

# Practical Advice for Launching a Strategic PR Program

By Mike Plotnick

The breakneck demands of today's A/E/C marketers can banish public relations to the back burner as team members perpetually scramble to meet the latest proposal deadline.

**T**hough understandable, this familiar scenario shouldn't prevent your firm from launching a PR program—even when internal marketing resources are scarce.

The process of launching and sustaining a PR program begins by recognizing the role of strategic PR in elevating a company's profile, conveying specialized expertise, and bolstering relationships with current and potential clients. PR can reinforce core messages you're regularly communicating to prospects in your everyday marketing activities.

That said, this process requires consistent effort and long-term commitment. It should be an ongoing priority for someone on staff, which may mean shifting internal responsibilities or engaging external resources.

Before deciding if and how to move forward, it's beneficial for your team to agree on a uniform definition of "PR," as the term means different things to different people.

In the context of this article, PR describes a range of publicity activities that primarily leverage traditional media, digital media, and company-owned media to communicate news and other narratives. It frequently informs and supports other marketing strategies, such as email campaigns, newsletters, and trade-show activities.

While there's not a universal blueprint for structuring a strategic PR program, here is a step-by-step framework that can guide the process.

## Define Your Audience

Begin by identifying a primary target audience your firm is most interested in reaching. It might be hospital facility managers in Texas, small business owners in Grand Rapids, or decision-makers across the North American solar market.

The more tightly the audience is defined, the easier it will be to identify the best strategies for reaching that audience. And the better you understand individuals within that audience segment—what they value, what they read, where they hang out—the more effectively you can communicate with them.

## Outline Key Messages

Next, develop core messages your firm would like to convey. This requires an honest inventory of your company's most compelling (i.e., unique, interesting, newsworthy) offerings.

Emphasize provable, fact-based statements, such as "Our company is 100 percent employee-owned" or "We developed a process that saves clients an average of six percent in fees over traditional construction practices."

Avoid subjective statements, including marketing platitudes like "We're the most innovative architectural practice" or "Our work stands the test of time" (both of which are open to interpretation).

## Develop Tactics

Now it's time to outline PR tactics for communicating your key messages to your target audience.

In today's fragmented media landscape, that often includes a blend of "earned media" (pursuing editorial coverage in traditional print, broadcast, and online media), "owned media" (your website, blog, and social media accounts), and "paid media" (article sponsorships,

promotion of social posts, or traditional advertising).

Though press releases continue to be a foundational publicity tool for many A/E/C firms, they shouldn't be the go-to vehicle for everything—especially when a particular announcement isn't likely to be deemed newsworthy by media gatekeepers. Consider whether a topic might be more effectively communicated via a case study, white paper, video, or personality profile shared on your website and social platforms.

## Build and Refine a Storyline

After identifying your audience, messages, and tactics, it's time to build out a compelling storyline that communicates your firm's point of view on a particular topic or announcement.

Often, it's not a matter of drafting a story from scratch, but rather, reworking and refining existing marketing materials you've already created for other purposes. Dust off and mine those content-rich proposals your team has spent so much time developing.

During this phase, think like a journalist. Remove your marketing hat and adopt the broader perspective of a reporter or editor whose mission is to cover an entire industry, market sector, or geographic region. Even if you're primarily planning to share an announcement on your company's own platforms, your audience will appreciate an objective, fact-based approach rather than a myopic treatise on your firm's greatness. You can make the narrative even richer by positioning your company's point of view in the context of broader economic, industry, or market-sector trends.

## Schedule for Maximum Impact

Timing is important. Look for opportunities to align the distribution of a storyline with

seasonal events (such as Earth Day or a relevant trade show) or topical themes (such as rising healthcare costs or the release of an influential economic report).

And schedule your social media posts for maximum impact by paying attention to research outlining the most fruitful days and times for sharing on each social platform.

## Assess—and Refine—the Approach

In the words of management consultant Peter Drucker, "You can't manage what you can't measure." And while I largely agree with his declaration, make sure you're measuring the most meaningful elements.

Instead of setting arbitrary—or out-of-reach—measurement goals at the front end of the program, I recommend using the first year to establish a baseline. See what you're able to achieve in year one, then gradually raise the bar by establishing a set of consistent metrics you can use to evaluate the program's ongoing progress.

## Share Your Successes

Some of your colleagues may continue to be skeptical about the value of PR, so be sure to share each success—whether it's a news clip or anecdotal client comment—with your boss, leadership team, and coworkers. Also look for opportunities to share successes externally on your website and social media accounts.

Though project pursuits will continue to be the bread and butter of most A/E/C firms' marketing activity, PR will extend those efforts by building valuable relationships with decision-makers and influencers before, during, and after those pursuits. ■