

Cathy Bussey

brilliant



Create a PR
sensation,
whatever your
budget, whatever
your business





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Cathy Bussey

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For my brilliant husband, Noel

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About the author

Cathy Bussey is deputy editor at PR industry ‘bible’ *PRWeek*. She has worked as a journalist for eight years at daily and weekly newspapers and magazines and also spent time working as a communications officer for an NHS trust.

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Introduction

We are entering the age of the small business. Technology has empowered the individual in ways undreamed of just 20 years ago. Tales of ‘bedroom businesses’ and successful enterprises started up using just a laptop and an idea abound.

I have spent my career working within the media, firstly at newspapers and magazines, and latterly writing about the PR industry at trade bible *PRWeek*. I have witnessed the power of PR to change a company’s fortunes, and the power of bad PR to send those fortunes nosediving.

If anything the recession has made PR more vital than ever. A good reputation is simply essential for a business to thrive. Consumers demand transparency and openness and PR is uniquely placed to help a business offer this. Unlike advertising, PR does not require an investment to generate results.

And then we have the digital revolution, the growth of social media and networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, and the rise of the conversation. The PR industry and the media have both had to adapt, because the public is no longer simply sitting and passively listening to the messages brands and businesses are trying to get to them through advertising and PR. The public is talking back and now it is the media and the business world that must sit up and listen.

But whilst considering all of these factors it did occur to me that the small business, the start-up and the entrepreneur may be rich in ideas but not necessarily in cash. All available funds go into the creation of their enterprise. There is no money left for marketing. They can't afford to pay someone to do their PR for them.

One of the great things about PR is that it can be learned, and anybody can do it. As a journalist with a wealth of experience dealing with PR professionals, and with many contacts within the media who also have this wealth of experience, why should I and we not be sharing this information with the people who really need it?

Brilliant PR will help you manage your own PR and save you money by sharing with you tricks of the trade and secrets that the PR industry would prefer you did not know. Whether you are starting a business, own a business already or you have just started in a PR or marketing role and want to get some background knowledge, *Brilliant PR* has been written to demystify PR and help you understand how to use it to your advantage.

My aim is to teach you *how* to present yourself and your business, product or your client to the public – mainly via the media – in a positive manner to improve your reputation, your business or your client's reputation, and ultimately help make you more money. The book will look at all the basic skills required to carry out a PR strategy, for yourself and your business, or for a product or client that you are representing. It will look at how to create a brand proposition, deal with the media and build good relationships, examine the elements involved in a PR campaign, talk you step-by-step through pitching a story to a media outlet, and help you manage any crises or problems you may encounter. It will use real-life examples to demonstrate what makes 'good' PR – and what makes 'bad' PR.

Whether you are one of the bedroom entrepreneurs to which I have referred above, with a brand spanking new business but no PR budget, or new to marketing and PR and want to know all the trade secrets, without paying a professional to help you, this book will give you all the information you need to put together and carry out a PR strategy. Anyone who needs lessons from the PR experts, but does not have the budget to recruit a company, can learn what they need to know from this book.



CHAPTER 3

Understanding the media

About once a month, I get a call at the *PRWeek* features desk from an eager freelance journalist wanting to pitch a feature idea. ‘How about a piece on what journalists *actually* want from PRs?’ they ask. ‘A guide for PRs on all the things they do wrong and all the ways they annoy journalists? What do you think?’ What this little tale demonstrates is how crucial the relationship between PR professionals and journalists is – and how most journalists tend to feel PRs ‘get it wrong’.



brilliant tip

Media relations is arguably the single most important element to PR. You can have a brilliant, creative, well-thought out campaign with solid news hooks, celebrity endorsement, the works, but if you cannot persuade a journalist to run your story, then all your hard work will have been for nothing. Think back to the opening paragraph of this book – why are some companies consistently in the papers, whilst competitors with exactly the same product or service are not? Chances are, the oft-featured company will have a sound media relations strategy, and therefore when they phone a journalist with a story or idea the journalist will be more likely to pay attention.

In an age of constant, incessant communication, journalists are bombarded like never before with spam, nuisance phone calls and untargeted, unsolicited emails, tweets and messages. Separating the wheat from the chaff is a job most journalists simply do not have time for. As a result, many an email will simply be met with a click of the ‘delete’ button, and a follow-up phone call is most likely to never reach its intended target.

It is crucial, therefore, that you get your approach right. You need to give journalists exactly what they want at your first and subsequent points of contact. There are, sadly, no hard and fast rules – every journalist is different. But there are some well-established do’s and don’ts that, whilst not guaranteed to get results every time, can certainly further your case considerably and help you stand out from all the noise.

The first step is understanding the different types of media and their specific interests.

Local press

Unless you are launching the next Apple, the *Daily Mail* is probably a too ambitious target to begin with. Instead, look at your weekly local newspaper. Studies consistently show that the public trusts local newspapers far more than any other type of media, and local newspapers have a dedicated readership. Getting a story into your local paper is the perfect way to begin generating local interest and signposting to the community that you are open for business.



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impact

Never underestimate how much loyalty, and respect, local newspapers command within the community. A local newspaper, far from being tomorrow’s cat-litter lining or fish and chip wrapper, is a treasured resource

for many, a source of constant information and entertainment. As a journalist working on a local newspaper I would receive constant calls about stories I had written, from people asking where this new shop was located or how they could go about taking advantage of an offer broadcast through a news piece. And here is a little secret – local newspapers are often pretty desperate for decent stories, especially smaller papers covering rural areas. Most local papers will have geographical ‘beats’ to cover and it can be hard work for a reporter digging out stories every week about a village with a population of 2,000. You can make the journalists’ life a lot easier if you have a nice little story all ready for them.

Local newspapers are interested in stories about local people and issues affecting local people. They like human interest stories, court cases, inquests, accidents, successes, local activities and events, local organisations, history, celebrities and points of interest. If you can provide them with a story that features one or more of these, you are likely to succeed.

Regional press

Often beginning life as ‘evening’ papers, the regional press has suffered huge cutbacks and compression in recent years. I spent two years working at a regional newspaper which, when I started, published six editions each day from its head office and four satellite offices. By the time I left, it was down to just three editions a day and had closed two of its satellite offices. This compression has dramatically affected newsrooms. Once heavily staffed, many regional newspapers now operate on a skeleton of overworked, stressed staff constantly grappling to hit their many deadlines. Most regional newspapers now have websites that are updated constantly, further adding to the pressure on the reporting team. Photographers are another casualty of the reduction in staffing on regional newspapers.

Although sad for the industry, and for those working within regional press, this situation presents fantastic opportunities for PR-savvy business folk wanting to get coverage. Give an over-worked, stressed regional hack a decent story, together with suitable photographs, and you can pretty much guarantee that story will be on the website within the hour and in the following day's edition.

Regional papers are interested in everything local papers cover, but on a larger geographical scale. Given they cover a larger area, the story needs to be stronger to make it into a regional publication.

Commercial radio

Independent regional radio stations are increasingly few and far-between. Most radio stations are now owned by larger corporations, such as Global Radio, and a good deal of content is syndicated. This means that the late-night show you hear on your local station, is likely to be broadcast by many other local stations around the country. Syndication slowly but surely removes opportunities for local businesses – the opportunities that exist on commercial radio are really reserved for celebrities and pop stars. That said, most commercial radio stations will have their own, locally focused breakfast show and regular news bulletins, and these can be useful targets for promoting a business or product.

Commercial radio stations like brief news headlines, people phoning in to discuss issues and topics with the presenters, lighthearted banter and celebrity gossip.

BBC regional radio

The BBC really does have the monopoly on broadcast, and its regional radio is no exception. BBC radio tends to span a larger geographical area than the local press and this limits

the opportunities for coverage. Very local stories are fairly rare unless they have a particularly strong news angle or are exceptionally quirky. Traditionally BBC radio has an older, higher-brow audience than commercial radio, making it a tougher target. The huge levels of trust commanded by the BBC however mean it is worth persisting.

The BBC has strong editorial values and a duty to provide licence fee payers with content that they are interested in and enjoy. BBC stations encourage listeners to phone in and interact with the presenters and cover issues that affect the region or the people living within it.

Talk radio

Talk radio does exactly what the name suggests. It is conversation and debate-based and focuses on a range of topics, from news events and happenings to irreverent and quirky items. Talk radio relies on interaction with listeners and features commentators and experts from the sectors which it is discussing. Although less popular than music-based radio, talk radio is an ideal target as it offers constant opportunities for people with strong views and interesting opinions. Some stations, such as TalkSport and LBC, focus on a particular area of interest or a region. Others are all-encompassing and will cover anything and everything as long as it is deemed to be of interest. Talk radio stations like expert commentary and people with strong opinions.

Regional TV

The news bulletins on regional TV programmes are always worth targeting, as TV remains one of the most influential mediums and certainly one of the most popular. But as with BBC radio, regional news programmes tend to steer clear from the kind of hyper-local stories that would easily fit into local

press, and instead pick one or two key stories to look at in more depth. These stories increasingly tend to be event-based, such as a fire, car crash or crime in the area, or political. That said, there is always room for the quirky, 'rollerskating budgerigar' type stories, so bear regional TV in mind. Outlets are interested in national stories with a regional angle as well as stories that directly or exclusively affect the region.

National press

The Times, The Guardian, The Daily Mail, The Sun, The Sunday Times, The Observer and so on are all exceptionally desirable targets. That means that you, and the rest of the world, wish your business or client could be featured within them. Getting coverage in the nationals is possible, but it is a fine art, and not a task to be undertaken lightly.



brilliant tip

Expect to have to work extremely hard to get into the nationals, and brace yourself for the possibility that your phone calls and emails will be completely ignored. Most national newspaper journalists will not bother to take the time to say 'thanks but no thanks'. You need a thick skin to deal with the national press.

National TV and radio

As with national press, coverage on national TV and radio is possible, but exceptionally hard work, and you must be prepared for countless rejections, or simply to be ignored. If you are representing a small, local business, any coverage in national press, on national TV or national radio is an extremely unlikely, but not impossible, scenario. Try not to build your PR

strategy around getting on to the nationals at first. Keep them as a desirable target, but until you are consistently scoring on a local and regional level, do not be disappointed if BBC Radio 2 does not leap at your pitch.

Consumer magazines

These are another super-desirable but extremely difficult target, although some consumer magazines are easier than others. Weeklies are an easier bet than monthlies, in particular women's monthlies, which are bombarded with PR activity from all angles. Coverage in a glossy women's magazine is pretty much the holy grail as whilst a national newspaper may take a critical approach, magazines are largely upbeat, positive publications and rarely say anything bad about any product or service they choose to feature. Readers are also hugely influenced by what they read in women's magazines, so if the beauty editor of *Vogue* says a product is good, women will rush out to buy it *en masse*.

Consumer magazines cover a myriad of sectors and interests, although the most-read tend to be quite generalistic in approach, such as women's magazines, foodie magazines and house and home style magazines.

Each publication will have its own areas of interest and there are no hard and fast rules for consumer magazines, so the best way to identify possible stories for them is to read at least three issues of the magazine you are targeting and be aware of what they cover and what they do not.

Trade press

As a consumer of everyday media, trade press may not really be on your agenda. Look deeper and you will find that for every profession, there is at least one trade magazine dedicated to producing news, features, comment and opinion about that

profession. Case in point: *PRWeek* publisher Haymarket owns titles covering the wonderful worlds of windpower, printing and even caravanning.

Trade press tends to be respected within its sector, even if the wider public is largely oblivious. Trade press is always worth targeting, as in general it is far easier to get a piece in a trade magazine than many other forms of media, and the trade press does tend to command attention from those working within the sector it covers. Good trade press stories can be picked up elsewhere – stories that appear in *PRWeek* can get picked up by the national media from time to time.

Most, if not all of the above categories of media will have an online offering. Media websites range from constantly updated hubs of breaking news, views, comment, opinion and features, such as the websites of national newspapers, to basic sites which contain teaser copy from the media outlet in the hope that you will go out and buy the magazine itself. It is hard to give a detailed outline of the websites of media outlets, as they are constantly changing and being updated. To illustrate this point, at the time of writing, *The Times* had become the first national UK newspaper to put all its online content behind a paywall, swiftly followed by the *News of the World*. Whether or not this approach will work remains anyone's guess at the time of writing.

Blogs

There are more blogs out there in cyberspace than you, I and the entire population of London have had, or ever will have, hot dinners. The vast majority of blogs are entirely, utterly, fundamentally pointless for our purposes – they are simply websites housing the thoughts, views and rants of the blogger, and are often read by the blogger's mum and – that's about it. There are however a large number of significant, influential blogs, ranging from first-person accounts, such as the hugely

successful Girl with a One-Track Mind blog from writer Zoe Margolis, to entire blog-driven news and lifestyle sites such as bitchbuzz.com. Blogs are as varied in tone, style, subject matter and content as is humanly possible, so decide which blogs to target, and make friends with those who write them.

Media relations

The rules of good media relations are relatively universal and apply to all outlets. You will need to tailor your approach to the individual outlet to which you are pitching, but first and foremost you must always remember some very simple do's and don'ts that every journalist you deal with will thank you for.



brilliant dos and don'ts

- ✓ DO your homework. Read the newspaper or magazine, watch or listen to the programme you want to target, before approaching them. Ideally read or watch at least three separate editions. Find out when that outlet's deadlines are and avoid ringing when the journalists are likely to be up against it.
- ✗ DON'T pitch anything that will not fit into that media outlet's various sections or geographical beat. Find out what they cover and stick to that.
- ✓ DO pitch your story to the right person. If your story is about education, pitch it to the education reporter. If it is about health, the health reporter, and so on. If you would like to pitch a feature, take it to the features editor. And always ensure you have spelled their name correctly.
- ✗ DON'T phone up just to introduce yourself or 'have a chat'. Journalists are busy. It is not their job to find a story in piles of background waffle you have sent them under the guises of helping them 'get to know you'. Be targeted. Have a story, news hook or feature idea all ready for them – make their lives easier.



- ✓ DO as you are asked. If the journalist wants a photograph or case study, do everything in your power to find one. If the journalist wants you to pitch the story by email, do it. If they prefer Twitter, send them a tweet.
- ✗ DON'T be a nuisance. Bombarding a journalist with phone calls and emails asking them if they need any more information or are they going to run your story is not 'being persistent', it is borderline stalking.
- ✓ DO accept that the journalist is in charge. It is your job to provide them with all the information they need to write their story. It is their job to actually write it and 'helpful' suggestions from you are not required.
- ✗ DON'T ever ask to see, or check, the story before it is printed or broadcast. No good journalist will ever offer copy approval unless you are an A-List movie star (which is why most interviews with A-Listers are so nauseatingly sycophantic). A journalist is a professional, writing stories is their job. They will check their facts as standard. The story will also go through an editing process, firstly by news or features editors, then sub-editors, then the overall editor. So even if you do get to 'check' a story, it still gets changed, altered and tweaked by at least three other people before it is published. Hence your 'changes' will be whipped straight out.
- ✓ DO manage your expectations. If you want gushing testimonies and a 100 per cent positive tone, buy an advert. Journalists are obliged to be fair, balanced and accurate in what they report. They are also not obliged to plug your business, print your web address and include your logo and corporate biography.
- ✗ DON'T try and be clever. Journalists do not have the time to jump through hoops for a story. They need information now so do not try and 'pique their interest' or any other teaser campaigns. Leave that to the PR professionals, who have limited success with these tactics.

✓ DO send journalists review samples and offer them access to your products or services without expecting anything in return. If they have the time and seem inclined, take them for lunch. Never expect any coverage as a result of this activity, but know that it will stand you in good stead and will pay off – next time the journalist wants a quote or has to write a review, they will think of you.

The above list is long, and only goes to show that the potential to ‘get it wrong’ is rife. If I had to break this list down to just one, crucial, vital point, it would be this: always be useful. Every time you pick up the phone or go to email a journalist stop and ask yourself: Am I being useful? Is my phone call or email going to make this journalist’s life easier? If the answer is no, do not make that call or send that email.

The follow-up call

There is a practice rife among the PR industry that will never fail to provoke a long, vehement rant from any journalist – and every journalist, without exception, has been on the receiving end of this practice. It is known as ‘the follow-up call’ (although it is usually prefixed by a rather unflattering adjective by most journalists) and it goes something like this:

PR agency sends press release to journalist. Journalist does not respond within 12 hours. PR agency forces some unfortunate junior member of staff to make a follow-up call, which usually goes something like: ‘Hello! How are you today? Isn’t it a lovely day? I hope the weather holds out til the weekend! Anyway, I’m just calling to see if you got my press release. Was the story of interest to you at all? Do you have everything you need or would you like more information?’

The reason PR agencies force these poor unfortunate souls to make these maddening calls is because they reason that journalists are terribly busy people, and that they get hundreds, possibly thousands, of press releases every day. Therefore there is no harm in a quick call making sure their communication got through to the right person, and also in gently jogging the journalist into making a decision on whether or not they want to run the story.

The reason journalists will normally prefix a ‘follow-up call’ with some form of expletive is that the PR agency is entirely correct in assuming that the journalist receives hundreds or thousands of press releases every day. And for most of these press releases, the journalist also receives a follow-up call. That is a lot of bubbly young PR execs asking some stressed, over-worked hack if they got ‘my press release’. The non-specific nature of the call is one of its most maddening aspects and begs the blindingly obvious question ‘Which of the one hundred press releases I received today are you referring to?’ The journalist also reasons that if they had wanted further information they would have done something themselves, being as they are perfectly capable of clicking ‘reply’ or picking up a phone.

If you ask 100 journalists, it is my bet that 90 of them at least will say that follow-up calls are completely and totally unnecessary, and should be outlawed and punishable by death. So why do PR agencies keep making those calls? The answer is, much as I hate to admit it, once in a blue moon, the follow-up call actually works. Their press release did slip to the bottom of the pile, or had been forgotten, or enough attention not paid to it, and, as it turns out, there was a perfectly good story there which I may subsequently run. And without that phone call, it probably would not have happened.

Does this make the follow-up call worth it? I will not attempt to adjudicate. I will admit they occasionally work, but by and large they are a massive pain in the proverbial and I would happily

never take another follow-up call ever again, even if it meant I occasionally missed a good story.

If you feel you want to make a follow-up call, then follow these golden rules. Say who you are and where you are calling from. Do not try and make irritating small talk unless you know the journalist personally. Say when you sent the release, what email address it came from and exactly what the story was about. Ask if there is any more information you can offer them. And then politely thank them for their time and put the phone down. If the journalist sounded like they wanted to throttle you, make a note not to make follow-up calls to that journalist again.

The best way to impress a journalist

Matt Cornish is the editor of a local newspaper and has worked for numerous daily and weekly publications. In his journey to the top of his profession, Matt has come across many a PR no-no, and here he shares his thoughts on the best way to get on his, and other editors', good side.



brilliant questions and answers

Q Why are relationships between journalists and PR professionals often so strained?

A It may be a cliché, but journalists are very busy people. Often we're grumpy and unfriendly. This is because we're largely over-worked and understaffed. Our mood isn't helped by the dozens of calls and emails each day offering us stories which have no relevance to our publication.

Q How do you prefer to be approached?

A Personally I prefer emails. But be warned, I receive 200 press releases a day, and I can filter the vast majority of irrelevant stuff very quickly. I delete most of them from the subject title alone. You



get a sentence if the subject title hasn't put me off. Things that stop me deleting immediately are the name of my town, the word 'local' or something I can immediately recognise as being of interest such as the name of my local hospital, the mayor of my town or a local landmark.

Q What puts you off?

A Big name companies, car manufacturers, random non-local celebs in the title of the email. However, other publications may be interested in these and put off by my keywords, which is why you need to research first.

Q What can people do to get on your 'good side' and make you more likely to run a nice story or feature on them?

A Unless you have built up a relationship, don't pretend we're your best friend. We can see through overly chatty and friendly PRs trying to ingratiate themselves with us. We'll run a story if it's of interest to us and there are very few exceptions to this. Being efficient, helpful and relevant will get you a good reputation and are much more important traits than being friendly. That said, don't ever be rude as you'll get nothing.

Q How can people build up better relationships with you?

A Increasingly, I've been getting stories from Twitter and other social network sites. But it's not an exact science and relies a lot more on my vigilance rather than your efforts. I respond well to direct messages from people about breaking news, but from a firm I'd prefer emails. If you can build up a relationship with a journalist on a social network site, they'll be more willing to listen to you. Target journalists you may wish to pitch to in the future on social network sites rather than those you want to pitch to now. Talk normally and honestly about the issues they're talking about, even have debates with them (but keep it friendly). Only when they know who you are should you pitch anything to them.

Good media relations all comes back to preparation. You cannot research a media outlet enough – but you can certainly not research it enough. Obviously it's unrealistic to have a thorough grasp of every single newspaper, magazine, TV show and radio station out there, not to mention blogs and websites.

Instead, draw up a list of media outlets that are interesting to you and relevant to your business and have run stories about you. Subscribe to these publications and get to know them better. It is essential to include your local paper in there, as well as any regional newspapers and radio stations. Also include at least one national newspaper, to keep you up to date with the news agenda, and the trade and consumer magazines that are relevant.

If you can, and it is not overly distracting, have a local radio station or talk radio station on whilst you go about your day job. Or listen to radio whilst at the gym or working out. The more you listen and read, the more you will understand the targets you are trying to reach.



brilliant recap

- Media relations is arguably the most important aspect to PR and it is vital to get it right
- There are numerous different types of media outlets and each have their own agenda and areas of interest
- It is vital to thoroughly research the media outlet you are targeting before pitching to it
- Follow the golden rules, which have been put together in consultation with numerous journalists and really are universal
- Always be useful!

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