



Creating the Right Image
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Let's establish one point right from the start. The best product does not always win. The product that runs the fastest, does the most for the least money, etc., is not always the product that ends up with the largest chunk of market share.

Among the factors that influence the success or failure of a given product, it's becoming increasingly clear that buyers – particularly buyers of complex products such as technology – gravitate toward known companies that stand for something.

This is where public relations enters the picture.

You can think of public relations as a discipline that shapes and elevates a company's image. Unfortunately, many start-up companies view public relations as an auxiliary function that can be put off until the company "gets bigger."

Big mistake.

Ignoring public relations does not prevent the marketplace from forming opinions about your company. They don't think, "Jeez, Company XYZ never distributes a news release, so I won't form a perception about the company." Instead, information about your company that leaks from colleagues, venture capitalists, employees and the like begins to influence how the market perceives you.

In short, the process of shaping your company's image is going to happen with or without PR (and with or without your consent).

Before going further, it's worth zeroing in on the phrase, "shaping your company's image." Note that I didn't use the verb "control."

One tactical error which many companies – from Fortune 500 heavyweights to startups – make is to embrace the view that they "control" their image. Such a view assumes that a company controls all the various forces that ultimately make up its image.

Every time a customer, prospect, partner, potential employee, etc., "touches" your company, that person makes an assessment about your company based on the interaction. Needless to say, you can't control these interactions even if you practice Orwellian management. And your competitors and the rest of the high-tech industry will have a say in how they perceive you as well.

That's why you should deploy public relations as a strategic tool to influence the factors that ARE within your grasp, so you can shape – not control – your image.

Establish the desired image for your company. Agree on the emotional (cool, high-energy, caring) and non-emotional (market position, product category, product differentiation) characteristics you want associated with your company. Develop primary messages for your company that reflect these characteristics. Then finally, create the strategies and tactical plan to catapult the messages, characteristics and desired image to the marketplace.

Earlier, I noted that buyers gravitate toward known companies that stand for something. The shaping of an image covers the last part of the statement “stand for something,” so let’s zero in on the word “known.”

At the risk of stating the obvious, raising the profile of a typical startup takes time. I use the word “typical” because there is always the exception to the rule. Once in a while, the stars align as in the case of Google – charged into a hot market segment, redefined the space, beat the goliaths, skyrocketing IPO, etc. – and the profile climbs furiously at a 90-degree angle.

But the Googles of the world are one in a thousand. The vast majority of startups need to build their profiles the old-fashioned way – with focus, consistency and creativity.

It’s a bit sobering when you look at the noise level. The typical news reporter at a trade magazine receives 100-plus news releases in a given week, of which less than 10 percent ever find their way to the printed page. There are hundreds of start-up ventures. Given that all of these companies (not to mention the entrenched players) want to be “known,” there’s fierce competition to raise a company’s profile.

Again, the way to rise above the noise level is through focus, consistency and creativity. The first two success factors are fairly self-explanatory. The PR program should identify your primary audience – probably the constituency that has the greatest influence on the decision to buy your products – and then hammer this specific audience with your messages again and again and again.

While building your brand in the virtual world is a topic in itself, it’s important to target both print and online targets. At the very least, every product category imaginable is influenced by bloggers who deserve to be on your radar.

As far as applying creativity to the public relations process is concerned, the idea is to develop a program that goes beyond the news release. Where does your primary audience go for information besides publications (which gets back to both print and online targets), and how can your company impact these vehicles? Does your CEO offer a unique story that can be packaged and humanized? Are you taking a unique approach that plays into broader media themes?

The point is, there is a multitude of ways to communicate your company’s story. By combining out-of-the-box thinking with focus and consistency, you lay the foundation for an effective public relations program.

And the sooner you implement a PR program, the sooner you become an active participant in shaping your company’s image.

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