

PR SHOULD SELL, NOT TELL

*Although Public Relations practitioners need to employ selling skills in order to influence the media favourably, few meet the standards practised by effective and professional salespeople, writes **LINDA TRUMP***

DURING the 10 years I have worked as a journalist and magazine editor, I have often wondered why public relations practitioners so rarely provide me or my readers with information of real value.

While I am bombarded by a continuous flow of press releases, averaging at least three a day, I only use about five of these pieces per month in abbreviated form in our "New Products & Services" column. The rest are simply relegated to File Thirteen. And with one or two exceptions, none has ever been worthy of publishing as a self-standing article.

The same goes for the regular invitations received for press launches. Few are ever of direct relevance to our target market and with time being at a premium, it does not pay to attend the majority of these events.

Colleagues in the publishing world share similar sentiments to the above. Which makes one wonder why PR companies so rarely seem to meet the specific needs of the print media.

In my opinion, the problem stems primarily from poor selling skills, and the lack of awareness regarding the fact that public relations is fundamentally a selling activity.

The Public Relations Institute defines PR as "the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics."

Compare this statement to the definition of selling provided by HK Nixon in his book titled *Principles of Selling*: "Selling has to do with all the numerous activities whereby individuals or firms possessing goods or rendering services seek to influence others to trade with them. Salesmanship is a popular term used to designate the arts practised by sellers in their attempt to influence others to buy."

Both definitions refer to the fundamental activity of influencing the public favourably. However, the PRISA definition does not specifically mention the key role practitioners need to play in order to influence, or sell, the press on passing on information to their respective readers.

If one accepts at face value that persuading the press to publish certain information requires a modicum of salesmanship, then many PR companies fare very poorly in this regard.

According to research carried out by international training consultants, Wilson Learning and Beveridge Systems, salespeople predictably progress through three distinct skills levels.

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Level 1 – befriending customers

Regrettably, PR practitioners generally employ only the skills used by inexperienced salespeople at Levels 1 or 2 of the model, as follows:

Focus on 'pleasing' the customer

At Level 1, salespeople attempt to sell by making friends with customers. This often entails inviting them to social and sporting activities and providing them with gifts in order to curry favour.

The PR industry excels in this area, assuming that journalists simply love the distraction of breakfasts, cocktail parties, tennis matches, and the like. However, if they were to survey media people, they would find that many of them resent the time wasted in "sitting around" waiting for presentations to begin.

At a recent meeting I attended, a prominent financial editor deliberately arrived late and then interrupted lengthy introductions by stating "Who cares who I am. Just get to the point and tell us why you dragged us out here in the first place."

His acerbic comment had the desired effect and the meeting immediately swung into action with more hard core information being exchanged than I have ever experienced at a press event.

Concentrate on activity rather than results

Like the lowly order taker, PR practitioners often focus on reaching as many media people as they can, rather than targeting a few quality prospects. As few magazines or newspapers like publishing information which has clearly been disseminated to everyone in town, this "spray and pray" strategy usually backfires.

Reluctance to ask for the order

Embarrassed at being seen as pushy, PR practitioners often fail to follow through in order to find out whether their offering meets the editor's needs and can be used.

They habitually 'close' or append messages to their letterheads like "Call us if you need any further information." Hardly an incentive to action!

Level 2 – the peddler

When commercial salespeople (read PR practitioners) are pressurised by management or their clients to produce tangible results, they usually evolve into peddlers, characterised by:

"Pitches" versus needs analysis

At this level, PR practitioners habitually bombard editors with generalised information concerning their clients' activities, products or services, often at the rate of one release a week. Pressurised to produce results, they then phone up to find out whether the editor will be using the material or attending the press launch.

When the answer is no, they often fail to comprehend why, and sometimes resort to a "deal orientation" where they either refer to client advertising which has already appeared or the imminent possibility of ad support should the recalcitrant editor publish the required information. The underlying assumption here is that one favour deserves another and that editors focus primarily on raising ad revenues, and not on producing quality copy.

What these amateur practitioners fail to respect is that professional editors rarely bow to threats and will refuse to budge unless the PRO can produce material of specific interest for the readership in question.

Level 3 – needs orientation

Only at Level 3, do salespeople (or PR practitioners) exhibit selling skills worthy of being called professional.

It is only at this level, that practitioners stop focussing solely on their own needs and consciously attempt to find ways in which they can customise information or events to meet editors' specific needs.

In other words, before they bash out the same press release to everyone, these practitioners speak to individual editors in order to determine what information or story angle would interest them specifically.

They then focus on conveying only the information which will be of specific use to the editor in question. And where they lack sufficient background, they take the trouble either to glean the information themselves or to put the editor in touch with the relevant client expert.

These more sophisticated practitioners recognise that unless they are able to differentiate themselves from their competitors by providing a unique service or article, they are likely to be eclipsed by more interesting information.

I once met a public relations consultant who met this description. A former journalist, he went out of his way to contact editors before he touched his typewriter in order to discuss how he could create a story uniquely tailored for their target markets. Using this approach, every single one of his articles was published.

In a more advanced stage of third level selling, the PR practitioner becomes a sustaining resource to his media contacts by providing them with innovative ideas and support which enhance the overall growth and appearance of their publications.

I only experienced this kind of assistance once when a prominent PR consultant took the trouble to send me copies of overseas articles or snippets of information which she thought I might find useful.

Not only were these items useful, but they also endeared me to this particular practitioner, with the result that I always went out of my way to support her when she held events which were of any pertinence to our target market. In a nutshell, what I am advising PR practitioners to do is refine their selling skills. They can start by implementing the following practices:

Study the media you are seeking to influence: Who are the readers/listeners/viewers (in terms of age, occupation, sex, income bracket, etc.)? What kind of content is generally featured in this medium?

Present information to this medium so that it would interest its target market.

Once you have come up with a good angle, phone up the editor or producer and discuss your idea. Are they interested? And if you submit it, how likely are they to publish it? (This preamble is essential as it clarifies what you need to do and builds commitment. Few people feel comfortable making promises which they subsequently fail to honour.)

Write your story so that it matches the format used by the publication. For example, if the publication uses introductory paragraphs and pull quotes, make sure that you provide these. Also match the length and style of the article to those used by the magazine. This is the hallmark of the true professional.

After submitting your story, or sending off the invitation, phone to find out whether it meets the editor's needs (not if he or she will be using it). If your information falls short of the mark, find out why and then rework it until it meets the editor's needs. (Contrary to popular opinion, editors do not enjoy fixing up PR peoples' poor grammar or incomplete stories, especially when they have been paid good money by their clients to produce the item correctly in the first place.)

Find out if any support material is required and then make sure you send exactly what the editor needs, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant the publication may seem. Remember your client is paying you a sizeable retainer in order to do a thorough, and not a half-baked job. Can you really afford to risk information about your client being published in a slipshod way, accompanied by grainy photographs taken by the editor?

Last, but not least, when information is published by the media, remember to thank the editor! This is the one area in business dealings where a little social charm can go a long way. And this gesture means a lot more to hard-worked editors than a dozen boring breakfasts or cocktail parties.

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