

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR PR SUCCESS

By Jennifer Rodrigues, TravelInk'd

For many hotels- too many in my opinion- public relations is either ignored completely or is an afterthought. They've got sales, they've got marketing (which support sales) and – for the especially ambitious hotels – they have social media. Why introduce another tool into their already overflowing marketing department?

Well first things first, we need to clarify one very important point. PR is not advertising. Actually, let's make that two. PR is not guaranteed placement, like advertising. So why use PR?

It's simple: public relations is a highly effective marketing tool for generating awareness and visibility for an individual property, hotel chain or brand. It's about telling a story- a compelling story- that will generate interest and enter into the consciousness of potential guests. It's about gaining recognition and mitigating negative attention. It's about defining who and what a hotel is, and delivering that message to the public.

Other added bonuses:

- PR has credibility. Unlike advertising, where a hotel can tout its perfect scores on customer service or its 100% occupancy rates year over year – messages which consumer take with a proverbial grain of salt because they know that in advertising, the hotel's messaging isn't censored – PR generates stories written by trusted, third parties. Consumers trust journalists' integrity because it's widely known that they have to remain unbiased. Think about it this way: you could spend \$4,765 for an ad in the New York Times or you could use PR to generate a FREE article in the New York Times, which consumers are much more likely to read, believe and act upon. *How's that for ROI??*
- PR is inexpensive. Whether you choose to do your PR internally or hire an external agency, the cost of PR is very low when compared to advertising.

Sounds good right? Thought so. I'm going to take a leap and guess that you're at least considering implementing PR for your property now. *So how do you get started? What do you need to know when implementing a PR campaign?*

Being the helpful PR pro that I am, I've put together five key rules for hotels to follow to ensure successful PR campaigns. Follow these rules and an email from an editor at the New York Times might be the next one coming into your Bberry (or iPhone). So let's get started...

Think Big (ie. Beyond your Property)

This is a tough one for people to understand and follow, especially for those who have been relying only on advertising up to this point. Understandably, to you, your property is the centre of the hotel universe. And it should be! But to the media and the rest of the world, while it's important, it isn't the only hotel of importance.

As I said above, PR is about storytelling and storytelling is only effective when there are people listening. So before sending out your next press release or before picking up the phone and calling a journalist, think about this – is this news newsworthy to everyone or just to you and your hotel? If I was an average consumer, would I care about this news? If the answer is no, then it's a safe bet that journalists won't care either.

Let's look at an example. Unless you're Hyatt or Hilton, lowering your rates by 10%- though it may be a big deal to the front office- isn't going to pique the interest of the Wall Street Journal, or of the average consumer. (That rate reduction may be of interest to someone contemplating a stay at your property, but that's a marketing function, not PR.)



So here's how turn that bit of news into a news story that the media will pick up on. Think BIG. If you're lowering your rates, and the hotel down the street is lowering their rates and so is the hotel by the airport, then you have a news story. This is a trend and media love to write about trends. Consumers love to read about trends. So when you're pitching this story, tell the journalist about not only your rate cuts, but also the rate cuts of your competitors to show them that it's a trend that's worth covering.

But that's not to say that only trend stories work. You can pitch a story that is specific only to your property but remember, it must be newsworthy. Here are some examples of the types of stories that media like to hear about. The fact that your kitchen staff volunteers one day a month at the local homeless shelter is a good story. So is your property's upcoming 25th anniversary. Or even its occupancy rate over the last 6 months compared to other properties in your compset (if you're doing better than your competitors' in today's economy, spread that message far and wide to trade publications!!).

One very important note - keep in mind that although you're selling your property, PR should never sound like a sales pitch.

Let's recap; what did we learn in rule #1? Be aware of the difference between what's newsworthy to the general public and what's important to management. Emphasize the former and you're well on your way to effective PR.

Emphasize your best assets

A big part of PR is putting your best foot forward – emphasizing the good, and downplaying the bad. (NOTE: That's not to say that you can lie because lying is the ultimate reputation killer. If you lie to the media, you will never get covered again by that media outlet!) While this may seem like common sense, the purpose of PR is to define your hotel's image positively in relation to your competitors.

Every property has something that distinguishes itself from its competitors- in every story that you tell you the media, highlight this difference and the importance to the consumer. If yours is a historic hotel, make that known. If your hotel is preferred among business travelers, write op-eds and expert commentaries on attracting and retaining business guests. If you run a brand new boutique in an up-and-coming area, talk about being first to market and the revitalization of the neighborhood.

Know your audience

Basically, who do you want to tell about your property? Most likely, your first answer would be consumers; the people who you want to come stay at your hotel. While that is definitely a huge audience and one that you want to pursue, there are others that shouldn't be ignored.

It's also important to raise awareness of your property among industry experts so it is important to also reach out to industry publications like YoungHotelier. By being included in industry publications, you position yourself as an expert in the industry and develop more credibility for your property/brand. Build a buzz within the industry and it will carry over into the general public.

Business media is another audience that shouldn't be ignored. People who read stories about hotels' financial health or day-to-day operations tend to travel (hello, business travel!), and creating awareness among this audience can pay immediate dividends.

Stories that appear in the local nightly news or in the New York Times can be few and far between, but trade and business stories can recur often and in multiple outlets. Widen your net and you'll catch more fish.



No Comment is No Answer at All

When we watch TV, interviewees are always throwing “no comment” at media, when they are faced with a tough question. While to you, “no comment” may seem like a nice neutral way to get out answering, to a journalist, this is almost an admission of guilt. Try this phrase instead:

- I’m not at liberty to talk about that issue right now. Are there any other questions that I can answer for you?

Or answer what you can and always go back to your key message. Let’s look at this (very extreme) example to give you a better idea of what I mean.

Question: "Was an employee at your hotel arrested today?"

Answer: "I suspect that the best source for that information is law enforcement, but what I can confirm is that the operations of this company have not been and will not be disrupted in any way."

See? Reinforcing the strength of your property and deflecting the question. It’s not lying, it’s not putting you or your property in jeopardy and it’s a great way to diffuse the situation.

Understand PR and manage your expectations

PR has its value in a marketing plan (see above) but it shouldn’t be the only piece. As I mentioned, PR is not advertising/marketing. Though its results can be clear and measurable, it is not direct sales outreach to potential clients. Metrics like ROI and incremental cost can be applied to PR, but rarely will there be a direct, moment-to-moment correlation between PR initiatives and sales.

So when launching a PR campaign, hoteliers need to be realistic as to what results and expectations they have for it. No PR campaign can guarantee front-page coverage on the Wall Street Journal every month. It’s not realistic. Instead, look for the longer-term impact of PR on your hotel, including how your hotel is perceived locally, nationally and internationally, and how levels of awareness of your property change in different markets.

Getting Started

Good public relations is achievable for every hotel, all you have to do is try. PR isn’t rocket science but it is labor-intensive. There’s a lot of writing, a lot of strategizing, a lot of communicating and a lot of relationship-building. But there’s also a lot of results that can be expected if you put in the time and effort. And those results will continue to grow and expand as time passes, without additional effort. In time, media will be calling you for comment, instead of you calling them pitching stories. So what are you waiting for?

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