



spring'11
Outlook



Society for Marketing
Professional Services
Boston

The Importance of a Media Relations Plan

December 8, 2011

Today's post was written by Jennifer Shelby, account director at Rhino Public Relations. Questions or comments? E-mail her at jennifer@rhinopr.com or visit www.rhinopr.com.

Most firms that strategically integrate marketing into their business planning efforts create multiple plans to keep goals top of mind and players accountable and on task. Typically contained within the five-year strategic plan is a more targeted one-year marketing plan that considers the larger objectives of the firm and determines a process in which to start working towards that goal. Yet without a media relations plan to complement the marketing plan, you might be missing key opportunities to reach your target audience and gain visibility for your firm.

Like any type of plan, creating and maintaining a media relations plan allows communications professionals to identify and pursue the most beneficial opportunities. Researching target publications and determining appropriate opportunities for pitching allows PR professionals to reach a wide target audience. In addition, researching the market itself allows for a more comprehensive understanding of what is and isn't viable for the firm in the current market conditions.

Several components go into creating an effective media relations plan. First and foremost, the firm's brand messaging must be clear and concise. This is essential for all business planning, not just that of media relations. A strategic brand message communicates to all parties involved how the firm views itself, what it hopes to achieve, and how it intends to get there. A strategic brand message contains language that differentiates the firm from its competitors and is the basis upon which all future planning is established.

After determining the core message, the goals of the program must be created and communicated to the team. Goals identify end results the program will achieve and provide direction for the media relations plan to take.

Once the goals are clear, there must be an understanding of the competitive environment in which you are pursuing work. A situational analysis allows marketing professionals to evaluate

viable markets in line with the services being offered. Research the players in the field, including the media and your competitors. A situational analysis will also allow you to examine what has and hasn't worked in the past in an effort to change future marketing and PR actions.

No plan is effective without actionable items. These actions should be tied directly back to the goals and based thoughtfully upon the situational analysis and the best course of action for the firm. Actions should be assigned to individual marketers or small teams to promote accountability to each other and the plan.

Next, determine who you are trying to reach. What publications do your clients or client-types read? Where can you establish members of your firm as thought leaders? What media outlets are reputable and provide a service or educational value to those within your industry? By researching publications and finding the right story to pitch, you will build relationships with these publications while getting your message out to your target audience. And, by aligning yourself with these editors, it is more likely they will return with questions or requests for input when they have another topic available in your area of expertise.

It's important to identify what stories you can pitch to media outlets that are engaging, provocative and informative. Hone in on what sets your firm apart and what you can contribute that is trend-setting and innovative.

Finally, spend time on a crisis communications plan. No one wants to employ it, but if the unthinkable happens, you'll be glad you put the time into establishing this invaluable program. Identify who will be your spokesperson. Decide where and how you will interact with the press. Craft language that all employees can use that will direct the media to your firm's liaison, and decide ahead of time what appropriate tone the firm will take during the incident.

Throughout media planning, it is important to remember that effective communications is not the sole responsibility of the public relations team, but also that of each and every member of the firm. Everyone in the company should have a clear understanding of how the company describes itself and what the firm does. In addition, staff members should be educated on what and, perhaps more importantly, what not to say to the media should they be approached. Finally, it should be made clear to all staff who has the final say on communications issues.

Media relations planning is a critical component to any strategic business plan and can elevate a firm's brand recognition and reputation in the marketplace. Establishing a thoughtful and detailed plan in tandem with other business initiatives will ensure that your firm is working effectively in every way possible.