

PR Landmines to Avoid: Part 2

Here are 5 more misconceptions about PR and its uses.

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Last month, I talked about five common mistakes I've seen, over and over, from businesspeople attempting to do their own public relations. Each mistake stemmed from a common misconception about what PR really is--and what it isn't.

To recap, the five misconceptions were:

1. Thinking PR is the same as advertising. Both are [good](#) but very different.
2. Becoming a press release "mill." Know that less can be more.
3. Doing your own PR without studying best practices or improving your writing.
4. Focusing too narrowly--and missing important things "on the edge."
5. Focusing too broadly--and not connecting with your real target audiences.

If you missed last month's column, don't forget to take a look back at "[PR Landmines to Avoid: Part 1](#)." Just being aware of them can steer you around the puddles and keep your feet dry.

This month, let's look at five more PR misconceptions:

Mistake No. 6: Being too slow on the draw--talking about your news after the fact, not beforehand. I think it must be human nature to want to tell reporters about an achievement after it happens. This may fly in the regular world, but in the world of media, this usually just makes it Old News. And these days, when news is cycling through our universe almost at the speed of light, old news is something to be avoided.

Certainly, in some situations, restrictions force you to wait with your news. And sometimes, such as being a surprise recipient of an award, you truly don't know the news in advance. However, in most cases, you have ample warning, and this is when you strategize to figure out the best way to reveal your news. Giving a key reporter a heads-up that something is going to happen may enable you to land a "trophy [story](#)" where it will be read or seen by your target audience. Further, by sharing the news in advance, you might get the reporter to come to your company to cover the news event. That can create a story that works all the way around. The key suggestion here: Evaluate each piece of news carefully and do the strategizing beforehand.

Mistake No. 7: Being inconsistent in your messages. This is one of the most common mistakes companies make, and it affects far more than just their PR activities. But even limiting the fallout to PR, lack of consistency will undermine your company's credibility. And the whole point of PR is building and maintaining your credibility.

It's easy to understand how lack of consistency happens: Companies create materials at various points in time and things never stay the same, especially with an entrepreneurial endeavor. What's true one day may have evolved even as little as a week later. But companies don't update their messaging to keep up. Content varies from place to place. The website says one thing, the brochures say another--even the company sign is out of sync, still bearing an old logo. The tone shifts back and forth. Sometimes even the website displays former logos and old taglines.

If you're taking the time to learn to use PR to your advantage, don't undermine your future success by looking like an amateur. Do an audit of all your materials, both content and design. See how you really look to the outside world. Fix this before inviting the world to see how great your company is.

Mistake No. 8: Bashing your competition when you get the reporter's ear--always a losing proposition. Sure, I know that in the advertising world, Company A will bash Company B in its commercials. And sometimes it works, especially when there's a little humor thrown into the mix. But in the world of PR, it's tough to hang onto your stellar reputation when you're dissin' the other guy. Don't do it, especially avoid it when the reporter is egging you on. It's a great idea to set the record straight with generalities. You can tell a reporter what works and what doesn't work, or tell her why something is good and why something else isn't. But don't name names to illustrate your points. A primary purpose of PR is to help establish your credibility as a quality company, an expert source, an entity that can be trusted to [do the right thing](#). Whenever you are interviewed, take the high road; it will always lead you where you want to go.

Mistake No. 9: Underestimating the power of social media in 2009. Learn it. Use it! Obviously, a great deal can be said about social media and the way it is oozing into practically every nook and cranny of our regular media experience. There's no escaping it, and people who are doing PR and ignoring it are falling further and further behind. The mistake here is not taking time to understand why it can help your PR efforts and, more important, how to make this happen. It's a mistake to say: "Sure, FaceBook is fine for my kids, but not for me. And Twitter, well, I just don't care what people are doing at every point in their day. And I sure don't want to [share](#) that kind of information with them! So what possible use is Twitter in my business?" Books and columns have been written that answer these questions. Read them. Get on the train, or it will leave the station without you.

Mistake No. 10: Successfully getting media coverage but having a mediocre website. It always pains us, but we see this on a regular basis. A company has successfully interested the media in doing a story. Whatever the angle, the pitch worked. Coverage was great. The company was poised for an onslaught of prospects. Unfortunately, nothing materializes because the website looks like it belongs in the last century.

What's wrong with it? Poor design, writing strewn with typos and grammatical errors, horrible [navigation](#), "vintage" information--all reasons prospective customers would doubt the company could produce quality products or services. Don't let this happen to you. If you're successfully navigating the PR waters to gain media exposure, don't let a poor website ruin it for you.

Yes, many great companies have poor websites. This is perfectly OK if they have a large client base that knows and loves them, no matter what they look like online. Conversely, many fledgling companies look like giants, with flash zooming around their well-written and well-designed sites. This doesn't make them a good company, but someone finding them for the first time might be convinced she had come to the right place.

My suggestion: Unless you have more customers than you know what to do with, make sure your website matches the quality of your company. It's your window to the public: Make sure the public can gain a sense of how great your company is by looking in that window.

So, how did you do? You're not alone if you identified with one or more of these mistakes. There's no way to avoid all the PR puddles all of the time, but do think twice if your PR incorporates any of these misconceptions. Make sure you have the basics in place so you can capitalize on those big PR hits.