

How to build relationships with journalists from the beginning

For most startup founders, you'll probably be introduced to your first journalists by your investors. Those introductions are worth their weight in gold, but to transfer that relationship you'll need to have something newsworthy to write about or to spend some time with that person learning what you can bring to the table too.

In agencies, honestly, the process isn't so dissimilar. For nearly all the agencies I've worked with, relationships with journalists are kept personally – but when a new contact is needed at a publication, a message will shoot into slack or be posted on the '[Insert Region] Media' channel on Teams and the requests will be made for introductions. Nearly always, there's one or two people at any agency that hold the largest number of relationships – not unlike the well-known vs lesser well-known investors. The problem with this – there's no useful data kept on how to improve those relationships over time, and it's not scalable.

Why personal relationships mean opened emails

When you unpack why PRs maintain tight relationships with journalists the answer is a simple one – it could mean prioritisation. Why do journalists keep close relationships with PRs? The answer, especially for early relationships is two-fold.

Availability of information – friendly PRs means a one-to-many access for content and experts

Guarantee of quality – a personal relationship hopefully means an unspoken agreement with that person that they won't clog up your inbox with pitches that aren't relevant – because it would risk the relationship

Naturally we do also all have friendly relationships we've made with journalists over a number of years, but those often actually tend move away from the workplace. The truth is though, in most cases journalists would much rather have the relationship with the company direct – it's just that approach to news gathering isn't so scalable.

No healthy relationship is all or nothing

For startups thinking about how to market their business early and build a credible brand, early conversations with journalists are everything, but it's worth bearing in mind that in the moment, it's not all or nothing. Just because a publication isn't interested in writing about you right now, doesn't mean you shouldn't learn what might get them interested in the future.

Like your investors, just because they're not interested now, doesn't mean they won't be when you have more credibility and stronger track record behind you. Building lasting relationships with journalists takes time, but like other advocates of your business, it is ultimately worth the investment.

Start a 'sweetheart' list and do your research

You wouldn't sail into a sales pitch without first learning about what your prospect is doing and how you can solve their problems. Journalists aren't any different, their business might be writing, but their revenue comes from their readers – directly or indirectly (via advertising), so think about who their

readers are and what they want to see first before diving into your pitch. Create a shortlist of 20 – 30 journalists that regularly write about topics that you want to talk about and work out whether you can credibly fit into their areas of interest.

Follow those journalists on social media too and don't be afraid to engage junior journalists at news organisations, they'll be looking to build their early relationships too and expand their social followings. By following journalists on Twitter you'll be able to learn about what they're interested in sharing and how they personally like to engage. In the old days you'd call and have an afternoon's worth of deep dive on the going topic, not quite as efficient – though I do miss it.

Collect data against your relationships

If you're running a marketing team, you're probably already tracking open rates, conversion rates, click-through rates, turn this technology on your PR work where you can too. Of the journalists on your 'Sweetheart List' how many of them open your emails, click on your content, publish your news? Create these benchmarks from the beginning and you'll always have something to work with. Your incoming comms leads will thank you too if you can already tell them you have a 60% success rate pitching thought-leadership articles to one publication or another – it'll save them time and you'll know your outcomes in advance and be able to improve them over time.

Lastly, seems obvious – but make your content accessible

There were 8,274 *funding rounds announced* between 1st July – 1st October. That's 91 other startups you're competing against everyday on funding announcements alone, never mind the other daily news, interviews, podcasts, opinion pieces, that you'll also be reading if you're doing your research properly!

Journalists don't have much time. Most of the journalists I know receive between 200 – 300 pitches a day... in an 8-hour working day that's a new story every 90 seconds. Don't make them ask for images, details on your solution, customer segments, backgrounds on your competitors, keep all of that information in one place and share it with them.

In a market where your value is related to your ability to provide fast access to high quality information, make life as easy as possible for your newest stakeholders and use your research, relationship notes, data feedback and

judgement to build relationships with journalists from the beginning.

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