

Six ways agency owners can do better PR



By [Roger Hislop](#)

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I'm in a bit of a unique position to talk about PR - strategy and copy lead at a respected PR agency, and also a regular contributor to a variety of publications. I've been on the giving, and the receiving end. A pitcher and a catcher.

Screeds have been written by PRs on how terribly PR is done, and by journalists on how terribly PR is being done (you can read some good ones [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

Symptoms, not the causes

Generally these pieces address the symptoms, not the causes.

Recently I had a short stint as a full-time editor on an online tech publication that was in "gear up to go daily" mode, where a grey-hair was needed to get the ball rolling. I was absolutely boggled by the sheer ineptitude of the PR I was being exposed to. But you've heard anti-PR rants before. Boring. What's new?

At the same time, I spend a fair amount of time both professionally and socially with agency owners and senior PRs (hell, I'm a PR guy, and PR people are often the best drinking companions). These are not stupid people. They're experienced, skilled, and run successful businesses. They understand media, they understand PR.

Top-drawer agencies, bottom-drawer work

So what's wrong? How do these PR pros run PR agencies that do (let's be blunt) crap work? Agencies which let junior staff with no clue and big attitudes loose on heavyweight journos from top-tier publications? Agencies that issue releases that are borderline incomprehensible?

Top-drawer agencies. Bottom-drawer work. And I'm not talking about the little edge-nibblers, or the local offices of big-name multinational mega-agencies who you can safely assume to generally suck; I'm talking about the good independents. Run by good people who know their business. And it's not just local; this applies to many PR agencies from the UK and US that I've dealt with.

So it got me to thinking. What is broken? Why do people who know what they're doing do things so bad that journalists laugh out loud at them? Or roll their eyes? Things so bad, that if I shared them with you, *you'd* laugh out loud or roll your eyes. Both, even. And then, if you looked, your own agency would probably be doing the same thing.

So here're six solid recommendations for agency owners and account directors. Because it's your responsibility, after all.

1. **Email is a dangerous tool - use it wisely. You listening, AEs?**

Email is the single worst thing to ever happen to PR. Back in the day when you needed to fax and courier press releases (ie it was a significant cost), you thought twice before issuing material. You also had no choice but to get on the phone and pitch. You developed what is known as "relationships", and "a clue".

Nowadays, journalists get deluged with email. Flooded with it. Endless, inane and inarticulate releases attached, sometimes with no useful subject line or cover note. With mass-produced pseudo-customised hack pitches that don't even begin to know how to talk to a news angle.

If you never speak to journalists, how do you know who they are? How do you know what they're interested in? How do you know what kind of pitches they're receptive to, and what kind of material they want, and how they want to get it?

How do you learn to understand the media by only ever sending out emails? Simple answer: you don't.

But sending email is quick and easy, requires no development of interpersonal skills. It's an easy out for hack PRs. It is, however, also an excellent way to reach a busy journo so that they can answer in their time, when they're off deadline or have a moment.

It's a tricky one. Used badly, email is a PR horror. Used well, it's super-convenient and -effective. Usually, it's abused.

So ban its use, until each account exec can prove they understand when and how to use it. AEs need to learn to pitch, and learn the consequences of screwing up a pitch. A bad email pitch just gets deleted. A bad telephone pitch is a learning experience (sorry, journos, you're going to get more phone calls, but maybe it'll result in a better class of PRs. Be harsh on stupidity. Polite, but harsh.)

To make this happen is the agency owner and account directors' responsibility. No email for AEs without lots of specific training. Email is the PR pitching tool of last resort, and a bad one. It has its place - learn it.

2. **Ban use of press databases**

While we're on it, press databases from the various providers are again a crutch for lazy and [jobsworth](#) media relations skills. These databases are largely the reason that PRs send releases to hopelessly inappropriate publications - because it requires no effort or understanding of media. Make them go down to the nearest Exclusive Books and browse the shelves to identify the right media. They might actually get their targeting right. Make them browse the web to find relevant online titles. They might actually read the damn site and know if they're relevant.

The only time media databases should be used is if you're targeting an unfamiliar vertical - but then it should be a starting point. Not the endpoint. "Opened database, selected vertical, clicked copy, clicked paste, clicked send. Done."

To make this happen is the agency owner and account directors' responsibility. They should hold the key to the media database provider, not the AE or AM. These guys should have their own, up-to-date, media contacts, and only come to you if they need help.

3. **Focus on the journalist, not the publication**

Publications don't publish stories; journalists do. Most PR companies seem not to get this - that the people behind the scenes making the articles appear are actual human beings.

If you don't know the person, you're not going to get a lot of love if you're pitching. This is the root of the contempt relationship between press and PR - because the journalists know the PRs have no clue how a newsroom works, and the PR people don't care to know. To many in PR, journalists are a tactic, not a professional with whom they're doing business with.

This attitude directly leads to an email I got this morning: "I have a product I want you to review". No honey - you have a product that if you convince me is interesting and relevant I'll ask you to send over to review. A journalist does not work for your brand, or your agency. They have no duty of care to you. Only to their editor, and their publisher [*and their readers - managing ed*].

Journalists also move around - staff at publications come and go, but the individuals stay in the industry for a long time. You develop a relationship with the beat journo at *Rapport*, because one day they will be with the section editor at News24.

The customer of the agency account managers is the client. The customer of the account executives is the journalist.

Senior figures should be regularly testing their ~~journes~~ AEs on who's who at the various publications. AEs must know and understand their customer (the journo), and they can then sell in their client's stories effectively.

4. Lay off the Excel and the AEV and reporting charts and give your work a sniff

I suspect a large part of the reason account directors have little idea of what their teams are doing is because they split their time between managing client relationships (by email) and jockeying spreadsheets for their bosses. They get coverage reports; they check the pie-charts look good. But how often do they read the coverage, review the work to see why an article missed the boat, whether account teams missed an opportunity for more, better coverage?

Unfortunately, the biggest casualty of the professionalisation and corporatisation of PR is 'gut feel'. PR is a relationships-and-intuition game - and that can't be captured in spreadsheets, no matter how clever they are with points and weighting and wotnot. Stop playing spreadsheet jockey, and start feeling for the pulse (in your possibly zombie PR campaign... it walks, it talks, but it's not alive).

5. Deal with negative stories; don't sulk/not care (?)

Something that blew my mind was that, when I wrote a negative story about a company or product, there was never any comeback. No response. Yawning chasm of silence. Tumbleweeds blowing past.

A negative story is almost always a PR opportunity. Simply speaking to the journo and saying, "Shooooaa, so you really didn't like that new dayglo mankini? I guess there's no accounting for taste, but did you know it is the single best selling item in their range this Xmas?" Maybe you'll get a bit of a positive follow-up; maybe the next time the journo writes about it, they'll be kinder, maybe they'll just appreciate that you cared enough to care.

If they got the story wrong, it's your chance to get a product specialist on the phone to them to explain the inner workings. Same result.

But if a journo writes a negative story about your client, they know they did. You know they did. They know you know they did. So to do absolutely nothing leaves a negative vibe hanging in the air, and also tells them you don't really give a damn about their opinion (or their publication). Not good PR.

Standard operating procedure on a negative story should be the team getting together to work out what can be done to turn it around.

6. Have an external pair of eyes review your work periodically

I'm not the perfect PR. I've made all of the mistakes mentioned above - bad targeting, ill-considered messaging, sloppy pitches, scattershot targeting, the works. Teams get busy, senior staff are running from meeting to meeting, and people lose sight of the wood for the trees.

Every so often, bringing in a grey hair from completely outside to come in and take a looksee would pay massive dividends. If you're a large agency, rotating account directors to review other teams would help (although they might also be lost in the groupthink, or fear being seen as a complainer).

This particularly applies to the writing - but also the pitching and communications technique. Do you know if your junior staff is ruining your agency's reputation with media by being arrogant, incompetent or sloppy? Have you checked?

The PR industry is often its own worst enemy. People who should know better do things they would mock if they saw competitors doing it.

Physician, heal thyself. Start by a bit of self-reflection.

Corrected at 4.10pm on 27 February 2012.

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