

What Some PR Firms Don't Want You to Know

There are a number of myths and false perceptions surrounding the practice of franchise public relations today and unfortunately many PR practitioners would like to keep it that way. By exposing and discussing several of the greatest kept “secrets of PR”, it is my hope that you will have a clearer understanding of the way PR should be approached and executed to maximize coverage of your brand and your franchisees in your target media.

1. Even the best PR professionals find media pitching unnerving and even scary.

There is no getting around it. PR practitioners need to be phenomenal sales people. The problem is that very few actually are. Just like any form of cold calling, picking up the phone to pitch a member of the media can be a terrifying exercise to go through. Reporters and journalists are bombarded daily with several dozen phone calls and hundreds of emails and faxes – it is no wonder they have a tendency to be skeptical, harsh and at times downright rude even when you've done your homework.

Many practitioners today lack the dedication to think strategically to break through the barriers and the thick skin to turn rejection into results. Developing a strategy takes time and thought; thick skin takes persistence. Rather than developing these skills, many practitioners abandon ever picking up the phone and rely on email blasts, blanket releases and other less effective, impersonal forms of communication. Sure this route is less scary and much easier, but it never produces the same results as biting the bullet and picking up the phone.

2. PR does not stand for “press release”.

Press releases are very important tools in the PR trade. They are critical to keeping your customers, franchisees, employees, investors and other key audiences informed about important news in your organization. However, issuing press releases should only represent a portion of your PR efforts. The majority of your efforts should be focused on tracking current and emerging trends in your industry and how the media is covering them.

High impact feature coverage is secured by identifying opportunities to link your franchise, products and services with those trends. It takes a skilled and seasoned PR practitioner to turn your news into relevant, customized story pitches for key media. Assuming press releases will consistently produce significant feature coverage would be like assuming you could build an entire house with just a hammer.

3. Strategic PR produces tangible results.

A blasphemous claim made all too often about PR is that its benefits are “intangible”. True, it can be difficult to quantify results in a discipline based largely on shifting market share and awareness, but tangible effects on the bottom line is the hallmark of any well planned, executed and tracked campaign. Practitioners who cast the “intangible” excuse when discussion turns to results are not holding themselves accountable for their work and are unworthy of their retainers. Before launching any PR campaign, tangible results and tracking methodology must be agreed upon by all stakeholders. Without measurement, improvement is impossible.

If impressions, or the number of people who see your message in the media, is a measurement you track, be sure only those impressions in your target markets and sales channels are included. Advertising cost equivalency is another commonly used benchmark of campaign effectiveness; however, this does not take into account the invaluable benefit of third party validation and the clarity of your message.



Do not be timid when setting your expectations. It is not unreasonable to set goals in terms of sales, leads or new partnerships. Results should be about what matters to you and your business.

4. Bigger is not always better when it comes to a firm's client roster.

A lot of PR agencies will try and blind you with a roster of big, brand name clients. While having experience working with recognized and respected organizations can attest to an agency's abilities, you should certainly perform due diligence. Ask about the scope of work done for that client, the results achieved and if they can supply references with whom you can speak. More importantly, ask what types of results they achieved for smaller, unknown clients. This is the true test of an agency's abilities. Securing coverage for an emerging or lesser known company takes a much different skill set than achieving results for a giant, established brand (and advertiser) such as Coca-Cola.

5. Successful PR is not about a rolodex.

Perhaps one of the dirtiest myths regarding PR is that it's all about who you know. I have been in the business for two decades. I have worked with, and in several cases become very good friends with journalists and reporters from many of the world's largest and most respected media outlets. The reality is, my rolodex contributes very little to my success in placing high impact stories for clients. Success stems from the ability to think strategically and deliver a timely, well thought out story in a professional manner. Journalists care very little about previous experiences. They are not in the business of making friends or doing favors. They have a charge – to inform and educate their audiences. Regardless of your personal relations and past history, if you bring something to them that does not support this charge, no dice. However, bring something of significant value for their audiences and you will achieve success whether it's your first contact with them or your fiftieth.

6. The talent that sells you may not be the talent that serves you.

Above all, PR agencies are businesses and as such, only the most experienced and polished players are presented during the sales process. Often when the sale is final and it's time for actual account work to begin, these practitioners are nowhere to be found and you are expected to work with a JV team whom you've never met; the varsity team is off selling services to someone else. Before engaging with any agency, you should know how much regular time and attention you can expect to receive from the senior members of your team and have the skills and credentials of your daily account management team validated. You must demand to know, meet and engage with every person that will be working on your account. Your team is only as strong as its weakest link. You should feel completely confident in your entire account team's ability, from CEO to account coordinator.

7. You may not be ready for PR.

Most practitioners would sooner cut off their own tongues than utter the words "You have no business engaging a PR agency right now." However, I have found that it is best to have an open and honest dialog with clients and potential clients about what PR can and cannot do for them. Don't be fooled. Engaging a PR agency is a lot of work and is very time consuming. And don't assume that once the contracts are signed that your obligation as a client eases up in the slightest. A good agency will demand your time and attention. A good agency will require regular face time with you, your executives, your sales people, your customers and your partners. They will need regular and consistent communication with all important client contacts. If your organization is not structured to support your PR team, the relationship will only result in hard feelings and time wasted. PR is the most powerful marketing medium there is and nothing worth having is ever easily had. Just as much as the agency must commit to projecting the client to the media, so must the client commit to communicating with the agency.

There you have it. Call me a tattletale, but misperceptions about PR only damage the profession and the truly talented practitioners of it, not to mention the clients who deserve quality work. By putting some

of the most alarming myths surrounding PR to rest, it is my intention to arm you with the insight needed to make sound, proactive decisions regarding your own initiatives.