The Trade Media and Beyond

A best practice guide to writing for business-to-business publications

Introduction

Brands exist in the minds of customers not only through their experience with the products or the service, but also because of the cumulative effects of long-term communications strategies. Marketing communications helps to define a company's relationsips with existing customers, and to present a picture of that company which new customers will want to buy into.

Specifically, PR can:

- Help to raise a company's profile in its market
- Assist in demonstrating the company's capabilities
- Help a company stand out from its competitors
- Present the company as one customers can have confidence in
- Support the company's sales efforts

The role of PR is well defined in these terms. But elevating your PR above that of your competitors is a challenge. So what constitutes best practice in PR writing?

Contents

1. Do the basics well
2. What's in a name?
3. Bottoms up
4. Empathy, not arrogance
5. Add value
6. Size isn't everything
7. Flattery will get you everywhere
8. I couldn't possibly comment
9. Final thoughts

1. Do the basics well

There are many guidelines for successful PR which will vary from project to project, from publication to publication, and from country to country. But the basic rules always remain:

- Make it simple, with clear use of language and a sensible, logical flow
- Be direct and to the point, but engaging at the same time
- Make sure that all your claims are believable, and back them up
- Be factual, but also be insightful
- Be inviting in your introductions
- Give the readers something they can act upon immediately
- Keep your sentences uncomplicated and your paragraphs short
- Bring out the issues, but don't editorialise (unless in comment articles)
- Keep the prose lean: being too flowery slows the reader down

Beyond these basics, remember:
a) that your material may well have to appeal to a number of different people. In magazine terms, bear in mind that you have to appeal to both the editor **and** the reader. Their approaches to a story will not always be the same.

b) that you are the facilitator, not the end user – the provider of information rather than the reader. Accept, therefore, that what you write may not be used word for word: your story must allow for the likelihood that editors will do what they are paid to do, and will edit your text to fit and for style.

c) that editors will be making judgements about the size, capabilities and vision of your company based on the quality of material you send them. Make sure their perceptions are the right ones.

2. What’s in a name?

Your company may well be one of the biggest names in the industry – a household brand known the world over. Compared to a rival company marketing a similar product in the same field, you might be a Goliath. But remember what happened when Goliath met David?

In a competitive magazine market, a bigger name is no guarantee of more substantial coverage. If your competitor’s PR material is better written – if it engages with the audience more successfully and stresses the features and benefits of the solution more emphatically – then his number of column inches will be superior to yours. Worse still, readers build their perceptions of the size, quality and success of companies by their magazine presence. Will you be perceived as the giant that you are, or as a ‘Fred in a shed’ company?

And don’t assume that the world will want to know all about your latest company news simply because of who you are. Readers’ lives do not revolve around finding out about what you’re up to. Something that seems important to you may well have little relevance to them when presented in a standard format. If you think it’s something they should find an interest in, then you have to find an angle that’s going to elevate that story beyond the run of the mill and into the realms of the outstanding.

Successful PR doesn’t rely on the company name to generate coverage, but it does help to build the company brand. And the better you do the job with this press release, the easier it will be with the next.

3. Bottoms up

The accepted rule of writing a press release for the trade press is that an editor should be able to cut from the bottom up without losing the sense of the story. That means that the opening paragraph of a company news item or a new product piece should spell out all the key information quickly and succinctly. Every paragraph after that should be of incrementally less importance. Stick to this rule, and irrespective of how savagely the editor butchers your story, you'll still have got the key points across.

No one should ever break the 'bottom up' rule when it comes to writing company news items or product update pieces. The medium is irrelevant: even if there isn't an editor physically cutting the story, the reader comes to that story with the same approach. He will start at the top, expect to get the key information quickly, and read on as long as he feels necessary before moving on to the next item.

With feature articles and case studies, however, the rule is completely different. Here the goal is to carry the reader from the start of the article right to the end. His interest has to be engaged all the way through. And in approaching longer articles of this nature, the reader himself will give you some latitude to spend some time easing him into subject matter and to meander through the arguments.

If the risk of losing the reader half way through a piece represents an abject failure, then the temptation may be simply to write it shorter. Invariably, that ends in failure too. If you're putting your needs first (in this case of making sure you've got the sales pitch in), and the reader's needs second, then you'll lose the reader before you've got the key points across. Every story has a natural length, so work to that length and write it in such a way that you carry the reader all the way through with you. If you can put the needs of the reader first, and build your points and arguments into that framework, and you'll have a recipe for success.

4. Empathy, not arrogance

Writing a feature article for a readership in a particular industry sector is not the same as writing a sales presentation for colleagues who will be trying to sell into that sector. The sales presentation might start by highlighting all the issues that are affecting the industry. If the target was the machine building sector, then that sales presentation might begin by highlighting the fact that machine builders are facing increased pressures from lower cost overseas competitors, and that the end-users want machines that are far more flexible than ever before. It might look at the way machine builders are being pressured by their customers for machines that boost productivity thanks to a vast increase in sophistication, yet which cost less than previous generations. And it might comment on the way machine builders are being asked to offer support for those machines, often on a global scale, as part of the package.

Having imparted this information, the presenter can then begin to detail the company's strategy for promoting its particular solutions to all of these issues.

However, starting a feature article aimed at machine builders by spending three or four paragraphs highlighting all those same issues is a complete waste of space. Every industry sector is perfectly aware of the issues it is struggling with. It doesn't need to be told what the challenges are by a third party: it needs to know what the solutions might be.

Remember that you're not writing to impress the market with your knowledge of their issues. You're looking to inspire them with your solutions to their problems.

So demonstrate an empathy with the market in your opening paragraphs. Let them know that you understand their problems, but don't be so arrogant as to assume that you know more about their issues than the readers themselves. Engage with the audience without talking down to it; build positive feelings, rather than fostering antipathy that forces potential buyers elsewhere.

5. Add value

It may seem strange to talk about adding value in terms of a press article, but why should it be any less important in submitting an article to a magazine than in putting together a bid for a project. The key here is to define exactly how we can add value in magazine terms.

Feature opportunities in magazines are often tied to a particular industry sector. That sector may only account for a small percentage of the total magazine readership, but it will have been judged to be an important sector.

Already, then you have whittled down the potential market for your own story. But suppose that your article is only of primary interest to a limited number of readers within that sector. What that means overall is that out of a total magazine readership of, say, 20,000, your article may only be of specific interest to 100 or so readers. The natural inclination of the other 19,900 will be to turn the page and move on.

That starts to sound like a pretty depressing picture until you consider that the technology used in the industry solution you're highlighting may well be applicable to many other sectors. This has always been the big argument for generating case studies; to highlight the potential for technology transfer to other industries – for engineers in one sector to benefit from the experience of engineers in another.

So, what we have to do is to ensure that readers in sectors outside of the particular industry sector that the magazine section is focused on do not turn the page and move on. Any article has to provide an introduction of sufficient interest that those readers are also hooked, and will read on to the end of the article.

Outside of specific industry sectors, we can still look to add value in more general feature offerings with introductory paragraphs that highlight the issues of the day with interesting angles that will draw readers in.

This is what adding value is all about. The magazine editor wants to see press material that is inclusive in terms of the readership, not exclusive. So look for background information and interesting angles that will hook the reader into the piece, whatever sector he may be in. In some cases it may mean adding comment (as long as this comment can be substantiated). And, most controversially, it may mean not getting bogged down in the technology until well into the body of the article. In other words, make sure you've really got the reader with you before you start talking shop.

Just as importantly, remember that the first person you have to convince as to the worth of your submission is the editor. Lots of the background material you worked so hard to include may well end up being edited out of the final printed article, but it will have been one of the key factors in getting the editor's attention in the first place. And that editor will remember where to come the next time he or she needs a good article.

6. Size isn’t everything

Judging the appropriate length for a story is not an easy task – especially when a single article might be required for a number of different promotional media. A given case study might need to be targeted at the trade press, used as part of sales collateral, or inserted into a given issue of an in-house magazine. Is any one of those more or less important than any other?

A case study in an in-house magazine may run to around 800 words; a feature to around 1000 words. A case study in a trade magazine might be half a page (300-400 words) or a whole page (700-1000 words). A feature article in a magazine might be a single page (700 to 1000 words) or up to two pages (1200-1700 words).

Your PR material has to be of interest to the press, but in many cases it also has to provide collateral material that the sales team can use to demonstrate the company’s credentials in given industries. If sales material is printed in standard double-sided A4 format, then the story has to be able to work in format of multiples of 2 pages.

All of these present conflicting requirements; so which gets precedence?

Generally, the technical content of any story will more or less write itself to a natural length. There is never an argument for overwriting the essential elements of a story just to add length. However, as discussed, there may well be good reasons to incorporate additional background information where this adds value to the story.

Take a holistic approach to the story, focusing on all the elements that will turn it into the best possible item, and see what length emerges. If it’s a perfect length for one medium, but slightly too long for another, cutting out even quite substantial amounts of background information is straightforward without affecting the sense and content of the article. In contrast, adding new

information in to get to a required length for any given medium will involve significant additional work.

But always ensure that you don’t wildly exceed the maximum accepted length. For example, a case study that runs to 5000 words is of no use to anyone.

7. Flattery will get you everywhere

When it comes to writing case studies, one of the most contentious issues can be getting the final approval from the customer. The three things you want to get across are the particular challenge that was addressed, the technical solution that was provided, and the business benefits that this delivered. But these key aspects can actually put you into conflict with the customer.

First off, talking about the challenges faced runs the risk of depicting the customer as one who is really not on top of his game – perhaps even incompetent. Secondly, talking about the technical solution that was delivered might be revealing information about the customer's process that he doesn't want to be revealed because it's part of his competitive advantage. And thirdly discussing the business benefits inevitably brings up issues such as costs, payback periods, productivity increases, efficiency boosts, etc which the customer may not really want made common knowledge.

Facts about the story which the customer will openly discuss over the phone or in face-to-face conversation will often be viewed in a completely different light once they turn up on his desk in print. Also, you have to bear in mind that what seems the most important aspect for you to get across is not necessarily the aspect of the story that seems most important for the customer: there has to be some latitude.

You certainly don't want to get into a situation where the customer sends back your copy with huge swathes crossed through, or even worse the situation where the customer simply stops returning your calls or say's he's too busy to read the piece or doesn't have time to get approvals done for you. These are all sure signs that the relationship is breaking down.

What all customers like, though, is to read about themselves in a positive light. A little flattery at the beginning of an article will get you a long way. Don't be afraid to spend a couple of paragraphs talking about the company's history

and how it has grown to be a market leader, or how it is a ready adopter of innovative solutions – how it leads from the front and thinks out of the box.

Carefully written, these paragraphs don't have to slow the story down; and they may actually add interest. Certainly, though, they will ease the story through the approval process.

And you can always rely on your good friend the magazine editor to hack out the information that he feels is superfluous, doing the dirty work for you. Everybody wins.

8. I couldn’t possibly comment

Getting maximum exposure in the media is greatly helped if you use all the possible tools at your disposal. It’s tempting to focus just on industry news, product stories, case studies and trade articles. But let’s not forget the importance of informed comment.

Indeed, in this web-enabled age when so much of the factual information you want to present in the printed media is just as readily available online, comment type articles take on a greater importance than ever. More and more magazines are giving over space to individuals who are prepared to debate issues in an open and honest way, and to put a name and face to their points of view.

Comment style articles can latch onto any of the issues of the moment. The higher the background levels of political, social and economic turmoil, the greater the opportunities for informed comment.

Embrace the formats of open letters, rights of reply and unsolicited opinion. Debate the issues of the day. Highlight the trends for the future. Be a beacon of hope in industry’s hours of darkness. Show the world that your company doesn’t just have technology, but also has vision.

9. Final thoughts

Consider when approaching your PR that before it gets anywhere near the reader, it has to get past the editor. The approach, qualifications and technical understanding of the editor will vary from country to country. Some magazines in some countries will employ highly qualified engineering journalists who will understand immediately why your story is worthy of inclusion in the magazine.

The magazines in other countries – the UK is typical – may well be staffed by a single editor with no formal (or indeed informal) engineering training, whose primary contribution to the magazine is to sensitively cut submitted stories to fit the available space. In this instance, the story itself needs to work a lot harder to convey the level of excitement that will ensure inclusion in the publication.

Give your material the best possible chance to succeed by making it as easy as possible for the editor to include it. For example, if there is a photo or graphic to accompany the story, then make sure it does accompany the story rather than giving the editor the extra work of contacting you to obtain the image. And make the graphics as compelling as possible; editors want magazines that look good.

Bear in mind that you have much more to tell the press and the public than you may have thought, from new products, to innovative uses of existing products, to educational guides on how to select those products.

And if you ever wonder about the worth of spending a bit more on photography or on doing a bit more research to make a story that bit more compelling, always remember that every page of coverage you secure in a magazine is one page less for your competitors to play for.

About the Author

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He holds a degree in electronic systems engineering, and has worked in the business media and in b2b PR since 1988.