



SEE WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE FOR
YOUR BUSINESS.

Roll over to Expand



How to Bootstrap Your Public Relations

Looking for ways around hiring a PR specialist or outsourcing your publicity? Take - and master - the DIY approach.

By Tim Donnelly | Sep 21, 2010

When Ross Mayfield was looking to spread the word about his new tech startup SocialText back in 2002, he didn't turn to a traditional public relations firm. He just turned on his computer.

Mayfield, who was paying up to \$30,000 a month to keep a public relations team at the ready for his previous ventures, instead decided tackle the increasingly fractured environment of media outlets himself. He started reading journalists he thought were likely to write about him, writing blog posts about related topics in the industry, and actively sharing information through e-mail. The strategy worked, and his business — which creates a Facebook-like networking site for the workplace — has been mentioned in myriad publications from the Harvard Business Review to TechCrunch over the years.

"When you had to go through mass media, there's really a handful of media outlets or influential or important reporters. Because there were so few of them that had the ability to publish, there was this whole layer called the PR industry," he says. "Well, (now) everybody has the ability to publish. You engage in direct conversations with both traditional journalists and bloggers through the Web. As long as you were willing to be more open and sharing than in the past, now it's much more of a conversation."

The shifting media landscape, combined with the rise of social media and DIY Web publishing, has stoked an intense debate in the business community.

While some experts say trained public relations professionals still come in handy for large-scale companies, they also say there's no reason savvy entrepreneurs can't bootstrap their own publicity efforts. Doing so costs little to no money and puts a more personal face on your business.

Bootstrapping Your PR: Why Bootstrap?

Media have split into two segments: traditional outlets such as print magazines and newspapers, and the ever-growing field of bloggers, Twitter personalities and social networks that cover niche topics, says David Weekly, founder and chief product officer of PBWorks, which makes online collaboration software and is based out of San Mateo, California. Particularly in the tech industry, that second media segment is moving the conversation more quickly than the old formats, he says.

New-media outlets tend to be more accessible than a newspaper: Whereas a print reporter may work on one big story a week, bloggers post several times a day.

Mike Troiano, a principal at marketing firm Holland-Mark, which is based in Boston, recently sat on a bootstrapping panel where journalists and public relations people haggled over the need to hire a public relations team these days. The conclusion, at least from the journalists' standpoint, was that it's easy to reach the same effect on an in-house basis.

"What you need is to invest in the development of the relationship with these journalists, who are in the end human beings," Troiano says. "The era of professional PR is over."

[Dig Deeper: How to Manage Your Own PR](#)

Bootstrapping Your PR: Do Your Homework

Before you even try to generate your own publicity, you've got to become a savant at the kind of media you want to break into.

That means being a voracious reader of all the blogs, newspapers, magazines, freelance writers, and Twitter accounts that cover your industry or specialization. Opening a bakery in Chicago and want mainstream coverage? You had better — at very least — be reading the Chicago Tribune's food section every week.

Mayfield recommends subscribing to the RSS feeds of relevant media outlets and creating a Twitter account to monitor the ongoing conversations from publications and writers. Search for sources that are covering your competitors and comment on blog posts relevant to your business. This makes you part of the conversation, and gets you name recognition even before you pitch a story.

"You can have an entire movement mushroom up in months or weeks," Weekly says. "You have to be participating in that conversation. When you have a product launch or when you have a story that you want to get out there, you fit it into the themes they're already covering."

It's an incremental investment in strategy, but one that's free, and easy to learn, he says.

The new media structure has torn down the wall of anonymity between reporters, editors and their readers: most important media figures have public profiles, Twitter accounts and blogs that you can interact with easily.

"In the end, the way I was able to be successful in whatever I'm doing is relationship building," Mayfield said. "You form real relationships with them, not just calling up and offering pitch."

Grace Leong, managing partner for Hunter Public Relations, which is based in New York, says publications such as PR Week and similar industry outlets provide an inside look at how other companies are handling publicity, as well as providing examples of press releases and other announcements you can copy.

"The more case studies you read in how brands or companies ran a campaign, the more sense you get about 'How am I going to go about doing this?'" she says.

Consuming all this content will make you an expert on who, when and how to pitch. It'll also help you see past the blinders most startup entrepreneurs have.

"When they're dealing with editors, they need to think like an editor rather than think like a founder," Weekly says.

[Dig Deeper: How to Put Together a Press Kit](#)

Bootstrapping Your PR: Create Content

If you're absorbed in the social-media community, you can start building buzz for your business or product even before your big launch. Mayfield says before he launched SocialText in 2002, he began blogging about topics having to do with the consumer Web and sharing them to his social and professional circles. When you're forming opinions about topics not directly related to your business, you're creating content that people can comment on or share, which helps build your personal brand, he says.

Weekly says he monitors Twitter to see what topics are popular. When a trend is hitting Twitter, he says it's the time to seize the conversation by writing a substantial (1,000 words or more) blog post or article. "All the other lazy people are going to retweet and link to it," he says. "The effect of Twitter is fascinating. It's an amplifier to spread news more quickly."

You also have the opportunity to share the process with interested audiences. Giving a certain group of writers or bloggers exclusive access to the process leading up to your launch will generate interest and could provide some constructive feedback, Troiano says.

"Start-ups are all about getting a growing set of concentric circles to buy in. That kind of organic growth — word of mouth, bit by bit, Facebook Like by Facebook Like — increasingly, that's the way a lot of these startup brands are being built," he says. "Every great brand starts with a group of really committed zealots. The backflow of info from that committed audience can be invaluable to you in shaping your product."

Another strategy to get your name out is to contribute to articles in journals, websites and trade publications. "If you're in a particular industry, you're probably going to end up understanding your industry better than your traditional PR firm is going to," says Weekly, who has contributed to dozens of articles over the years. You can find these opportunities on the Web and then create an abstract of an article to pitch, he says.

[Dig Deeper: Leaders of the Social Media New School](#)**Bootstrapping Your PR: Handling a Crisis Situation**

Now you've built some buzz on your own, but what do you do when you need to handle a public relations crisis? Mayfield says a good place to start is to make sure you have a trusted network of advisers by including someone with a public relations or marketing background on your board of directors.

Before you respond to a news event, Weekly says you should sit down and sketch out the message and determine the key points to keep repeating throughout the ordeal. Stick to three main points to keep it simple, he says.

Experts all agree on this advice: be honest, be transparent and give up shaky ground while moving into firmer territory. Leong of Hunter says you should prepare by reading up on case studies of recent crisis public relations efforts — from BP to Johnson and Johnson — to see what worked and what didn't.

Monitor the conversation about your company on Twitter and blogs and respond if the conversation reaches influential media people, Weekly says. Adding your official voice to the conversation directly on blogs and comment sections builds good will, he says.

"People always appreciate that the folks from the company engage even if it's on a relatively small blog," he says. "They respect the fact that you're willing to come down and talk about them."

[Dig Deeper: How to Communicate in a Crisis](#)**Bootstrapping Your PR: Don't Ignore the Alternatives**

Just because you're trying to squeeze every last bootstrap dollar out of your public relations efforts doesn't mean you have to go it alone.

Traditional firms help by staying on top of editorial calendars, applying for awards and seeking out speaking or interview opportunities. But Mayfield says you can still harvest this skill set by taking advantage of the poor journalism job market. A lot of reporters unable to find work will take a position on a public relations team in an industry they're used to covering. That gives you a person on staff familiar with the media landscape who is adept at telling stories and connecting with audiences.

Troiano says he's also found freelance public relations people who can be hired at a day rate for half of what a typical agency would cost.

Another resource Leong suggests is your local college. Many schools have chapters of the Public Relations Student Society of America, a public relations training ground run by enthusiastic students. A business can hire students at a cheap rate to develop a public relations strategy or consult on publicity issues.

"They can whip up a really nice plan locally and get it done for you," she says.

[Dig Deeper: How to Manage an Independent Contractor](#)

Copyright © 2010 Mansueto Ventures LLC. All rights reserved.
Inc.com, 7 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007-2195.