

Why introducing PR too early could sabotage your startup

Startup land isn't short of myths but one of the most pervasive is that the earlier you get PR, the better. There's a continued belief that securing media attention in the early days of launching is the secret to sustained success.

On the surface, this seems to make sense. Increased revenue comes from growing customer numbers and you achieve this by getting people interested with a striking PR campaign. If PR so directly links to profits, then why would you wait to get started?

Actually, there are a number of very good reasons. While the above may work for more established startups, freshly launched businesses are more fragile and have more to lose if things go wrong. And they're more likely to lack the infrastructure needed to back up their PR promises.

Here's why introducing PR too early could be one of your biggest mistakes.

You end up making promises you can't keep

In the past, today's news may have become tomorrow's chip paper but in our online world, press releases hang around. Gaining media attention may get

your name in people's mouths but it also makes it glaringly obvious if you fail to deliver on your promises – and consumers will remember this too. If you launch late or a new product feature flops, your own PR will hold you to account. Early-stage startups are more likely to trip up in this way as they have less data on which to base product timelines or gauge consumer reactions.

These scenarios may sound theoretical but you don't need to look far for examples. Dating app Thursday announced its May launch to press but struggled to meet its own deadline. Although it managed to push through this inauspicious start, beginning your brand story with disappointment is never a good look. Not to mention the additional time, effort and budget needed to run crisis comms on a crisis you've created yourself.

You have the demand but not the supply

Young startups can fail to deliver on promises in another way – by being too successful in getting the word out. Prematurely promoting your business can make you sound more established than you actually are which, on paper, sounds like a win but in reality can add up to a loss. If you get more consumer attention and demand than your infrastructure can handle, you'll again end up with disappointed customers and a brand narrative of letting people down. Increasing demand without ensuring you have the supply to meet it can endanger your reputation and consumer trust.

Even big global brands aren't immune. When Oatly launched its 'it's like milk, but made for humans' campaign in the UK, consumer demand far outstripped supply, which led to a sizeable shortage. Whilst a temporary shortfall can increase popularity by creating a sense of exclusivity, it very soon switches from fun to frustrating if consumers are unable to get the products they need. A company can look clueless if they're encouraging customers to buy something they can't get their hands on.

You prioritise media over your business model

Put simply, early-stage PR is often a mistake as it pulls focus at a time when startups should be concentrating on their business models. Chasing media coverage brings a certain buzz but it won't last long if a company doesn't have a viable business to back it up. And good PR campaigns aren't cheap. They require money and resources that will need to be sacrificed from other areas of the company in order to successfully run.

Holding our nerve and delaying our PR push has actually given my company,

Laundryheap, the edge in our field. Whilst some of our competitors were burning through investor cash with flashy campaigns and high profile partnerships, we chose to sail below the radar for four years, quietly working out a profitable model before we started shouting about our success. It took courage and determination to pursue this strategy, particularly when we saw others rush to grab ad space, but it's the path we'd choose time and again. Whilst we've grown from strength to strength, we've seen competitors who pursued big PR too early having to merge in order to stay afloat.

When you're a young startup it's natural – and good – to be excited about your offering. But you shouldn't let overeagerness push you into premature PR. Waiting will stop you making promises you can't keep and allow you to maintain focus on fine-tuning your business model so you have the infrastructure to make your startup a success. Once this is done, you'll be in the best position to go out getting headlines.

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