



It's Good to Be You

*Why Now Just May Be the Best Time
to Be A Public Relations Professional*

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Abstract

Public relations professionals are, ironically, getting quite a bit of bad press lately. So being a PR pro, it can be tempting to start to get down on yourself and your profession. But there are other things happening in the marketplace today that, I believe, make it a pretty darn good time to be in PR.

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As many may have noticed, public relations has been taking something of a beating lately. Between bloggers publicly renouncing PR pros for spamming and the entire industry getting a nationally televised tongue lashing, it would be easy to get down on ourselves. We could all use a reminder about why this business works, and why now is the best time to be in PR.

At my last employer, I watched the creative and account services teams shrink while the PR department kept adding bodies, and it got me thinking - what is it about public relations that is driving its success these days? Here's my take on why the market (i.e. clients and senior management) is shifting its favor towards public relations.

Media Outlets Provide Unbiased Information

From an insider's perspective, this probably seems laughable. But I'm consistently reminded of the view from the outside when I receive the panicked call from a client when a newspaper or trade publication publishes misinformation or takes a quote from a company representative out of context. "Don't they want to get the facts right?" they cry.

So despite what we may think, the general public still believes that their news outlet is providing them (at least somewhat) correct and impartial information. And on the flip side, that same general public is increasingly cynical towards pure advertising. We're bombarded all day long with ads that tell us a service or product is the best, the fastest the cheapest - and we've all learned to tune it out. And as a result, media coverage becomes more likely to influence consumer behavior. So that's where many companies have decided to focus their spending.

It's Free Advertising

There's a perception that the earned media placements garnered through public relations efforts are free. Now, we all know that everything comes at a price. But for many organizations the investment in public relations is considered part of the cost of doing business, so the benefit of getting media placement is a bonus.

Even without that perception, when you're not developing an ad (including copywriting, creative and image costs) and planning, negotiating and buying the space in the publication, earned media placements definitely have the potential to be more cost effective. And cost effectiveness is top-of-mind in the economic times we're experiencing today.

Variety is the Spice of Life

Companies are speaking and listening to their stakeholders in a rapidly expanding number of ways. Where there was once just the press release, now there are blogs, discussion forums, online communities, podcasts, email newsletters and more. For a PR traditionalist, these new avenues of communication can be daunting, but for the practitioner willing to dive in to these new mediums, you can become invaluable to your employer. I've seen many public relations professionals transition into managing new media programs with ease - they already possess the skills to promote the company's message, manage relationships with writers and publishers, and deal with damage control when necessary.

The Economy, Stupid

When the economy takes a downturn, most of us who work for agencies or who deliver a service that might be viewed as expendable prepare to tighten our belts. However, public relations professionals - and especially those willing to embrace new communication mediums - are uniquely positioned to thrive. While clients cut "expendable" costs like advertising, they continue to invest in public relations for the reasons I've outlined above.

So, what's the lesson to be learned for those--like me--who aren't public relations professionals? There are still plenty of marketing initiatives that consumers trust more than traditional advertising, that take advantage of new media outlets and are cost effective. The trouble is, that these initiatives aren't what come to mind when your clients think of marketing, so you'll have to spend a little extra time educating them. As for PR pros out there, chin up. The business may be on the ropes from a few harsh critics, but there is always a reason to celebrate what you do.