



## DEVELOP A STRATEGIC PR PLAN

If you have any doubt just how important a PR plan is, look no further than to Cynthia McKay. Hoping to increase sales for her small gourmet gift company in Castle Rock, Colorado, she hired a PR firm that took her money without telling her what it would achieve on her behalf. Three weeks and \$3,000 later, there were no results.

Her experience wasn't much better after she eventually turned to a pay-per-placement PR firm. The firm pitched stories without engaging in strategy development, failing to outline in advance which media outlets it would pitch and how these story placements would contribute to her overall business goals. McKay was initially charged \$2,500 for placement in a cover story about careers in a well-known women's magazine. Later she was billed \$11,000 for a mention in the Associated Press about her company's gift basket donations to soldiers in Iraq. The PR firm charged her every time a different newspaper picked up the story. Not surprisingly, McKay ended up feeling "nickel and dimed," as she told the *Wall Street Journal*.<sup>1</sup>

Often companies hire PR firms without understanding what the results or the costs will be. Regardless of whether they work with an internal PR staff or hire an outside firm, companies must understand the value and the cost of their PR efforts before they get started. The best way to do that is to outline all the pieces in a compelling PR plan.

## RALLYING THE TROOPS

A detailed PR plan helps ensure that everyone is moving in the same direction. It helps to rally the troops around a common goal. We recently watched the 100th Apple Cup, the annual football game between the University of Washington Huskies and Washington State University Cougars, the two largest universities in the state of Washington. Sadly, the Huskies lost the game on the final play because half of the players ran one play while the other half ran another. It was an embarrassing moment. No common game plan had been in place, and it cost them the game. "We just blew the coverage," said University of Washington coach Tyrone Willingham after the game. "Our communication was not good, not complete across the board. We had some guys playing one thing and some playing something else."<sup>2</sup>

Without a PR plan, a company risks the same disaster. The result may be that half of its employees move in one direction, and the other half in another, unknowingly undermining the work of the first half. To help ensure that everyone is united and moving in the same direction, it's essential that companies operate from a common PR plan. By developing a strategic plan, companies stay focused on achieving their most important goals without getting distracted or sidetracked. "I think having a good plan is really important because it guards against unrealistic expectations," says Lee Weinstein, principal of Lee Weinstein & Associates and the former director of global corporate communications for Nike. "It allows you to come back later and say, 'Here's what we said we were going to do, here's what we did, and here's how you can evaluate against it.'"

Like a detailed architectural blueprint, a PR plan helps everyone get in sync as to what's going to be accomplished over what time frame and for what cost. It sets expectations and prevents unwanted surprises, making it an essential tool for companies of all sizes. A PR plan becomes even more critical for large companies with hundreds of employees or complex initiatives that involve many players. When Apple launched the iPhone, for example, it worked with hundreds of partners ranging from wireless operators to software developers. Can you imagine the chaos that would have ensued had all these partners failed to work from a common PR plan? They would have all operated in discord, clumsily bumping into one another as they touted conflicting messages.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL PR PLAN

So what exactly makes a PR plan compelling? First, it needs to be thoroughly *researched*. It should convey a clear understanding of your company's business objectives. If you haven't done so already, spend some time answering the list of



questions in “The Case for a Strategic Approach to PR,” designed to help you identify your organization’s business objectives and what you want PR to help you achieve. Every successful PR plan includes an up-to-date description of the current market situation, the latest marketplace trends, and the company’s position as compared with its industry competitors. Gathering and synthesizing this information in a thorough and thoughtful manner takes time and requires a good deal of critical thinking.

Second, a compelling PR plan is tightly *focused*. Every effort outlined in the PR plan should help your company achieve its most important business objectives. Where is your organization today, and where do you want it to be tomorrow? Once you determine the direction, every effort you engage in should either move you toward it or be discarded.

Third, a compelling PR plan is *creative*. PR professionals often try to take shortcuts by reapplying the same efforts that worked for another PR campaign or client, the approach being that a press release worked in that situation, so let’s just reapply it to the PR campaign we’re working on now. The problem with this approach is that it fails to focus on the true business problems of the particular client or situation in front of you. Every PR campaign is different and deserves its own creative thinking.

Fourth, a compelling PR plan should be *integrated* and support the efforts of other departments in the organization. Is it in harmony with the goals of the marketing department and the sales department and the overall business goals of the company? Make sure you examine any other plans that exist so that the PR plan is in sync. If the PR plan conflicts with any other functional group within the organization, either it should be changed or a meeting with all the key players should be held so everyone is brought into sync as to the high-level goals of the company.

Fifth, a compelling PR plan should be *holistic*. It takes into consideration your company’s entire news cycle and maintains momentum between major announcements. Too often, companies let the momentum subside between major announcements, losing the visibility they’ve worked so hard to create. With a little planning, it’s possible to continue the momentum so that you don’t lose mindshare among the media or customers between major initiatives.

Finally, a compelling PR plan is *realistic*. By that we mean that all the strategies and tactics outlined in the PR plan can be accomplished within the available budget and time frame. If you have only \$20,000 per month to work with, make sure the strategies and tactics you outline can be accomplished within this budget. If you have only a couple of months leading up to the launch of a product, make sure all the publications you work with are able to publish your story within this time frame.

Realistic also means that all the strategies and tactics are achievable. Let’s say your strategy is to win the football game by scoring a touchdown at the end of the fourth quarter, and to do that, one of your tactics is to throw an eighty-yard pass at the end of the fourth quarter. The chance of completing the pass is really low, which probably makes it a flawed approach. In the same way, you can come up with the most creative strategies and tactics, but if they can’t be realistically achieved, they aren’t worth their salt and should be rejected. As Al Ries and Jack Trout write in their book *Marketing Warfare*, “A grand strategy can be awesome, inspirational, audacious, and bold, yet an utter failure if it doesn’t put troops in the field in exactly the right place and at the right time to accomplish the job tactically.”<sup>3</sup>

### THE BALL PARK PR PLAN

One of our all-time favorite PR programs was a campaign developed by Sara Lee to raise awareness for its Ball Park hot dog brand. The goal was to keep the Ball Park brand front and center during the summer months, when barbecuing is at its height. To accomplish this, Ball Park created a contest showcasing the best hot dog toppings consumers could come up with. The Great American Hot Dog Taste Challenge invited consumers in nine markets that Ball Park wanted to dominate to bring recipes that spoke to the traditions of their respective cities. Ball Park generated participation in the contests by pitching media stories in advance of each city event. After the contest was over, chefs from Sara Lee appeared on local morning shows to demonstrate recipes from local winners.

Altogether, 41,000 people attended contest events across the United States, sampling more than 15,000 hot dogs. By the time the contest ended, traffic to Sara Lee’s Web site had increased 30 percent. “It exceeded our expectations,” Sara Matheu, director of media development and communications at Sara Lee, told *PRWeek*. “We really feel like we have 41,000 new brand ambassadors out there.”<sup>4</sup>

This is a great example of a PR campaign because it’s *creative, focused*, and *integrated* with Sara Lee’s overall goals for the Ball Park brand. The company found an innovative way to accomplish its goal of building awareness of its brand—by holding a contest that encouraged thousands of consumers to taste its hot dogs—and then highlighting the winners on morning television shows watched by millions. At the same time, the contest was tightly focused. It didn’t target all consumers. Instead it focused on nine specific markets Ball Park was trying to dominate. What’s more, neither the campaign nor the editorial coverage that accompanied it was initiated simply for the sake of doing PR. The effort was tied to an important business objective: increasing sales of Ball Park hot dogs.



## Ways to Spark Your Creativity

*After you've worked in public relations for a while, it's easy to slip into a rut and continually implement the same tactics that have worked in the past without exploring new ideas. As a result, PR campaigns can become stale. To get the best results, every PR plan should involve its own fresh thinking and implement the best creative ideas. So what can you do to start thinking more creatively? Here are seven tips:*

- **Warm up your creative juices.** A great way to loosen up your thinking is to complete some warm-up exercises. Try writing down everything that pops into your head, stream-of-consciousness style, for five minutes, keeping your pen moving the whole time. Or open a magazine to a random page and let your mind free-associate with the image on the page, writing down everything it reminds you of. Once you've loosened up your mind, begin brainstorming ideas for your PR plan.
- **Try mind mapping.** Mind mapping is a technique that helps people see new relationships and possibilities through the use of diagrams. Write down a word or idea in the middle of the page, and draw a circle around it. Next to that idea, write down words you associate with it, drawing a circle around each word you write. Eventually you'll have a non-linear page filled with ideas for your PR plan.
- **Organize a group brainstorming session.** Group brainstorming is a great way to explore new ideas. Assemble your team in a room, ask a question, and then write down everyone's ideas on a whiteboard, without judgment. After all the ideas are out there, revisit them as a group to pick out the best possibilities.
- **Take a walk.** Take a twenty-minute walk, trying to think of ideas while away from the office. Or better yet, go for a brainstorming walk with a coworker. It's amazing how we generate some of our best ideas when we remove ourselves from the situation.
- **Keep a PR notebook.** Read as much as you can about other industries, companies, and PR campaigns; and keep a notebook containing ideas and approaches that inspire you. You can also use your notebook to jot down your own ideas and to take notes as you read.
- **Bounce your ideas off another person.** Come up with some initial ideas, and then bounce them off a coworker, a friend, or your spouse. Great solutions can unexpectedly pop into your head if you describe the problem out loud.
- **Enroll in a creativity class.** Numerous books and classes are available that are designed to help people unleash their creativity; many of them include hands-on exercises. Read about creativity or enroll in a class, then regularly practice what you learn.

## THE BRAINSTORM PROCESS

So how do you go about developing a PR plan? First, determine the length of time it should cover. Companies typically operate from a twelve-month PR plan that incorporates their overarching goals for the year and gives them a high-level view into what they want to accomplish. In addition, they often create mini-PR plans that serve as a more detailed road map for specific product launches and other significant announcements slated to occur during the course of the year.

Once you've figured out the timeline, schedule a brainstorm session to capture the creative thinking of the group. This session should include as many types of people as possible, especially those who might be a consumer of the particular product or service you're trying to promote. If you work inside a company, consider including employees in different parts of the organization, and even colleagues outside the company, who aren't working on your particular announcement. If you're employed at a PR agency, include colleagues who aren't working on your account. Our experience has shown that by the time the brainstorm session is scheduled, employees working on the account often have already started to form a point of view based on their initial research or discussions. Opening up the brainstorm session to a broader spectrum of people encourages a fresh perspective and a wider range of ideas.

We typically begin the brainstorm session by providing an overview of the business and communication objectives we want to achieve and the audiences we want to reach and then asking the group to help us develop some of the strategies and tactics that will help to accomplish these objectives. To come up with the best strategies and tactics, you may want to pose some of these high-level questions:

- Where are customers' minds today? Where do we want their minds to be tomorrow?
- How do we need to position our company? What are the best ways to do that?
- What role can third parties (customers, analysts, partners) play to help tell our story?
- What kind of competitive response can we anticipate?
- What events might we leverage to help us achieve our objectives?
- What announcements should we plan for during the time period of the PR plan?
- What are we going to do to maintain momentum when we have no news?
- Are there trends we can leverage to tell our story?
- What colorful detail exists (interesting personalities, experiences, graphics, visuals, statistics) that will help us bring our story to life?
- How will we measure success?



Once you answer these questions, it will become clearer what strategies and tactics are needed to help you meet your objectives. Using a whiteboard, we list all of the suggestions without any judgment as to whether each is a good or bad idea. After the brainstorm session is over, the team working on the PR plan evaluates the ideas, incorporating the best ones into the plan. This approach ensures that we come up with the widest range of creative ideas. It also prevents us from taking a cookie-cutter approach, in which we recycle the same ideas over and over again.

"When I do PR planning, one of the things I like to do is talk about what would nirvana be if we executed this campaign with perfection," Weinstein says. "Do we want our story to be in the *New York Times* Style section? Do we want MTV news to cover it? We then build our plan back from that and make sure it syncs up with our budget, brand, and mission. That allows us to be really strategic."

### THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF A STRATEGIC PLAN

Whether you're working on an overarching PR plan or a miniplan, a strategic plan always has most or all of the following ten components. Like a series of interlocking LEGOs, each section should build upon the one that comes before it, starting with a situation analysis and ending with a conclusion:

#### 1. Situation analysis

The situation analysis is like the president's state of the union address. It should discuss the state of affairs for the industry as well as the company itself. It should also describe the competitive marketplace as well as any legislative issues and trends that are affecting the industry. The purpose of the situation analysis is to ensure that all participants are operating from the same assumptions so there's consensus as to how to move forward.

We developed the following situation analysis as part of an overall PR plan for a fictitious company, Hunsk Motorcycles.<sup>5</sup> The entire PR plan, included in the Appendix, demonstrates the creative thinking that a good strategic PR plan should include.

- Hunsk Motorcycles has been in business for more than twenty years. Its main competitor is Harley-Davidson.
- Hunsk customers are primarily men aged thirty-five to fifty and college educated who view themselves as risk-takers. They want a bike that "ticks like a clock and moves like a rocket."
- Through the first six months of this year, shipments of Hunsk motorcycles were approximately 125,900 units, a 7.2 percent decrease compared to last year's 135,600 units.

- The company anticipates that U.S. economic conditions and ongoing consumer concerns will continue to create challenges at least through the end of the year. Nonetheless, the executive management team remains confident about its future and is committed to managing and reinvesting in the business for the long term.
- The management team recognizes that the Hunsk marketing campaign, with its ineffective materials and positioning, is outdated; it's lost its "oomph." The PR and marketing campaigns are not reaching the company's target audience, and the employees promoting its motorcycles don't always have direct experience with the product.
- In the past, Hunsk has updated its marketing campaigns to align with trends in the broader consumer market (younger demographic, eco-friendly business practices, lightweight body and machinery) and in the process has lost touch with its core demographic, neglecting to establish a key message and value proposition that resonated with its customer base.
- The company is interested in getting back to its marketing roots, with a goal to be more authentic. Again, the company's core demographic is men who view themselves as the real rebels. They are fiercely independent, confident, and edgy.

#### 2. Business objectives

The business objective section offers a statement about what the organization as a whole is trying to achieve. Perhaps your business objective is to build the perceived value of the company or to broaden your customer base by moving into a new geographical area of the country.

We created the following three business objectives for Hunsk Motorcycles:

- Boost sales and drive revenue.
- Reconnect with the core customer and recapture market share from competitors.
- Build the perceived value of the company.

#### 3. Target audiences

This section should provide a list of the key audiences you want to reach to meet your business goals. For example, Hunsk Motorcycles wants to target four audiences:

- Consumers, primarily men aged thirty-five to fifty
- Employees
- Shareholders
- Investors



#### 4. Communication objectives

The communications objectives section outlines your broad communications goals for each of the target audiences you are planning to reach. It should clearly state the desired perceptions of your company by the end of the time period covered by the PR plan.

For Hunsk Motorcycles, we developed three communications objectives:

- Elevate the visibility and value of the brand.
- Deepen relationships with loyal customers and enthusiasts.
- Create a sustainable platform for coverage across a variety of media, positioning Hunsk as the maker of the finest motorcycles in the world.

#### 5. Key messages

This section lays out the key messages you want to communicate to each audience. To develop these messages, consider specific messages for each audience to adopt the specific perception you seek. You may want to develop one set of messages for your company and another set of messages for each product or service. Each message should be simple, powerful, and descriptive.

We crafted the following key messages for Hunsk Motorcycles:

- Hunsk is in the business of making the world's best motorcycles to create exceptional experiences for its customers. The company is committed to innovation as it continues producing great motorcycles.
- The company has the right management team in place and is well poised to position Hunsk for the future, to strengthen its bonds with its current customers, and to secure new customers. The road ahead is looking bright.
- Outstanding corporate governance has been a long-standing business practice at Hunsk because it makes good business sense. Although the motorcycle business is fun, corporate governance is something we take seriously.
- Hunsk understands that its customers don't want to be sold to. They want to be part of the brand and what it represents, which is the freedom, excitement, and adventure of the open road.

#### 6. Strategy and tactics

Every PR plan should present a strategy overview that collectively discusses all the strategies you plan to implement to bring your communication objectives to fruition and why you chose them. Here is the strategy overview we drafted for Hunsk Motorcycles:

We have identified the following six strategies that Communiqué PR can implement on behalf of Hunsk Motorcycles. These strategies can be executed in tandem or as disparate projects.

- Strategy 1: Demonstrate Hunsk's value with motorcycle enthusiasts.
- Strategy 2: Tie Hunsk to key lifestyle trends and consumer habits.
- Strategy 3: Tell the story of Hunsk's reinvention and return to its roots.
- Strategy 4: Create support for Hunsk online.
- Strategy 5: Hit the road with museum participation.
- Strategy 6: Pursue and win industry awards.

Each strategy should be given its own section that includes a description of the strategy and the tactics required to accomplish it. Here's a description of the first of the six strategies for Hunsk Motorcycles as well as the tactics we identified:

#### Strategy 1: Demonstrate Hunsk's value with motorcycle enthusiasts.

To help Hunsk Motorcycles reach its target audience and demonstrate value to them, we recommend placing articles in the magazines read by serious motorcycle enthusiasts. Specifically, we envision targeting journalists with *American Motorcyclist*, *Easyriders*, *Rider*, and others for coverage. Communiqué PR would reach out to editors of these magazines with the goal of reviving awareness of the brand and securing coverage about Hunsk. In the coming quarter, we anticipate spending seventy hours on this strategy.

#### Tactics

- Determine angle and messages for a pitch to motorcycle enthusiast publications. We believe the following story angles would resonate with the readers of these publications:
  - "Tips for Taking a Tour on Your Hunsk." Five tips highlighting reasons that Hunsk bikes can make your road trip the best ever. (Includes list of top Hunsk accessories and recommended routes.)
  - "Maintenance Tips from the Pros for Bikers." Position Hunsk as a subject matter expert on what bikers need most or how Hunsk owners can fix and tune up their own bikes.
  - "Riding Free, Riding Safe: Tips to Keep You on the Road." Focus on ways that riders can maintain their freedom and stay safe.



- Develop first-draft pitch materials.
- Review materials with HunsK executives.
- Develop second-draft pitch materials.
- Work with HunsK vice president of marketing to secure final approvals on all materials.
- Distribute pitches and story suggestions to journalists.
- Follow up with a round of phone calls to spark journalists' interest in writing about HunsK.
- Place a second round of phone calls.
- Recap results from discussions with journalists.
- Facilitate interviews (assuming we'll secure three to five interviews for HunsK executives with these magazines).
- Develop recap of calls.
- Work with the journalists to ensure they have artwork to accompany the story.

#### 7. Budget

Here you'll want to describe the overall budget as well as the number of hours per month it will take to implement the entire plan. If you're working with a tight budget, you may want to get even more detailed by providing the estimated cost of each strategy and tactic. This helps to prioritize opportunities, enabling your organization to focus on the efforts most critical to the campaign. It also makes it easier to negotiate additional budget should company executives want to add more strategies and tactics to the plan. For example:

Strategy	Hours	Rate	Fees
Demonstrate HunsK's value with motorcycle enthusiasts	70	\$200	\$14,000
Tie HunsK to key lifestyle trends and consumer habits	140	\$200	\$28,000
Tell the story of HunsK's reinvention and return to its roots	100	\$200	\$20,000
Create support for HunsK online	180	\$200	\$36,000
Hit the road with museum participation	500	\$200	\$100,000
Pursue and win industry awards	120	\$200	\$24,000
<b>Total</b>			<b>\$222,000</b>

#### 8. Timeline

To establish accountability, the PR plan should include a timeline that outlines projected accomplishments within a specific period of time. The timeline should also describe who will be executing which part of the plan. That way there's no confusion about who's responsible for each effort when you later go back and review the plan's success:

Strategy	Timeline
Demonstrate HunsK's value with motorcycle enthusiasts.	Q3
Tie HunsK to key lifestyle trends and consumer habits.	Q4
Tell the story of HunsK's reinvention and return to its roots.	Q4
Create support for HunsK online.	Ongoing
Hit the road with museum participation.	Ongoing
Pursue and win industry awards.	Ongoing

#### 9. Measurements of success

This section is extremely important because it creates shared expectations as to the nature of a successful campaign. Success can be measured in many ways, which we will discuss in detail in Principle 9. Whether you're measuring success by the number of story placements, the quality of comments, or the cost per impression, it's important to outline these measurements in as much detail as possible. This allows you to revisit the plan at the end of the campaign to determine whether it was moderately successful, wildly successful, or less successful than you had hoped. It also eliminates the risk that different executives within the company will develop different sets of expectations regarding success. The following are two measurements of success we developed for the first strategy of the HunsK Motorcycles PR plan:

- Build relationships with ten journalists with magazines written for motorcycle enthusiasts.
- Secure three positive articles about HunsK and its bikes.

#### 10. Conclusion

The conclusion provides an opportunity to discuss any parting thoughts and ask company executives for their input. Here's the conclusion we drafted for our HunsK Motorcycles PR plan:

We are eager to receive your feedback on this plan and hope it provides a detailed road map of our proposed activity. Please feel free to contact me with any questions. I may be reached at [name@communiquepr.com](mailto:name@communiquepr.com) or at (555) 555-5555, ext. 123.