

Demystifying Public Relations

by Joseph Lopez

Public relations, or PR, is a combination of information and altruistic actions. The goal of public relations is not merely to send a message about a product, but to communicate the personality of the company behind the product. Public relations seeks to create a positive impression in the minds of the recipients, so as to ultimately foster subsequent actions, such as the purchase of books.

Publishers, and ministries with a publishing division, have limited funds for promotion, yet want their products to sell. Public relations, which is often less costly than advertising, can be an effective part of an integrated marketing campaign.

How to begin

You have a new book and want the media to promote it. First, identify a newsworthy element you can use to position the book to media outlets. Is the book from a new writer, or from a bestselling author? Does it cover a subject from a new angle? The more unusual the concept, the more likely PR will succeed.

Second, identify the audience. Is the publication for Christians or for a mass audience?

Next, decide who would be a good spokesperson for the book. An author, editor, book critic, lay reader, librarian, or a local celebrity could recommend it. Pastors and ministry workers could be good advocates, but often work only for Christian media.

Determine the kind of media to be used: TV, radio, print, Internet, community meetings, special events, fliers, posters, philanthropic activities. The choice depends on your resources and research on the demographics, market location and size, and so on, of the people you want to reach.

Formulate a strategic statement that identifies the book, the conduit of information, and the end result. Set realistic expectations.

Media Relations

Media professionals are often cynical about PR because they are inundated with information. Do not let this discourage you. When you really have something newsworthy, the media will listen.

Print media. Read local dailies and study what kind of "publication" stories they cover. At Christmas and Lent, editors would like to focus on good news; capitalize on this proclivity. Take advantage of the lull in

activities at less busy times of the year to launch your own PR activities. Go above reporters. Contact the editor in chief, or the general manager.

Broadcast media. Because television and radio broadcasters rely on the news they receive from print media, try to get print coverage first to attract their attention. Send PR to the program director for daytime shows, as these are most likely to cover book-related news. Target cable shows and independent stations that are more receptive to "soft" news. Call when you are more likely to reach decision-makers, rather than their secretaries. Or, have a pastor call on your behalf. If you have time, nothing beats a personal visit.

Electronic media. The Internet can be a great and cost-effective PR tool for the long term. Create a Web site to promote your book. Register it with multiple search engines and link it to other popular sites. Web sites work best with other advertising. Always refer to your URL (universal resource locator, www).

Additional Tips

Unless you have a famous author, focus on the life of the author. John Grisham, known for his legal thrillers, was a small-town lawyer when he started writing. Sebastian Junger, author of *The Perfect Storm*, was a tree cutter. People respect and identify with unknowns who finally get the recognition they deserve.

Never forget to send a publication sample for review.

An employee with unusual, creative ideas just might be a natural PR strategist. Perseverance and patience are valuable PR traits. If nothing happens with the first fax/call/action, follow up repeatedly.

Learn about PR from the International Association of Business Communicators (www.iabc.com), the Public Relations Society of America (www.prsa.org), and the Museum of Public Relations (www.prmuseum.com) and similar organizations.

Do not be a spin-doctor or a pretentious diplomat. Honesty, integrity and sensitivity are marks of the best PR. This means saying the right thing (the truth) at the right place at the proper time (no self-serving delays) and in a caring manner. ♦

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