

Q&A: Public Relations for the Training Industry

Public relations is one of the most misunderstood of all marketing tactics. If done wrong, you can waste lots of time and money. If done right, you could take your training company to a whole new level.

We talked to Linda Galloway of Apollo Associates, who is a specialist in PR for the training industry.

Q: What are the ingredients of a successful PR program?

Linda: As with any program, you start with objectives. Before you send out the first news release, you need to first determine what you're trying to accomplish – such as increased market awareness, competitive differentiation, or proof of success.

The next step is to identify the resources that you have to work with. For instance, do you have customers who are willing to talk about issues related to your market, be the subject of a case study, or potentially mention your company when on record with a reporter? Do you have statistics, research, sources, or other materials that would give reporters a different angle or a brand new perspective on a topic? Does your organization have senior-level spokespeople who are articulate and can credibly speak to issues relevant to your market? Do you have any marketing activities to leverage – product launches, conferences or other events, partnerships?

Once you have a program foundation, you can then set out to develop a plan that ideally incorporates two types of outbound communications: making news, using news releases, news advisories, and story pitches; and taking advantage of identified news opportunities in editorial calendars.

Finally, you also should have prepared press materials at the ready. For instance, you'll want to have biographies and photos of key executives, some kind of company backgrounder, screen shots of key products, case studies that illustrate how your products and services are used and demonstrate their benefits, and Q&As or fact sheets that can be quickly read by press members.

Q: What value can a PR agency bring?

Linda: Effective PR requires a wide variety of skills. Creative and strategic thinking. A knowledge of your market. Excellent writing. Experience in working with reporters and editors.

It's rare to find an individual with all of these skills at a salary a young company can afford, so by hiring an agency, you can tap into the skills and experience of multiple individuals – usually at a more efficient cost than hiring a full-time, fully qualified employee.

An agency can also bring your company a measure of objectivity that can be difficult to maintain internally. PR has to be based on the interests of readers and the editorial needs of media. You will not make headway if your news releases are thinly disguised advertisements or if your background materials are overtly promotional. In some cases, outside PR professionals can also be more effective at counseling executive spokespeople and preparing them for press interviews.

Q: When should you consider a PR program?

Linda: Not all companies are ready for PR. In addition to making a sustained budget commitment, a company needs referenceable customers, executive-level support, and something to talk about in order to get real traction in the media.

Q: How can a PR program complement other marketing activities?

Linda: Public relations can enhance a company's investments in other marketing activities, such as advertising, trade shows, direct mailing, or telemarketing. When your company's name is in print, you gain market credibility. Prospects will be more likely to pay attention to advertising or to schedule a sales call. Additionally, customers will feel more confident about their purchase decisions.

It's also very important to make sure PR efforts are integrated with other marketing activities. For instance, at the most basic level, you want to ensure that you time a press launch of a new product with marketing activities. Background materials used for press activities – such as Q&As and fact sheets -- can usually be repurposed for other marketing activities. Press positioning and messaging should be consistent with the content of other marketing materials.

Q: What are the most important things to understand about PR?

Linda: I've come up with five very important things that are sometimes overlooked.

- 1) It's a fact that an article that references your company has a higher credibility than other marketing activities, such as advertising.
- 2) PR is not "free advertising." With advertising or direct mail, you control the message about your company and its products. You cannot control what a reporter writes.
- 3) You have to ensure all PR activities support what readers want to read and know – not necessarily what you want to say.
- 4) Results take time and a consistent, ongoing effort.
- 5) Making news takes creative thinking, persistence, and sometimes, luck.

Linda Galloway is the founder and president of Apollo Associates, a public relations firm based in Connecticut which specializes in PR for the training industry. The company's clients have included Articulate, Bersin & Associates, Expertus, NETg, and SkillSoft. You can reach Linda at lgalloway@apolloassociates.com.