



## Public Relations for the Technical B2B *A Solid Business Case Rather than an Emotional Appeal*

By Jean Van Rensselar

The public relations strategy for B2Bs is nearly 180 degrees different than the B2C strategy – especially where technical products and services are involved. With a B2B:

1. The target market is tighter and easier to reach.
2. PR must support a long buying process and multi-layered selling process.
3. PR must promote customer retention and upselling.
4. Creating brand identity is secondary to creating and maintaining a market position
5. The sales appeal needs to be fact-based and logical, rather than emotional.

As far as B2B public relations goes, the last point is the most critical difference. All public relations efforts must focus on building a logically convincing case for the sale, rather than appealing to emotions through fluffy ad copy and clever graphics.

This is not to say that B2B PR doesn't require creativity. But the creativity comes in much earlier in the process – during positioning and differentiation strategy. Once those areas are solidified, the marketing copy builds a convincing case that's laser-focused on objectives.

Public relations is not a magic bullet. It will not overcome lax business practices, inferior products, or poor service. What public relations *can* do is build on the good practices, products, and service you already have in place. A good PR specialist will find points of differentiation that create media attention and bring in new business.

## The Role of Public Relations in Differentiation

The same thing that will drive business and increase sales is the same thing the media is looking for – something different that has value. One of the greatest (if not *the* greatest) benefit of public relations specialists is their unbiased view of what you offer.

Unlike B2C public relations, no B2B PR campaign (or sales effort) can be successful without a strong product or service differentiator. Period. It really is that important.

### Here's an example:

The sole point of differentiation for a coupling manufacturer was that it created more types of couplings than any other manufacturer (something two other coupling manufacturers were also claiming). But this was not something most customers and prospects cared about – it was a point of differentiation that very few people perceived to be a benefit.

A public relations specialist toured the factory, did some extensive industry research, and sat down with the CEO, marketing team, and representatives from the manufacturing floor. The initial discussion was about how to either create an entirely new product or retool an existing product that would make the industry and prospects take notice. During the discussion, someone suggested abandoning the customization service and focusing on new mass-produced products instead.

“Wait a minute,” the PR specialist said. “Tell me more about the customization service – What do you offer? What’s your profit margin? How many of your customers take advantage of it? What are the benefits? How many other coupling manufacturers offer the same service?”

It turned out that creating custom couplings with a quick turnaround was what the majority of existing customers valued most about this company. While it wasn’t the most profitable offering, it did create a large core of very loyal customers who knew they could count on a custom product to get an expensive piece of machinery up and running in less than 48 hours. The customization service was a very, very valuable relationship builder that company officials didn’t recognize.

Did other coupling manufacturers offer custom couplings? Yes, but none had the strong track record of quick turnaround that this company had.

The new point of differentiation: *Everything you need now plus custom couplings guaranteed within 48 hours.*

A six-month trial PR campaign using the new differentiator was launched. Case studies, advertorials, trade articles, press releases, an online forum, and new online delivery tracking tools formed the core of the campaign – which was successful in attracting media attention and bringing in many new customers.

The lesson here is that your differentiator doesn’t necessarily have to be something new. There’s a real possibility that you’re sitting on something very valuable already and aren’t capitalizing on it. It’s worth repeating: Developing a strong differentiator is an extremely important service that public relations professionals can provide.

Consider the media to be a very inexpensive test market. If your new offering is generating media interest, it will most certainly generate interest among customers and prospects as well. If the media doesn’t care about what you’re offering – no one else will either.

## The Basics of B2B Public Relations

At this point, you may be asking yourself: How much of a commitment you'll have to make in terms of time, personnel, and money and what kind of results you can expect. The answer to both questions depends on your objectives.

### Overall Goal

Regardless of what you're selling, how big your company is, and what your PR plan looks like, the goal of public relations is always to increase profit – every other objective is secondary. If you don't see measurable results from your PR program within six months, the program isn't working. Provided your differentiator is meaningful, within the first three months, you should find that customers and prospects are asking about it. You should see increased traffic to your Web site. And you should sense a shift in the market's perception of what you offer. In short, your company should have a new positive momentum that is beginning to translate into increased profit.

### General Activities

All PR communications should focus heavily on the specifics of differentiating features and what benefits those features yield. While B2C PR focuses on benefits first then (maybe) features, B2B is always features first then benefits.

There are dozens of traditional and cutting-edge public relations tools. Your PR professional will choose the ones that are the best fit for what you want to accomplish. The first consideration will be the information gathering habits of your target prospects, the second will be likelihood of success, and the third will be the cost of implementing those tools.

### Fees

You will have a choice between:

- Paying a set fee for individual activities (producing a white paper, for example)
- Signing a contract and paying a monthly retainer for specific services
- Or a combination of both – a monthly retainer for specific services and additional fees for activities outside the scope of those services

## PR Start up Elements

Basic B2B public relations program start-up elements include:

1. A one-year PR plan
2. A messaging guide
3. A media kit
4. A media list
5. An editorial calendar

Message and strategy follow-through are two areas where in-house efforts often fail. Even some PR firms fall short in these areas – yet both are crucial for results. Everything in your PR

campaign needs to tie back to your core organizational goals - the focus should be on the key messages that you want to resonate with your customers and prospects.

## 1. The One-Year PR Plan

This will be your master guide for one year. Everything in the plan should be coordinated with existing organizational goals and objectives. Not surprisingly, this will probably be the most difficult, time-consuming, and debated element of your PR activities. The plan should have some built-in flexibility and be open to review at regular intervals. Expect that there will be many changes to your first-year plan - the following is a basic outline:

### **Situation/Overview**

Motivation for PR  
Markets  
Goals  
Strategies  
Tactics  
Budget  
Timeline

### **Target Markets** (for each list...)

Target market  
Demographics  
Needs  
Tailored solution

### **Goals & Objectives**

(listed in order of importance)

### **Strategies, Tactics, Budget, Timeline**

Strategy  
Specific tactics  
Projected cost  
Approximate completion date

### **Results Measurement**

Method and intervals for measuring results

### **Final Assessment**

Were the goals achieved?

## 2. The Messaging Guide

The essential messaging guide builds a consistent image in the marketplace and presents a singular representation of your brand to customers, prospects, and business partners. Everyone in your company should become familiar with the elevator pitch and use it whenever asked about the company – in person, on the phone, by e-mail, on a plane, or in an elevator. In addition, they should use the key messages to reinforce differentiating points for customers and prospects. Everyone should be familiar with and practice the messages, regardless of position or duties.

Your company will get the best results when everyone uses these points every day. A good single-sheet messaging guide includes the following:

- Tag Line
- Positioning Statement
- Elevator Pitch
- Key Messages (3-5)

### 3. The Online and Print Media Kit

The hardworking media kit should contain everything that reporters and editors need to know about your company. The information needs to be organized so that the users can find complete information quickly. It will also become the core of your online Media Room. It's hardworking, because with a few minor tweaks, it can be morphed into a marketing kit – which you can post to your Web site, display in your waiting area, and mail to your best prospects. The basic inclusions for the 2-pocket folder are as follows:

#### Left Side

- Cover/introduction/table of contents
- Introductory media release
- Quick facts: single sheet of facts and statistics about your company/industry
- Differentiator Page: explaining how your organization is truly different from the competition and designed to meet a very specific need in a very specific way. The focus is not on what you do, rather how you do it in a valuable or unique way
- Company background: Tell your story in an open, honest, and entertaining way in order to win hearts as well as heads.
- Executive Bio(s): of company spokesperson(s)
- Executive Q & A: question and answer format that will provide last minute quotes for editors and reporters on deadline
- List of products and services
- Contact information/areas of expertise

#### Right Side

- Executive photos, interesting graphics
- Entire kit, including photos and graphics on a CD
- A small freebie with the company logo such as a pad of paper, pen, or something more interesting – such as a flashdrive

In addition to the above, the Market Kit also includes:

- Case Studies: 3-4, 1-2 paragraphs each – How products/services solved challenges of representative industries. Case studies allow prospects to see how they, too, can benefit from what you offer.
- Call to action and response information

## 4. The Media List

The media list is usually an Excel or Access file that includes online and print media sources that will receive your press releases and trade articles. Developing a good media list is a highly specialized skill that not every PR firm does well. Some use a stock list without tailoring it to the individual client, but a good list is created specifically for a single client and includes only those media contacts that would be interested in running the client's material. A good way to alienate media people is to continually send them releases that they can't use – a tech-related release to a travel reporter. The media list should be updated annually.

## 5. The Editorial Calendar

An editorial calendar, which lists online and print publications and the schedule of topics they are interested in, should cover the current and next five months. Depending on the publication type, the lead time – the time between when the article must be submitted and when it will be published – runs anywhere from two weeks to four months.

The chances of a publication picking up one of your submissions increases if it's about one of their scheduled topics. You'll need to update the editorial calendar every month.

## Your Online Presence

In 2008, Web 2.0 and social networking were hot. However, a recent survey said that *Web 2.0* was the number one term companies were tired of hearing. Why? Despite the hype, the majority of the Web 2.0 tools didn't deliver on their promises – especially for B2Bs. But some, such as forums, and RSS feeds did. The lesson here? Every PR tool you employ – whether online or offline – needs to make strategic sense for your company.

The online public relations tools you'll want to use will depend on the tools your target market routinely uses. The best way to find this out is to ask. However, there are some standards – for example, engineers and others in the market for technical products and services gravitate toward online searches, supplier sites, and professional forums. C-suite executives tend toward online searches and still rely on print media for the in-depth analysis they can't get online. Your PR rep will help you:

1. Define the target market and determine how they currently engage in social media technology.
2. Set objectives.
3. Develop a strategy that will engage and enhance your target market.
4. Determine the most advantageous mediums.

## A Word about Press Releases

Press releases have always been the core of public relations campaigns and despite the proliferation of online media, they still are. Why?

- They work in both print and online editions of most publications.
- If they're short – no more than 700 words – they are a versatile way for editors to fill last minute gaps – they also fit in with the new crisper formats of many publications.

- Publishers don't have to pay their own reporters to write them.
- Editors use them for story ideas.
- If carefully written, they get the company's message across at a much lower cost than advertising.

One of the most valuable skills of a good public relations professional is knowing how to develop a press release that the media will want to publish. Writers and editors are more likely to pick up stories if they:

- Include great photos or graphics
- Align with their editorial calendar
- Tie into what people are talking about now
- Add insight into hot issues
- Reference prominent people, places, or things
- Are controversial or surprising
- Directly impact readers
- Feature people or events that readers can relate to
- Educate readers
- Entertain readers
- Have a strong local angle – local to the publication
- Tie into a holiday or special occasion
- Feature a significant milestone or major honor

Current online and print media are very visually focused – this means that if you include a compelling graphic, the release is more likely to be picked up.

Some people, especially those used to dealing with advertising, don't understand why they can't include a complete price list of their products and services in the release and why they can't use words like "fabulous" and "fantastic." Editors are looking for facts, they will only print facts, and if the release looks like free advertising, the release will not run – it's as simple as that. A good release walks the tightrope of being interesting to the editor and beneficial to the company. The key is to pick an interesting topic and weave the company's main messages into it.

## Other PR Materials to Consider

Case Studies: Provided they are well-written, long on specifics, and short on marketing fluff, case studies are very valuable tools that serve a multitude of marketing purposes. They show prospects how companies such as theirs were able to benefit from your products and services in the real world. The finest case studies result when an experienced case study writer directly interviews customers. Another idea is the *case story* - which is a fictional case study that shows the practical applications of your offering.

White Papers: Often used for technical products and services – they describe the features and benefits with very little self-promotion. They should educate, while positioning your company as a reliable, established leader in its field. Sales people use these to convince prospects who are on the fence and they are often posted on company Web sites and used to attract visitors and generate leads. With minor tweaking, white papers turn into trade articles.

Web Copy: If your Web copy is stale or doesn't really convey your differentiator, what you do, and how well you do it, consider revising at least a portion of it. You may be able to pull portions of new print marketing materials to update your site.

Position Papers: If there is a hot topic in your industry, trade publications look for position papers that lay out a thoughtful, convincing argument. Companies also send position papers to legislators, trade organizations, and newspapers (in the form of a guest editorial).

Brochures/Sell Sheets/ Fliers/ Direct Mail: The lowly brochure isn't dead...yet. It still works for applications such as point-of-purchase displays and waiting rooms. Copy for these short printed materials also morphs easily into Web copy. A 2008 survey determined that direct mail still generates 7 percent of all leads.

## So what can you expect B2B PR to do for you?

A lot. Depending on your goals and the quality of your overall program, it can:

- Differentiate your products and services
- Convince prospects to buy
- Uncover new prospects
- Provide instant feedback on your products/services
- Pull sales out of a slump
- Increase your overall visibility
- Support a product launch or marketing effort
- Reposition a mature product
- Position your company as a leader
- Strengthen your relationships with clients
- Increase positive perceptions and reduce negative ones
- Communicate key information to employees
- Further your organization's policies and goals