
PR Tips for Startups

An ebook by Brian Solis of [PR 2.0](http://www.briansolis.com) and Co-Author of [Now is Gone](http://www.briansolis.com)





PR is one of the most misunderstood disciplines in the marketing department and many startup entrepreneurs and even veteran executives are quick to underestimate and undervalue it, or on the contrary, expect PR to solve all of their marketing needs all with just one email or press release.

In order to be successful in Public Relations, you need to grasp what it is, what it isn't, and how it works and why. Otherwise, you'll never be able to build the right team, determine the best strategies to amplify visibility and gain traction, or have the ability to effectively measure it.

And, for disclosure purposes, the following points are based on good PR and are highly summarized and simplified to get you thinking. As in anything, there's more to the story. And, there are always those that do not represent PR in the best possible light. Keep in mind that those who do not practice PR effectively are obvious when you know what to look for, and thankfully, they do not represent the entire industry.

1. Understand what PR is and isn't.

All too often, businesses expect PR to perform miracles simply because they confuse it with advertising, online marketing, media buying, search marketing, etc. PR can't guarantee legitimate coverage in industry publications - no matter how tight the relationship. If PR promises it, then they're lying. I leverage relationships daily to consider stories that I package in a way that's most relevant to them. Most of the time it works because I take the time to make it valuable to respective markets. If I took advantage of my contacts to force coverage whenever I needed to deliver on a promise, then it would mark the beginning of the end of my relationships.

While I won't compare PR to each branch of marketing, I will say that PR IS NOT ADVERTISING. Reporters and bloggers don't stop what they're doing to write about your company, just because we send them a press release. They're bombarded by PR people all over the world. Stories are cultivated. If we respect them, do our homework, and help highlight the value of a story, coverage is imminent. If you want guaranteed



exposure, buy an ad.

2. Don't under value PR.

PR, when done right, is extremely valuable to company branding, which has immeasurable benefits in the long haul. Customers have choices and if you're not consistently vying for their attention, it's pretty easy to fall off their radar screen when they evaluate options. Too many companies nickle and dime PR to the point of absurdity. Don't get me wrong. Expensive PR doesn't equal success. But short changing PR is usually a first step in the wrong direction.

3. PR is not a switch.

It doesn't go off and on whenever you have the time or budget to throw at it. The market moves too quickly, and if you're not actively participating in it, you'll quickly find that company sales and site traffic will begin a downward spiral that may or may not recover. Embrace it. Nurture it. Stick with it. PR is an inexpensive solution for gaining visibility within the market segments that matter to your business.

Don't fool yourself. As a company executive, you can not and should not run PR yourself. You have more important things to do, like say, run a company.

If you turn off the PR switch, your competitors will steal your thunder, and, your customers.

4. Initial and consistent coverage takes time.

In most cases, coverage doesn't just happen. PR is like farming. The more seeds you plant, along with the time you spend watering, caring for, and feeding them, your crops will grow in the form of coverage over time. While some things such as news, etc., force information out quickly, other stories take time. And when they appear, they help raise brand visibility, drive some people to buy, and they also spark others to consider writing about it - which in turn also influences the cycle to replicate. Don't assume all of this coverage happens simply because you are a popular company.

Also, realize that there are different forms of media and they each react to different stories in their own way. Trades (whether traditional media or blogs) will cover certain things that relate to your industry whereas mainstream media will need the story presented in a way that has broader appeal.

5. Get a spokesperson.

Just because you created the product doesn't mean you're the best person to sell it. I've worked with some of the most passionate executives that just don't click with the people they're trying to engage - no matter how hard they try. This has negative impact that lasts and is tough to overcome.



Suck it up and get a spokesperson who can help tell the story to the people that will help grow your business.

6. PR is not the only tool in the shed.

Understand that PR is only an umbrella for the specific communications initiatives that will help you achieve complementary, simultaneous goals. For example, corporate branding and product marketing require different campaigns. Don't put all of your eggs in the PR basket. Run SEO campaigns. Look at online ads and promotions. Run contests. Attend events.

PR can not be the only thing you rely on in order to build and sustain a successful business.

7. PR at the Head, Across Chasms, and in the Long Tail

No matter what industry you're in, realize that the most popular blogs, newspapers, or magazines are only one part of the process. Your market is divided by adoption and buying behavior and documented through a bell curve rich with **chasms**, pyramids that further divide and classify them, quadrants that demonstrate competitive advantages, **ladders** that represent the technology that people can use to reach customers in different ways, a **cluetrain** that shows how people carry it through the long **tail**, and hopefully reflected by a hockey stick that forces you to evaluate what to do from Inside the Tornado. Yes, of course this was meant to be funny...but it does show that one program no longer serves the masses when you deconstruct it by the markets and the people that comprise it.

This means that you have to embrace both new media and traditional media in PR. For example, in the tech space, TechCrunch, Mashable, VentureBeat, Read/Write Web, et al, will yield measurable traffic so great that most of the time it will knock out company servers. Every executive wants them. CEOs **cry** if they can't get coverage on them. But, by no means, do they carry your value proposition to the entire collective of people that will embrace your product and help sustain your business for the whole game.

They represent the early adopters and pragmatists. However, there are other worlds of global microcommunities rich with horizontal and vertical publications and blogs that will carry your story to the more conservative groups of people that collectively converge as the primary base of recurring revenue.

In this case, it's less about traffic and hits as metrics for success and more about quality, registrations, purchases, referrals, etc. that define business growth and sustenance.

8. Engage in social media.



We live in a "social" economy and the only way to succeed in it, is to participate. Participation is marketing. **Community relations** is marketing. Engagement builds trust, relationships and loyalty, but it requires a genuine, dedicated, proactive, and value-driven effort.

Blog about industry-relevant topics, not just company accomplishments. Provide tips and hints to help your customers make more informed decisions. It's not a new tool in the marketing belt. It is a new opportunity to engage customers and cultivate relationships. Simply put, be a resource for your community.

Embrace online **video** and watch how creative, genuine, and cool content becomes incredibly viral. Words can carry the message so far, but video is also an opportunity to showcase the product while entertaining viewers.

Podcast new updates, customer successes, ideas for new product uses, etc. Bookmark and share relevant links using the popular social tools available.

Cultivate user generated content.

Write **social media releases**. Write SEO press releases. However, write them well and strip out all of the bull shit.

If relevant, build transparent profiles in the social networks where you can find and support customers.

Share images and behind the scenes footage using services such as flickr and YouTube.

Listen and engage in **MicroMedia**.

Hire a community manager. In the new world of social media, new PR can be complemented through the efforts of someone who can actively represent the company in all things social so that they can provide proactive information and support to people looking for guidance in the communities they frequent. Don't market to them, have conversations.

*Note, this is an ultra-simplified list of how to jump into the world of social media. Read the **Social Media Manifesto** and **The Art and Science of Community Relations** for additional suggestions and guidance.*

9. Support and reward your PR program.

Feed it as you do any other branch of the company. Respect it when it works and let your team share in the success. Don't focus on the shortcomings. Don't take credit for coverage if you randomly sent someone an email a long time ago. Don't tell your PR team that the coverage that's happening is solely driven by the viral activities of users



and other existing coverage. PR is designed to spark Word of Mouth and every time a new article appears, it's because of something that PR did either recently or awhile ago. That's the value of PR. It's the program that keeps on giving!

Bottom line, extend congratulations as goals are achieved and support PR in a way that keeps your team motivated to kick ass.

10. Keep good people.

If you find a PR person or team that truly lives and breathes the company and the product, never let them go. They are a rare breed and deserve support and promotion.

11. Keep an open line of communication.

Meet with your PR team regularly to communicate realistic goals and measure progress. Paint a real world picture of what success looks like each month and listen to the reports to see if they are indeed attainable. You get out of PR what you put into it.

12. Establish realistic metrics.

PR isn't a miracle solution to help you attain all business objectives.

Agree upon realistic metrics in advance. All too often executives lose sight of what PR is designed to do. The right coverage is invaluable, even when it doesn't translate into visible hits, traffic spikes, or sales. Super Bowl ads, for example, rarely pay for themselves in the short run.

Realize that a proactive, intelligent and consistent PR program will contribute to the bottom line. It shouldn't be solely responsible for company success or failure.

Metrics can be in the form of specific targets every month, traffic, registrations, lead generation, links, and now, [conversations](#).

13. Do not launch your company or product at a conference.

Contrary to popular belief, do not attempt to launch your company at a tradeshow unless it is a venue specifically designed to make your launch successful. For example, in Tech, we have [DEMO](#) and [TechCrunch40](#), and each draw worldwide attention. But, the best PR is always done before the event.

At conferences, companies kick and scream for attention and usually drown each other out. Tell your story before you have to compete to do so. However, go to conferences and events for lead generation and networking.

14. Do not start contacting people on your own.



This is one of my personal favorites. Many executives believe that in order to get something done right, they have to do it on their own. So, they start emailing reporters and bloggers on a whim without regard for relationship, existing conversations, or their best interests. I have seen some pretty interesting ramifications for doing so.

All I can say is this. Consult with PR before doing so. In fact, sometimes contact is best coming directly from an executive. It just needs to be planned and orchestrated in a way that is beneficial to reporter/blogger, the company, and the overall PR initiative.

15. Embargos and Breaking News.

The blogosphere and social media in general has created the need for **new rules** when breaking news.

Determine who your news benefits, where they go for information, and what they're looking for. Then reverse engineer the process and design everything around what you learned, from writing the release, what you say and how you say it, to whom and when.

Do not rely on a wire service to get your news out. PR is best served by specifically working with the new and traditional influencers who can help get your story told, in advance, and usually under **embargo**. (Note: Most of the time, less is more. Do not try to take your news to anybody and everybody under embargo. Be smart about it. A few key places can carry your story farther, and, without ruining relationships with influencers along the way.)

Exclusives are a rare practice these days and usually reserved for some pretty incredible and industry moving news.

16. Customer service is the new, new marketing.

Customer service is no longer an inbound activity or viewed as a cost center. Social Media changed everything and it isn't a spectator sport.

Marketing-savvy corporate executives are working with PR, Advertising, and Marcom teams to explore options and strategies on how to participate in relevant online conversations. This represents a shift in outbound marketing as it creates a direct channel between companies and customers, and ultimately people.

Social Media is rooted in conversations between people and peers, regardless of the technology that facilitates them, and every day they take place across blogs, networks, forums, micromedia, and online groups. And, each day, with every new community and social tool that is introduced, brands, products and services are actively discussed, supported, and disassembled.

Social Media represents an entirely new way to reach customers and connect with them directly. It adds an outbound channel that complements inbound customer service and



traditional PR, direct marketing and advertising, placing companies and their customers on a level playing field to discuss things as peers. Most importantly, it transcends the process of simply answering inbound questions to creating a community of enthusiasts and evangelists.

17. PR isn't charity.

While many PR people and agencies demand unreasonable fortunes, remember that you're a startup and solutions are abundant when you know what you're looking for and value the engagement.

In PR, you get what you pay for – well most of the time anyway. Don't expect brilliant PR for pennies. Nor should you expect results by over paying for services. There are consultants, individuals, and agencies willing to work for reasonable cash and stock incentives. But, I can't think of anyone, who's good at what they do, that will work on a performance-based payment program.

PR just doesn't work that way. Think of it this way. Good sales people don't work solely on commission. Most earn a salary on top of their commission to keep them active and successful. If PR people wanted to earn their income on a commission basis, they would get into sales where they can usually make a lot more money. They're in PR because they prefer to "tell" a story instead of "selling" it.

18. You're not the only company with a great story

Remember this. At any given moment, reporters and bloggers are getting bombarded with pitches, both good and bad, by companies that take the time to learn what they want in addition to those who simply spam them and hope for the best. It's overwhelming to say the least.

They have better things to do than stop everything that they're working on just to read your press release. This is one of the reasons why you need PR. Well that, and the fact that you need someone who's not drinking the bath water to tell you that your story needs help in how it's told to the specific groups of people to whom it matters.

Just because it's new doesn't make it newsworthy.

You have to compete for attention and in order to do so effectively and genuinely, you need someone who can help tell your story, the right way, through the people who reach the customers that will impact your bottom line. It's not an overnight process. It's not a game. It's a process of investing in building and leveraging relationships now and in the long term.



Brian Solis is Principal of [FutureWorks](#) , an award-winning PR agency in Silicon Valley. Solis blogs at [PR2.0](#) , [bub.blicio.us](#) , [WebProNews](#) , and regularly contributes PR and tech insight to industry publications. Solis is co-founder of the Social Media [Club](#) , is an original member of the [Media 2.0](#) Workgroup, and also is a contributor to the Social Media [Collective](#) and [ConversationalMedia.org](#).

In concert with Geoff [Livingston](#) , Solis released “ [Now is Gone](#) ” a new book that helps businesses learn how to engage in Social Media.

Solis has been actively writing about new PR since the mid 90s to discuss how the Web was redefining the communications industry – he also coined PR 2.0. Solis is considered an expert in traditional PR, media relations, and Social Media. He has dedicated his free time to helping PR professionals adapt to the new fusion of PR, Web marketing, and community relations. PR 2.0 is a top 10,000 Technorati blog and is ranked in the Ad Age Power 150 index of leading marketing bloggers.

Connect with me on [Twitter](#), [Jaiku](#), [Pownce](#), [Plaxo](#), or [Facebook](#)