Public Relations and Nonprofits: The Power of Technology

By Beth Johnson, Salsa
When it comes to public relations (PR), many nonprofit professionals automatically think it is either too much for their time-crunched, small staff to take on, or too expensive to hire an agency that will handle it for them. And twenty years ago, they may have been right. Once upon a time, public relations consisted largely of creating press releases, identifying specific, individual reporters to reach out to, working on tight, print-related deadlines and vying for finite, often limited, space. If organizations were actually able to garner attention, they would need to manually scour for clips and do the cutting and measurement tracking themselves. It’s no wonder many nonprofits think this type of PR is more than they can handle. But in the new digital age, effective PR can be accomplished with a lot less, making it feasible for many nonprofits to handle outreach themselves.

PR 101

Let’s start by defining public relations for those who might not have spent hours and hours studying it in a college classroom. According to Leah Wilkinson, co-founder of the PR firm WilkinsonShein, public relations is about “communicating your message to the people who are most likely to communicate it to the audience you care most about.” It’s knowing what to say, how and when to say it, and to whom. In general, PR is about reaching out to a desired audience via the media (we’ll come back to who constitutes the media in a minute) and is not paid promotion or advertising. There’s an old adage among PR professionals that advertising is what you pay for. PR is what you pray for.

Effective PR combines your message with time-tested tools and tactics to reach the audiences that matter to you the most. Before anything else, public relations efforts begin with deciding who you want to reach and crafting the messages that will resonate most with them. Then, and only then, can you begin developing a list of influencers you want to reach. This can be writers, reporters, bloggers or high profile individuals who are likely to repeat your message to the desired audience. When it comes to the format you’ll choose to communicate your message to the influencer, there are a wide variety of tools and tactics including press releases, media advisories, individual phone pitches, issuing statement, participating in trade shows, speaking opportunities and more.
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PR in the Digital Age

At one time, PR truly was a time-intensive practice, requiring extensive research into not only who to reach out to but how to do it—meaning combing through books of contacts to find the appropriate one, making phone calls or faxing press releases to reach people and hoping your message didn’t get buried by the latest news of the day. In the last several years, PR has changed. A lot. Almost anyone can do at least some public relations for their organization, either by reaching out on social media, posting a video to YouTube and sharing it on Facebook, targeting a specific blogger via Twitter and even hosting virtual press conferences with the help of Google+ hangout. Email makes it significantly easier to share press releases, pitch a reporter or follow up with a key influencer about a specific topic.

Access to media has changed too. Instead of having to wait for the 6 p.m. news or the morning print edition of the paper, audiences can consume their news anytime, anywhere through their computer, smartphone or tablet. Additionally, audiences are able to self-select which types of news they want. For those focused, for example, on technology, they can spend their time on dedicated websites, niche media outlets and even the blogosphere without being relegated to the business section of their local paper in hopes of catching an article that’s relevant to their interests.

Technology, Nonprofits and PR

Technology has changed the way PR works and opened the door for almost anyone to do it, even with a limited budget. It provides endless opportunities for communication and content delivery. It means that individuals can reach media members almost instantly, and get responses to their outreach almost as quickly. Content can be delivered to media members at specific times or intervals to maximize open rates. Publishing content has become easier too, allowing some organizations to become their own news source. They can easily and cheaply create everything from videos to blogs to books and self-publish their materials for instant sharing on social media, with reporters, and often directly with their target audience.

The advent of online tools for pitching reporters and sharing news has also made it more realistic for nonprofits to handle their own PR outreach. Free or low cost wire services allow press releases to be shared with a variety of media outlets. Online communities like ProfNet Connect give organizations the chance to create profiles for their subject matter experts to be approached for media opportunities and even speaking engagements. The free resource HARO
(Help A Reporter Out) collects and shares requests from journalists needing short-turnaround information for pressing news pieces and allows for direct communication between reporter and source.

Any nonprofit spending time on PR will want to be sure they can track their efforts to share with their supporters and board members. Technology helps with that too. Free Google Alerts allow users to set up notifications for every time specific key words get mentioned – like the name of a nonprofit for example. There are also paid tracking services for media clips that can be secured at reasonable, attainable prices.

**Using a Content Marketing Strategy for Public Relations**

With such boundless technology options available, the best public relations efforts may be derived from an overall content marketing campaign. This means leveraging existing content in as many ways as possible, and in some instances creating additional materials from the current content.

The Solar Energy Industries Association (SEIA) is a strong example of how public relations and content marketing strategy can work together. In August 2012, Jamie Nolan joined SEIA as their press officer. She was given access to U.S. Marketing Insight®, a quarterly publication by SEIA and GTM Research that surveyed nearly 200 utilities, state agencies, installers and manufacturers to collect data about the U.S. solar market. The highly regarded publication was a must-read for media members and the perfect platform for Nolan to share SEIA’s message with the world.

Nolan knew that PR was more than just reporters, so she created a multi-faceted content marketing campaign that allowed her to get more bang for her buck. She began to break U.S. Marketing Insight® into various parts and formats. She offered it on the SEIA website as a PDF, optimized it on the site itself for mobile and even broke it into smaller pieces for highly-focused articles, infographics and blog posts. She also worked to create a members-only section of the website, offering additional graphics and materials to supporters and media. Using the established content and messaging of the larger publication, Nolan was able to repurpose the content over and over, dividing it into digestible, easy-to-target pieces.

With the content ready to go, Nolan leveraged a variety of tools she already had available to her to manage the campaign and her outreach with minimal additional expense. Beginning with her CRM (in this case, Salsa), Nolan was able to segment her list of reporters and bloggers to do emails, event outreach, registration for a virtual press conference and more. She also used:
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- **Attentive.ly** - A Salsa plug-in that allowed her to see who from her media list was active on Twitter
- **Meltwater** - A media keyword monitoring service to track her efforts
- **Vocus** - A wire distribution service that enabled her to reach widespread media members
- **Visual.ly** - Designers were able to bid on her projects, including infographics, allowing her to create custom pieces for significantly reduced prices
- **Muck Rack** - To identify reporters to target and track their sharing activity
- **SEIA.org** - Provided a central location to host all the elements of the content marketing campaign
- **Facebook** - Nolan exclusively posted images on the social media site and was able to do some highly-targeted local engagement
- **Twitter** - This was key for link sharing, campaign tracking using hashtags and driving participation in a virtual press conference
- **Google+ Hangout** - This was used to host a virtual press conference as well as to discuss report findings and drive viewers to the SEIA website

For other nonprofits looking to use her strategy as a blueprint for their own, Nolan advises, “Use what you’ve got. Wrap your arms around your data, echo messages across the media, think local and don’t forget to measure your efforts.”

**Using Your CRM for PR**

Nonprofit organizations already know the advantages of having a CRM for managing supporters and donors, but may not necessarily think of using it for PR like SEIA did. With the right features enabled and settings in place, a CRM can easily be repurposed.

Using technology to maximizing impact is about leveraging key criteria, according to Blake Groves, vice president for strategy and business development at Salsa. He explains the goal is to find the sweet spot between groups, actions and influencers- i.e. who is being targeted for outreach, what they have done, who they reach and what they are talking about right now.

Setting up a CRM for media outreach begins with groups. Reporters can be classified by a variety of areas but consider things like area of specialization, type of publication, “friendliness”...
to the organization, etc. Then, track the actions they have taken using the reporting features. Find out which emails reporters have opened, what requests they have made and what they have clicked on the organization's website.

Using a CRM to manage media members provides a chance to look outside traditional channels to see who reporters are engaging with, who has the most followers and influencers (using plug-in features like Attentive.ly) and create a cohesive picture of the individual reporter in a single system.

With information gathered, the next step is using the CRM to target emails or pitches, and review individual reporter information prior to a specific outreach effort. Reporting features allow users to slice and dice the data, especially helpful when looking at specific groups and improve outreach efforts, maximizing media coverage while minimizing time and expense.

**PR in the Digital Age and Beyond**

Achieving PR success in a nonprofit organization has become increasingly attainable with significant changes to the field of public relations and advances in technology. Whether utilizing free and low cost tools to bolster efforts or developing a full content marketing strategy designed to garner media attention, using public relations to further an organization’s mission and reach its audience has gone from a luxury to a must-do.

About the Author

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Beth Johnson is the communications manager for Salsa Labs, a Washington, D.C.-based technology company helping nonprofits ignite action and fuel change by providing tools for fundraising, advocacy, communication and supporter management. She oversees a variety of writing and marketing projects, including public relations efforts, graphic design and social media outreach. Johnson began her career handling public relations for the Marine Corps Marathon and continued to develop her skills managing e-communication at George Mason University in the Office of University Development and Alumni Affairs. She holds a B.A. in communication from Auburn University and a M.A. in communication from George Mason University.