

A PR guide for design agencies

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What does effective PR look like?

Effective PR encompasses everything from influencer management, event planning, communications, media relations, crisis communications, social media, and digital marketing (your first pro tip: if you're searching for a PR agency, find one that specialises in your sector and does all of the above).

There isn't one agreed definition of PR and many don't even connect it with meeting your business objectives and adding to your bottom line, which it absolutely should!

I'd say PR is about one-on-one relationships with journalists and influencers who can authentically attract and convert your customers. You want PR to help your business to grow efficiently, at pace.

What does a PR strategy entail?

This is your blueprint for how to successfully do PR and create a PR strategy. Once you have a strategy in place, don't simply roll it over each year. You'll need to update it regularly to account for:

- Today's climate of buyers e.g. shifting customer expectations, ensuring you are recession-proof
- Competitors e.g. who are the most prominent players?
- Trends and key issues e.g. diversity and sustainability
- The areas you can claim expertise in – new client sectors, specific work. As this evolves so should your strategy.

Nurturing global and national media relations

Whether you're trying to secure coverage in global or national titles, you need to build and nurture relationships. Journalists receive hundreds of press releases every day so the key is making sure yours encourages them to open and read it.

One way to help your chances is to build relationships with key press contacts. Set up regular press meetings with key journalists. Take them for coffee or give them a tour of your studio or have them see some of your work in real life. Frequently liaising with them will go a long way in maintaining those key relationships.

Freelance journalists will work on many different publications. They might be doing an interior trends feature for The Telegraph, and then writing an office design piece for OnOffice magazine. Find the freelancers in your sector and reach out to them regularly to find out what they're working on.

Pro Tip

Add journalists (both full-time and freelancers) to your CRM. You'll find it a lot easier to nurture these relationships if they're stored in your database with their contact details and any notes on prior or upcoming interactions.

The 7 stages of creating a PR and media strategy

1. Defining your business goals
2. PR audit
3. Competitor coverage review
4. Specific PR/comms objectives
5. Narratives and assets
6. Comms content calendar
7. Building a media list

Creating a successful PR and media strategy

1. Defining your business goals

I can't stress this enough: a successful PR and media strategy hinges on your wider business goals, aims, objectives, and target audience. Start by getting really clear about who you are, what you want to achieve, and whom you want to reach.

Pro Tip

As in the design sector, user personas are helpful in visualising your buyer and their pain points. They'll be invaluable in helping with your positioning and marketing strategy. Just remember to be specific.

Example

You are a branding agency working primarily with SME privately owned businesses in the hospitality sector. What publications will the owners of those businesses read, and what organisations do they belong to? By being precise, you'll find it a lot easier to create a targeted media list (we'll touch on this later).

2. PR audit

If you've tried doing PR before and/or have secured some coverage in the past, it's worth analysing the process and the results. Be honest around what worked and what didn't.

Example

Did you or your PR agency pitch a trends article to a publication that mainly covers more personal Founder stories? What learnings would you take away from previous efforts?

3. Competitor coverage review

Define your direct competitors if you haven't already and conduct an online search to see where they've received coverage. Could you add this publication to your media list? Why do you think this content was featured i.e. what box did it tick for the journalist? Conducting a competitor review can bring about some great insights.

4. Specific PR/comms objectives

You've defined and documented your business objectives from step 1. These should be the bedrock to inform your PR objectives.

Example

If your business objective is to get more traffic to your website, your PR objective may be to get more coverage in online titles with links to your homepage. Or if your business objective is to increase your profile as an expert in the space, your PR objective could be to increase the number of speaker and content creation opportunities for events and publications.

5. Narratives and assets

Now that you have some PR-specific objectives, what kind of newsworthy stories could help you achieve your aims? Think about the assets you'd need too. In the example below, you'd benefit from images of the design solutions plus infographics on the results, as well as written materials about your sustainability credentials and any other supporting information.

Example

You have rebranded a business to accentuate their sustainable credentials at the same time as helping them cut their carbon footprint through redesigned packaging and a new low carbon website. Use imagery to show how good the work is alongside well designed infographics showing their improved sustainable footing.

Pro Tip

Consider PR angles and get into the habit of asking yourself “so what?” and “why now?” It’s not about what you love about your brand, business, or the work that you produce, it’s about why it’s of interest to your target audience and why it needs to be told now.

6. Comms content calendar

You have a few narratives to work with so begin compiling them in a comms content calendar. This is your very own planning document and can be created as a spreadsheet. You’ll need a column for tasks and key dates such as “issue a press release on X theme”.

Get an understanding of the lead times of different titles and what they would be writing at particular times of the year or particular times of the month.

National titles often have a shorter lead time whereas monthly magazines may finalise their features three or four months ahead of a publication date. You can ask for media packs from various publications. Remember to factor in key industry events within your comms calendar.

Pro Tip

Don’t forget about online activities! You’ll reach a much broader audience by having your online and offline activities working in tandem. In the lead-up to issuing your press release, try creating some buzz on social media with short teasers or a countdown of clues.

7. Building a media list

Compile a comprehensive media list. Again, this could be a spreadsheet and you’d want to include things like the name of the publication, the name of the journalist, their job title, etc. Add labels so you know if the title is national media, consumer media, trade media, print publication, digital publication, freelance journalist, etc.

Think about all the publication categories your agency or your work might appeal to.

Not all these publications will be suitable for everything you create so it’s about studying the publications, knowing what type of features they cover and what content will appeal to their (and your) target audience. Being strategic in this way will increase your chances of securing coverage.

It doesn’t stop there. You won’t get much luck sending your press release in a mass mailer to your media list. PR is about building and nurturing relationships with journalists, which is why the first page of this guide emphasises the importance of media relations.

Parting words...

If it wasn’t already, the design sector is getting crowded. Your business needs to stand out by consistently putting out high quality PR and comms. That way, you’ll stand strong while your competitors try to swoop in and take your share of voice.

Whether you want to get something started on your own or take the help of professionals who can be accountable for getting you results, the key point is to begin.



This guide was written by Katherine Sandford-Anderson, founder of Sandford PR and an accredited DBA Expert. You can contact Katherine directly via www.sandfordpr.com or you can read more about her and the DBA’s full range of consultants on the DBA Experts Register via www.dba.org.uk/experts