

How to do PR in a way that works for your startup – Part 2

Foundational PR knowledge, especially media relations, has been kept opaque for a long time. It's allowed a layer of ambiguity to be drawn over the media landscape in a way that has only benefited PR professionals. This opacity has meant that startups now typically default to using external agencies that charge them high rates and fail to provide transparent ROI metrics, leaving founders wondering whether PR is really worth it. In short, PR has become a black box, and it shouldn't be.

If you're considering engaging a PR agency or freelancer to help you with PR, first ask yourself what you want to achieve and how you are going to set them up for success.

Here's an example of the type of questions you should go through:

Have you identified PR objectives that support your business objectives?

Do you have someone in the team with capacity to manage an external

provider?

Do you have interesting developments to talk about in the year ahead?

Do you have an idea of what PR success looks like for your leadership team?

If the answer is yes to all of these, make sure you create a quick Notion page (or whatever tool you prefer) summing up those items. They will form 90% of your PR brief (the rest is information about your company and its strategy) – without that, you risk paying external providers to create said brief instead of them executing against it.

Understand what PR agencies and freelancers need from you to deliver

While engaging an agency might seem like outsourcing the problem, it can end up adding to the load. Agencies need a time investment on your part to make anything happen. You will have weekly calls, “storymining” sessions and messaging workshops which won’t deliver media coverage straight away and can be time-consuming and costly, unless you get your agency to work on a success-basis (which these days if you push for it – you can).

Freelancers are more straightforward but again, they will also need significant onboarding in order to be able to talk about your company knowledgeably to the media. So before you take the jump, check that you can allocate the time to managing an external partner and that you are definitely not able to do a basic version of what a PR agency does, yourself – “in-house”.

Consider keeping your PR function internal

If you decide the latter is true, running your own PR activity is simpler than you think if you have the right structures in place and have a concise selection of tools. Yes, it will require time that you don’t have, but we’ve seen some of our startups run PR engines by spending as little as 5 hours on initial planning & media relationship building, and successfully picking up coverage consistently every month thereafter. They just made sure to spend half a day each month pulling together the content they’d previously planned and then shared it with relevant journalists.

In truth, pitching to journalists is a lot like fostering sales prospects. It’s about getting your messaging right, finding the right access (usually email addresses

or, on occasion, Twitter DMs), and addressing a pain point they have (in the journalist's case, it's usually access to valuable content that their readers will engage with). Our founder previously wrote about [how to build relationships with journalists](#) here, but in a nutshell, our best advice is to work backwards from your company's own [ideal customer profile \(ICP\)](#).

Ask your customers what they read when they make decisions about which companies to buy from, and then use that analysis of your own audience to find similarities with readerships at publications. If your ICP and the publication's audience align then go deeper and look at the journalists within those publications that are most commonly writing about the topics that you want to be talking about.

Chances are, if you find a journalist who is consistently writing about the topics or challenges that your company is creating solutions for, they will be interested in knowing about your company. While they might not be interested in writing about you immediately, they'll definitely be interested in knowing about you – use that commonality to introduce yourself but be aware that the journalist you're pitching doesn't have lots of time, so keep it as concise and relevant as you can.

Say RIP to the 'little black book' myth

There's an old myth that you need to have your own little black book of contacts to get in with the media, but these days a clear pitch with relevant content beats relationships with 'friendlies' hands down. Journalists knowing your name (or your PR agency's) only helps insofar as they're more likely to open your emails – but really it's the headline and what's in it that actually determines the outcome.

Getting the message right and knowing what journalists want to receive is the hardest part – but getting hold of journalist email addresses can be done with services we all use already like Apollo.io etc.

If you do choose an agency, make them work in the way you want to

First, avoid agencies that simply send press releases and place your thought leadership. There are better – and cheaper – solutions out there to do that. Look for an agency that can bring you true strategic value, not just execution, and help you develop your brand, define your company positioning, and create PR collateral and content plans that directly feed into marketing material that supports goals as a business.

Second, check that your agency is being smart about ROI and metrics to measure success. Too many agencies use outdated article clipping lists or skewed data points indicating they helped you reach millions of people with impressions. Insist that they propose a relevant measurement framework that takes into account both quantitative and qualitative outcomes for your business. Lean principles and feedback loops don't exist in agencies, so you may need to educate them on how you like to work so that they fit in with your own speed and rhythm. For instance, ask for a clear, agile plan to track success and efficiency of the pitching process – so that they are incentivised to iterate on their processes to improve how they work with you and with journalists over time.

Understand job titles and optimise how your 'client team' is setup

Finally, make sure they're able to customise the 'client team' around your needs. Agencies price retainers based on the hourly rates of the people that will work on your team.

The more senior, the more expensive. So once the strategic planning phase has been completed (usually a month or so if they're quick, but depending on the length of time you've agreed) – do ask for more time from junior and mid level members of the team. These will be Account Executives and Account Managers (usually 2 – 6 years of industry experience) that will, following the planning sessions, be well acquainted with your business and can do the bulk of executing on the agreed PR strategy. Without this flexibility, there's a good chance you'll be paying for expensive "strategic advisory" from a Director who may no longer be necessary and will add £350 per hour sitting on 'Working in Progress' (WIP) calls with you.

We hope you found these tips helpful and that you now feel more informed about doing PR for your business. If you're feeling very discouraged about it, that's also fine. There's still a long way to go before PR is a fully transparent, accessible and manageable function for companies of all sizes. If you have a question for us, you can always find us and ask – [here](#). We try to make time for founders where we can and we're always happy to share what we know.

Tom Lawrence is Founder and CEO, Camille Oster is Director of Operations and Ben Heath is Director of Clients at [MVPR](#).

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Article by TOM LAWRENCE, CAMILLE OSTER & BEN HEATH