

10 steps for launching award winning communications program - by Susan Shelby

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Public relations (PR) is an under-appreciated art, especially in the commercial real estate marketplace. In a world based on concrete concepts, acute precision, and data-driven results, many non-marketers have difficulty wrapping their heads around the concept of PR.

PR is not a data-driven, ROI-evident endeavor. But, it is an integral part of marketing, lending visibility to a firm's core services, highlighting new trends or innovative technologies, and promoting the brand by communicating the great work being done. It transcends the idea that a project should speak for itself, instead placing emphasis on the firm performing the work. Firms of all sizes can benefit from a well-planned communications program.

Step One: Identify Clear Goals and Milestones

When you submit a proposal, you identify your audience – the person making the decision to hire you based on qualifications, fee, or both. Find your PR focus by answering the following:

- Who are you trying to reach?
- What are you trying to accomplish?
- What are your key messages?
- What are your internal challenges?
- Conduct an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) to identify key areas on which to focus.

Step Two: Build a Team Dedicated to PR

To lend value and weight to your PR efforts, assign someone to advance the program. This can be one person or a group. It can be an in-house staffer, an outside agency, or a combination. Assemble your team and assign clear roles and responsibilities, including writing, pitching, and tracking opportunities.

Step Three: Find Internal Champion(s)

Find an internal champion, especially among your non-marketing staff, who understands, values, and advocates for the PR program. Ideally, this person should be a member of the management team.

Step Four: Work with your Company Culture

The most important part of a PR program is establishing the firm's voice. Together with visual branding and content messaging, the firm's voice establishes a tone and provides a foundation to base all communications and social platforms. It sounds daunting but here are a few steps to get started:

- Start small and build momentum
- Do a PR 101 to educate everyone within your firm as to how they can help

- Share coverage with staff so they see the results of your PR efforts (sometimes you have to toot your own horn!)

Step Five: Overcome Resistance

In today's hectic business climate, it is easy to push aside PR. Common objections to PR include:

- "I don't have enough time!"
- "I'm too busy with billable work."
- "I don't want to brag."

To which you can reply:

- PR brings greater visibility to your projects.
- PR increases brand awareness.
- PR positions your staff as experts in their field.

Step Six: Consider E-Marketing

E-marketing is a low-cost yet valuable tool to show you are a trustworthy resource. Keep content brief, relevant and easy to understand. The goal is to educate, not brag. Use e-blasts to promote upcoming conference presentations and article placements, introduce key personnel to potential clients, and link to videos or online client testimonials on your website.

Step Seven: Add Social Media

Social media networks are a way to get news out quickly and engage your audience. Social media should be part of your marketing strategy, and it's important to figure out which channels best support your culture, brand and voice. We recommend starting with LinkedIn as it is a business-to-business platform and, therefore, most relevant to professional services firms. It is also the best way to get staff engaged. Consider distributing posts ready to "cut and paste" by staff to their personal LinkedIn status.

Step Eight: Leverage Your Website

Use your website to deliver valuable and useful content without sounding like a marketing brochure. Create a blog on your website and regularly post updates to create a following.

Step Nine: Consistency is Key

A common belief is that it takes seven 'touches' to leave an impression. Therefore, aim for a steady flow of news, such as:

- 1-2 press releases per month
- 1-2 byline articles per quarter
- 1 e-blast per month
- 2-3 social media posts per week
- 1 blog post per week

Step Ten: Track Metrics

Remember when we said PR isn't data-driven? It can be, if metrics are set up in advance. There are metric analysis tools available that monitor coverage, social media hits, website visits, and news mentions. The trick is finding the data that speaks to your audience, setting up baselines and measuring on a regular basis.

As part of your overall communications strategy, PR is an invaluable marketing tool that creates visibility, promotes brand recognition, and builds credibility and third-party validation. With luck and hard work, it can generate new business leads. The value of PR and marketing becomes self-evident when your firm's expertise is showcased and your target audience is reached.

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