

Using Public Relations to Recover from a Business Problem

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I had a problem with one of my products, now I want to build up my reputation again. What is the best way? What is the role of public relations in my overall business plan?

A good reputation is a very important asset in any business. Things that foster a good reputation include accuracy, and understanding. A business' credibility often comes from a willingness to listen, with respect, to those with whom you interact. Even when there are problems, you still honestly describe the problem and likely impacts. By listening with empathy and concern, dealing fairly and honestly, your business can often weather very difficult circumstances.

How does a business recover its reputation after encountering a significant problem? Our reader is correct to ask about the role of public relations – which is one of the major vehicles any business can use, to manage and improve its' market reputation. Let's take a look at the role of public relations, and how to tie together fees and outcomes.

Public relations is "the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics" as defined by the Institute of Public Relations. "Publics" can include customers, employees, shareholders, the general public,

competitors and other peer groups, the media and any other sources that can influence or educate the marketplace.

Most businesses use public relations to identify relevant targets, and then determine how best to influence them. The objective can range from changing or neutralizing hostile opinions, to building positive impressions or reinforcing favorable opinions. The outcome of most public relations efforts ranges, depending on the situation. In the case of problems, a typical outcome is to minimize business losses. When a business is on the upswing, the goal may be to make it easier for sales to find their targets, get in the door and beat the competition.

Let's focus back on our reader's problem, recovering from a difficult situation. Remember the importance of trust and honesty in building reputation. In a difficult situation, spin control, or trying to put a good face on a bad situation, can be tricky. You don't want to mislead the marketplace, while you explain the problem. You do want to inform the market, helping people understand what your business is doing to make improvements.

According to Dawn Dankner-Rosen, President of DDR Public Relations, when in any negative situation, crisis, or bad event that has cast a negative light on the

business, you want to get to the point where you can focus the positive. She says that you cannot disregard what happened. You have to remember that honesty is always the best policy. Own up and admit to the negative occurrence, and then move ahead. In no way do you want to cover up what has happened. Dawn maintains that good public relations are not spin masters, they are honest and upfront, present the facts, and help their customers to move forward to the future. Once you've admitted that you've done a bad thing, you can describe what you're doing to resolve it, and show the good that is coming from your efforts, trying to replace bad with good by disseminating a stream of positive messages.

How do you go about selecting a public relations firm, and set up an arrangement that will get you what you want. Interview several public relations firms and ask them for their advice. Look for public relations firms that are already working with your target markets. In crunch time, you may not be able to afford the time it takes for a public relations firm to come up to speed on what your target market is all about. Additionally, you want a firm that knows enough about your market, that they can do a good job of educating and guiding you, not the other way around.

If you are not sure where to find PR firms to talk to, open up the

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Yellow Pages, call business peers and ask them who they have used, go on the web and look up public relations organizations – there are several. DDR Public Relations suggests that besides word of mouth, a great way to find a PR consultant is by asking media people who they know and respect. Editors and reporters know who they like to speak with, who has been honest, upfront and helpful, which is the core of a good public relations professional.

Pick a PR firm based on several factors: how well they know your target market, your ability to communicate with them and vice versa, their experience handling similar situations. Also look for PR firms that know how to get back to the media in an instant. Most editors and reporters are working on deadlines and you may only have a window of an hour or two to get your message across. You don't want to blow an opportunity because a reporter didn't get a prompt call back. Once you have selected 1-3 PR firms as ones you could work with, talk with them specifically about how they would charge.

You probably want to agree on a target amount / month, which you are willing to spend, and which allows the PR firm to do their job. However, beware of open-ended billing arrangements. While concept development, theme, and strategy are all important, you can go through these steps

and end up with nothing published, in which case you would probably be very disappointed. Instead, focus on results. For example, you may want to have articles published in several trade journals. You may want the opportunity to be interviewed by media outlets your customers subscribe to, to get the word out on what your company is doing to improve things. You may want an article which you can reproduce and use as part of your sales literature. Find a way to link the majority of your payments to outcomes that will cause you and your PR firm to both say the effort was a success.

My thanks to Dawn Dankner-Rosen, President of DDR Public Relations, for her contributions to this article. Her firm is a Westchester based public relations and marketing consulting firm, in business for 23 years. Looking for a good book? Try the audio CD, Get Free Publicity, by George McKenzie.

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