

Building Your Brand through Public Relations

A Primer for Microsoft ISV Partners

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Why Branding Matters

The Power of a Brand

Your customers, employees and competitors each hold an opinion of your company and your products. This view of you and what you offer is your “brand”; and all businesses have one, whether they create a positive image through your intentional branding efforts or project a negative one simply by neglect. You may hold one impression of your brand, but the way that your target audiences see your brand may be very different. Bridging this gap between what you want your brand to be and how others view it is the role that Public Relations plays in your marketing.

An important element of your brand is your reputation in the market place. Your brand success depends largely on whether you're perceived as a quality leader, a company that stands behind its products and services, a business that listens to its customers, and any other number of factors that help you gain a good reputation among consumers. Your brand can further your reputation by:

Creating An Emotional Connection

By creating a positive brand image among customers and the larger marketplace, you can implant a feeling of trust in the minds of consumers. Any political candidate out to win the support of voters will tell you that people are more likely to trust a name with which they are familiar than an unknown—and much more likely to feel comfortable with a name endorsed by others.

Differentiating Yourself From Competitors

A popular and respected brand image also is essential to make your company stand out from competitors when consumers see little or no difference among everyone's offerings and price. In this instance, the buyer makes a choice almost entirely based on familiarity of the name, word of mouth and the personality of the company's representatives.

Premium Pricing

Customers are willing to pay more for a brand they respect. They assume the most well-known and positive brands are somehow “better” than others. It's why many shoppers happily pay more for Bayer aspirin than a generic brand that is exactly the same in content and effectiveness.

A strong brand, then, provides you a major advantage in the marketplace through an emotional tie with consumers. It places your company in a positive way right in the center of their decision-making process.

The Role of PR in Building a Brand

By using public relations, you persuade others to help you build your brand, making your marketing efforts much easier and more effective. A public relations program can add integrity to your advertising campaign, increase interest in your event and generate enthusiasm for a direct-mail effort.

At its core, can help you build a powerful public relations brand in five key ways:

1) Awareness: It places your name in front of your potential customers in a constructive manner.

2) Customer Relationship

Management: It helps you keep your current customers, who often are your best brand ambassadors as others seek them out for advice.

3) Validation: It can provide endorsements for your company through comments by current customers, industry and media analysts, and journalists.

4) Credibility building: It enables you to earn customer interest as a result of your support for the community and speaking engagements that position you as an expert or leader.

5) Assurance: It can help you weather a crisis by establishing a reservoir of “good will” with the media and the public, who will be more likely to give you the benefit of the doubt during times of trouble (as was the case with Martha Stewart, for example).

Why You Need Public Relations

What Is Public Relations

Public relations is the art of persuading others to accept or support a company, product, service, policy or opinion.

Because it’s an art and not a science, it offers considerable room for creativity; but it is well-founded in a set of practices and ethical standards from which professional PR practitioners operate.

Convincing newspapers, magazines and broadcast outlets to report on your company is an important part of public relations, but only one aspect of it. PR also includes such activities as:

- **Analyst relations:** Communicating your story to industry analysts who strongly influence corporate decision-makers and investors
- **Crisis communications:** Controlling an unexpected event to minimize its negative impact on a company’s employees, customers, brand image, sales and operations
- **Community relations:** Participating as a good corporate citizen in the charitable and civic affairs of the community in which a business operates.
- **Government relations:** Helping to persuade regulators and legislators through communications and by rallying community support
- **Presentations:** Developing speaking opportunities to establish your leadership image
- **Customer and internal relations:** Communicating effectively with your customers, prospective customers and employees
- **Marketing materials:** Preparing case studies, brochures, videos and other marketing communications
- **Special events:** Conducting events that tie your brand with a worthwhile community activity or charitable organization

• Relating to other target audiences:

Communicating effectively with groups that can impact your brand

PR’s Role in the Marketing Mix

Public Relations is not meant to replace advertising, direct mail or seminars; but rather it works to support your other marketing efforts. For example, when you launch an ad campaign, PR may persuade advertising reporters to write about the campaign’s content and your reasons for it. If you are planning a customer conference or seminar, you can gain awareness for it through a news article or radio interview about the upcoming event or after the fact with a report about recommendations that attendees received at the conference.

More Bang For Your Buck

More than ever, companies actually are making public relations the core of their marketing efforts and supporting the PR with advertising, direct marketing and events. This reversal has come about because companies realize for the price of one full-page ad in a publication, you can carry out months of public relations activities.

“...PR is much more cost effective than advertising.”

Advertising is necessary, because it’s the only way you can be certain you control the message and exact wording you want to place before your prospective

customers. But PR can lead the way with a cost-effective foundation for your overall marketing.

Third-Party Credibility

The most important reason for using PR may be the “third-party credibility” that it provides. Positive comments about your company in a news article, editorial or customer testimonial carry far more weight with consumers than does advertising. Through advertising, you may tell everyone how great your products and services are. But through PR, you persuade others to tell everyone how great your products and services are. That is a crucial difference in establishing your brand.

The Value of Ongoing PR

When you hold an event or conduct a sales campaign, you may generate results for a while, but eventually the business is likely to decline again unless you keep gearing up campaigns. That's the situation in which automakers have placed themselves with rebates and “value pricing.” Likewise, it may be that on the day of your big event, roads are shut down by a big snowstorm, or a major news development diverts reporters who were going to cover your story. One-shot publicity or sales events do not make for reliable marketing programs.

Public Relations, on the other hand, provide you a relatively inexpensive and consistent way to keep your name in front of your market. By establishing good working relationships with reporters, good community relations with local agencies and government officials, and good relationships within your local business community, you enable PR to keep

delivering positive outcomes for you all year long. Sending occasional news releases, serving on local panels, participating in industry trade shows, submitting your products for reviews by technical publications, and writing bylined articles for trade magazines or op-ed editorials for your local newspaper all can work to maintain and strengthen your brand at a very low cost.

It's important not to keep stopping and restarting your PR program, however. Reporters change and the public's memory is short. When you try to restart a dormant PR campaign, you may have to begin from scratch in rebuilding your brand image and your credibility. Ongoing PR is as essential to your company's health as is maintaining your IT infrastructure. By keeping your brand up to date and consistently visible, it becomes stronger and more secure.

The Cumulative Impact of PR on Your Brand

As reporters become more familiar with you and your company, they tend to turn to you for commentary on industry developments. Eventually, instead of your constantly knocking on their doors, they begin knocking on yours. As consumers continue to read about you and your business, their confidence in you grows and over time, you become the benchmark against which they measure your competitors.

PR has a cumulative impact on your brand. It can solidify your leadership position and “soften the market” for your advertising and events. Also, generating

results from PR becomes easier as your program matures, because the media, the public, the industry and the local community have become familiar with your brand and are more receptive to your PR messages.

What Makes an Ongoing PR Effort an Important Marketing Strategy for ISVs

Extending Your Marketing Efforts

It's clear to see that public relations can provide an integrated framework for all your other marketing efforts, but it does more than that. PR enables you to educate the marketplace to extend the reach of your program. You will find that public relations can bolster your marketing programs in many ways:

- ISVs that are seeking to own an emerging segment often **confront corporate inertia** as the largest obstacle. Companies don't know a solution to their problem exists and may not even have identified the problem itself. PR can educate the marketplace on basic business challenges and, while doing so, promote technology's role in meeting those challenges. This strengthens the ISV's position as a solution provider, can activate latent demand in the marketplace, and can generate a more receptive audience for

advertising and other marketing initiatives.

- While an event or seminar may have a sales impact on those attending, it misses everyone else in your region and your industry who didn't attend, unless you use media relations to **communicate the key themes and conclusions from the event to a wider market.** This use of public relations allows you to amortize your investment in the event across a far greater audience and deliver exponential returns for a relatively small incremental investment.
- **Link news articles generated by your PR efforts to your Web site or reprint them** (with permission from the publisher) to add credibility to your sales-staff pitch to prospects. Venture capitalists conducting due diligence rely heavily on the Internet as a resource, and the articles they find about your company can make a big difference in their evaluation.
- Many ISVs and product companies use public relations to float features and functionality out to journalists and readers to gauge feedback and help in prioritizing the development of subsequent releases. Employing public relations to determine what the market thinks of your product can yield results that can be incorporated in advertising, direct mail and other marketing efforts. Microsoft uses beta testing to achieve this feedback. Windows Vista, for example, was made available to 10,000 official technical beta testers from the enterprise IT and developer community, along with 500,000 members of the Microsoft Developer Network and

TechNet. The results, comments and testimonials that are returned by these testers can be used in corporate public relations efforts. Similarly, the error-reporting mechanism built into the Windows XP system furnishes information on usage patterns that require attention from product-development teams.

Building Trust

PR should be a vital part of your marketing strategy, if for no other reason than that it is one of the most successful ways to build trust in your company—to energize a positive brand image. The fact that a reporter has chosen you to provide information or viewpoints makes you a more credible figure to the public and your industry. Your appearance on a speaking agenda positions you as a spokesperson for your company and your business sector. And your contributions to your community earn the gratitude of others. In the end, you become a highly trusted company and executive.

Distinguishing Your Brand from Others

In the software arena, the industry has suffered on occasion from unsuccessful, unproven and unscrupulous software developers. These have ranged from companies that were not sufficiently funded and went out of business, leaving their customers holding useless warranties, to hackers and purveyors of malicious software who attempt to hijack business computers for fraudulent purposes. Negative publicity about these

types of vendors and developers can cause the marketplace to think negatively about *all* types of software providers. Through public relations, you can speak out against abuses of technology and business practices. You can offer your solutions and reassure your prospects. You can, in effect, make your brand rise above the rest, employing the news media, direct customer events and other PR techniques to separate yourself from other brands that project negative impressions.

Taking Advantage of Your Newsworthiness

News media are interested in innovative products, in technology and in good business stories. The chances are that your company offers all of these. By using PR as a part of your marketing strategy, you can leverage your “newsworthiness” into articles that help generate demand for your products and services. Many of your products are highly visual. Both print and broadcast media are searching every day for stories that can keep their audiences' attention through still or video images. By taking advantage of everything your products, services and business have to offer the media, you and your brand are likely to outpace your competition in news reports and awareness levels.

How To Build a PR Strategy

One of the advantages inherent to PR as a marketing tool is its flexibility and

scalability. In creating your PR strategy, you should consider a tiered approach. Begin with the essential PR tactics for your core program and then expand your plan as you become accustomed to the value and requirements of public relations activities.

company's bottom line. For example, in the call to action in your public relations material (news releases, bylined articles, etc.), offer a special, dedicated URL which redirects users to your home page.

You'll know that anyone who accesses this landing page has obtained the URL from your PR program, and you can thereby get a sense of the program's effectiveness. A dedicated toll-free phone number can serve the same purpose.

Creating a Master Plan

Begin with a master plan. This simple document should list:

- The goal of the PR program itself
- The business objectives you wish to attain through your PR program
- The strategies you'll use, such as media relations or seminars
- The activities you will carry out under each of these strategies, such as preparing one news release a month on your products or business wins, developing a quarterly seminar, etc.
- The number of hours you expect to devote to each activity so that you can plan your time (Don't forget to allow time for interviews that result from the releases you send to media)
- Follow-up actions for each activity, such as responding to seminar attendees with a marketing letter
- The metrics you will use to determine success

Measurement of program results is a key consideration to gauging the effectiveness of your PR program. Build linkages with your sales and marketing processes so that you can accurately assess the impact of PR to your

PR Activities Master Plan
Execution: Mid-February through December

Plan owner: Who is accountable for managing this plan?

Goal

What is the ultimate outcome that you're seeking to drive with this public relations program?

Business objective

What are the specific objectives that you'll measure the success of this program around? They should be measurable and time delimited. ie: 15% increase in qualified leads to our website in 6 months.

Strategies

What are the high level strategies that you'll employ to achieve these objectives? ie: Media relations to establish thought leadership, proprietary research to raise awareness of a particular industry pain point , etc.

Tactics

What tactics will you employ to bring the strategies to fruition? ie: a media relations strategy might employ some or all of the following media relations tactics with corresponding time investment:

Tactic:	Hours Projection
Compile a media list	6 hours
Prepare one news release a month on your products or business wins	4 hours/month
Writing op-ed editorials	5 hours/month
Respond to reporter inquiries	2 hours/month
Conduct interviews resulting from news releases	4 hours/month

Metrics

How will you measure your traction/success? These should map back to the objectives portion of the plan and generally include an upper and lower control level to provide a performance band to base decisions on:

Control Level	Web Traffic	Media Briefings	Speaking opportunities	Analyst References
Upper	n x 1.25	n x 1.25	n x 1.25	n x 1.25
Expected	n	n	n	n
Lower	n x 0.75	n x 0.75	n x 0.75	n x 0.75

Similarly, on your Web site's "Contact Us" form, ask a question or two on how the visitor learned about your company; and include such options as through articles, speaking engagements, product reviews, etc. Ensure your receptionist asks the same question for incoming phone leads. The ideal measurement tool is a pre-campaign benchmarking survey on the market's awareness and inclination to buy, which is repeated annually to judge the broad impact of your program. Measuring your results over time can show you which PR activities are succeeding, where to focus your energy and resources, and what new activities may be appropriate to expand or adjust your initial efforts.

Your master plan will grow over the coming months as you add new strategies and activities, and you'll be able to review it to see how you are reaching your objectives and the return you are receiving on your investment of time and budget.

Developing a Media Relations Program

Your first step should include a media relations strategy. By reaching your audiences through news coverage and other appearances in the media, you can get the most from your marketing budget. Your primary investment at this level is simply the time you will spend on media activities. These actions largely relate to assembling the elements required to implement a media strategy effectively, including:

- **Compiling a media list** of the publications that your target audiences are most likely to read and of journalists who are most likely to report your story. This list can include your local news- " papers, radio and TV news departments and business publications, as well as trade magazines that cover technology and industry.
- **Finding the news** in your company. Look for unusual developments, new products and services, your other marketing campaigns, awards and honors, or milestones (like a fifth-year anniversary of your business) as sources of potentially newsworthy stories.
- What makes a story newsworthy depends in large part on the news outlet's target audience, how current the story is and what other news is being reported that ties into your own story. More specifically, however, your product or service may be newsworthy if:
 - It meets a need that the market-place has been searching for, such as mobile access to e-mail
 - It takes an unusual approach to solving a need, such as fingerprint recognition
 - It reflects an emerging trend, such as RSS feeds
 - It is highly visual or otherwise entertaining, like a mapping program that uses satellite images instead of line drawings or a new type of virtual tour application.
 - It is simple for the prospective customer—and the reporter—to understand
- **Preparing background materials.** You may want to develop the following tools to acquaint media with your business and your news story:
 - A one-to-two-page "backgrounder" on your company's history, offerings, special focus, major clientele, position in the market-place and other business information
 - A fact sheet with one-line bullet points about your company and its products and services
 - A half-page-to-one-page biography of each of the major executives in the company
 - Frequently asked questions about your company and your products
 - Digital images of your products (screen shots or the physical product), your business location and the executives for whom you prepare biographies
- **Writing news releases.** When you have found the news stories in your business, you will want to communicate them to the media through news releases. These can be drafted as Word documents and embedded in e-mails to the appropriate reporters to save on postage and to ensure timeliness. Visit the outlet's Web site or call the news desk of the media you are targeting to find out the name and e-mail address of the reporter or editor who should receive your releases, or review the publications to determine who covers your industry. Often the reporter's e-

mail address is listed in the publication or on the Web site.

- **Responding to inquiries** from reporters that result from your news releases.
- **Authoring articles** for business or trade publications that accept “bylined” columns and features from outside sources to gain regard as an expert on your topic.
- **Writing letters to the editor or op-ed editorials** for your local paper on current business or community issues as a way of gaining recognition for your position as a business leader.
- **Creating an online newsroom** on your Web site. When reporters are considering a story about you or your company, often the first thing they do is visit your Web site to gain a better understanding and gather information. You should dedicate a section of your site to media materials that will make it easier for reporters to cover your story. These include online versions of your news releases, backgrounder, fact sheets, bios, FAQs and images, as well as contact information—including e-mail address and mobile phone number—for the person reporters should work with to arrange interviews from your company. Send an e-mail to local and trade media to inform them of the newsroom and to encourage them to visit it for regular updates of news releases and other information.

Remember that the news media are not your ultimate target for these efforts. Rather, they’re the conduits, or “media,” through which you can reach those

targets at low cost with a broad scope. Once your media program is in place, you can consider public relations strategies that approach your target market more directly.

Expanding Your PR Strategies

Beyond media relations, many ISVs find value in customer seminars, where they can demonstrate best practices and new products and also educate both current and prospective customers. You can organize a simple seminar at your location or at a convenient public facility and gain attendance by:

- Sending e-mail invitations to your customer and prospect list.
- Providing information for your local newspapers to include in their business calendar sections.
- Notifying local TV news departments that broadcast stories on business activities.
- Sending a news release about the upcoming seminar to business reporters.
- Requesting local business groups to include your seminar notice in their newsletters and bulletins.

After your seminar, follow up with local media and trade publications with a news release that provides specific recommendations, predictions, announcements or analysis that were offered at the seminar.

Other PR strategies that you may want to consider include:

- Creating a marketing brochure or even a video presentation to distribute at regional and industry events and to use to respond to customer inquiries.
- Participation in local trade shows, where you can rent a booth to demonstrate your products and services.
- Submitting your product for technical review by a publication that you and your marketplace trust
- Speaking before local business and civic groups as an expert and a representative of the business community.
- Creating a special event sponsored by your company, with promotion of the event through the news media. This could be anything from a user conference for customers to a 10k run to raise money for charities.
- Initiating an “ambassador” program for your employees to proactively promote your company in the community.

Budgeting for Public Relations

While Public Relations is very cost effective, it can require a considerable amount of time, as well as expense, related to expanded PR strategies. It’s important to remember that the time you spend on PR is an investment, not just a cost, and you should expect a healthy return on your time investment just as you do on your monetary investments.

A few hours of work to prepare media materials can lead eventually to successful new-customer engagements, but because PR works by strengthening

brands and reshaping the emotional decisions that influence what people will buy, it is usually difficult to quantify the specific results of a particular PR activity. You should measure the time and money you spend on PR, then, against the overall growth of your business to determine PR's value to your company. If you observe a noticeable pickup in sales, leads and inquiries in the months following the implementation of your PR strategies, you'll know the program is working to your benefit.

In-house Or Outsourced PR?

In developing your PR program, you have the choice of doing it all yourself or hiring a professional PR practitioner. While you may save money handling everything in-house, your results may not be as good or as rapid as they would be by calling on a PR pro. Public relations people already know the media and have daily contact with them, so they often can provide you a significant advantage. On the other hand, they each work with a number of clients, and you may not always be their top priority; and they add dollar expense in place of your own time investment.

Fees and Expenses

If you are considering hiring a freelance PR practitioner or PR firm, be sure to ask them how they bill their fees for the time they spend on your program. Most PR agencies bill on an hourly basis, with an hourly rate attached to each person on their staff. Routine activities should be carried out by people with a lower rate, with the firm's top executives involved in planning, strategizing and making high-level contacts. Individual practitioners also usually bill according to an hourly rate, but many individuals—and firms,

as well— bill their services based on flat fees. They may provide you a cost range for preparing a news release, for example, or for writing a speech. In any case, they will bill expenses to you as well, ranging from postage to room rentals for events to graphic design costs for your invitation or marketing brochure. As a rule of thumb, anticipate that expenses will total about 10 percent of the monthly fee.

New Trends Impacting Your PR Strategy

Rarely have changes in technology and in the media resulted in such rapid changes in the way public relations is practiced. Here are some trends that present new opportunities for you to capitalize on your PR efforts:

More Media With Smaller Audiences

Not so long ago, everyone read the morning paper and tuned into the six-o'clock news on television each evening. Today, we can choose among hundreds of media outlets on TV, on the Web and in print. More trade publications are being issued, each with an increasingly sharper focus on a niche audience. News on the Web is available in any flavor, from all-technology or all-entertainment to virtually every local paper in the country and every broadcast station. These changes mean that any one news outlet has a smaller audience than the big newspapers and big TV networks had years ago; but, at the same time, each has a more defined audience with more of a common interest. Often it's easier to "pitch" your company's story to a magazine or online news site that focuses specifically on technology or to try to place a story about a new office

productivity application in a magazine aimed at small businesses or soft-ware users. You may find a more eager audience if you focus your PR efforts on specialty publications or those primarily in the geography you serve.

Decentralized Companies

With more globalization and more acquisitions, companies are discovering it's less important for their staff actually to live in the community where the business is headquartered. Knowledge workers often can do their jobs from just about any location. This means that, as a vendor, you may not be able to reach a company's decision-makers through public relations techniques that only target a prospect's headquarters city. You may need to seek broad exposure for your news stories, an advantage that the Web and trade magazines provide.

The Failure of Newspapers

On both the local and national levels, the majority of print newspapers are dying. With news instantaneously available on our computers at work, on our cell phones and our PDAs, far fewer people are taking time to sit down with a paper and read yesterday's stories. It is far more likely today that people are reviewing a paper's news online, where they can easily choose only those articles they want to read, rather than flipping through and scanning a printed paper to find articles of interest. Keep in mind, therefore, that your best contact at a news publication may be its Web-site editor, especially for technology stories. These editors know that their online readers have some degree of technological capability and interest because they elect to receive their news online, so your story becomes

a logical choice for them to run. And don't overlook news-only Web sites that report primarily on technology, like C|Net, Gizmodo and ASPCentral, to name a few.

Search-Engine Optimization

Because so many news sources exist on the Web, increasingly people turn to search engines to find stories on the topics in which they are interested. The news releases that you post in your newsroom should use search-engine optimization (SEO) techniques, incorporating key words, descriptions and other SEO best practices so they rise near the top of search-engine results.

The Emergence of Blogs

Among PR practitioners, blogs have become a full-fledged news medium. Very often bloggers have more impact on the success or failure of a product—especially a technology product—than does advertising or any other marketing tactic. Search for bloggers that write about your industry and your types of products or services. These bloggers disdain news releases and generally avoid commercialism; but they likely would welcome a conversational e-mail or posting from you about new technologies, trends and developments in the IT industry. Strike up an online news relationship with the most influential bloggers in your arena to gain word-of-mouth support for your company and your offerings. You can link to the Web's 100 most popular blogs at <http://www.technorati.com/pop/blogs>, or use Technorati.com's search engine to find bloggers who write about your specialties. You'll find a list of technology blogs at www.online-pr.com.

Podcasting and RSS Feeds

A brand-new technology in late 2004, podcasting exploded on the media scene in just a matter of weeks. Now it's a relatively simple task to create your own audio (or multimedia) broadcast relating to your news story and provide downloads through your Web site via online subscription and RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds. As you release new content, it is fed automatically to the media players and computers of your subscribers. Podcasting will become an important tool for public relations practitioners in the years ahead, since it largely eliminates the role of journalists as moderators and filters of the news and affords news-makers a way to reach the public directly with their stories. The same can be said for RSS feeds of the written word. If you offer RSS subscription through your Web site, you may be surprised at the number of subscribers you attract, each of whom automatically will receive your news releases and other materials that you encode in XML when you upload them to your site.

Resources for Creating Your PR Strategy

- *Online Public Relations* at www.online-pr.com for lists of media outlets by category, including technology publications, and a list of technology-oriented blogs
- NewsLink at www.newslink.org for links to local and national newspapers

and broadcast outlets across the United States and around the world.

- *All about Public Relations* at <http://aboutpublicrelations.net/> for tips on carrying out public relations programs and tactics
- Public Relations Society of America at www.prsa.org
- *PR Week* for public relations news and trends at www.prweek.com
- Local university graduate communications and journalism departments, which may provide interns to assist with launching your PR efforts

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