CISION®

Excite, Execute, Engage:

The Secret to Successful Pitching in PR

Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

What are the elements of a successful communications campaign? Some PR professionals would identify time as a crucial factor. Those who can respond quickly to shifts and trends and execute quickly will often have a competitive edge. In that respect, any tool or process that allows you to get ahead of the pack with a campaign is a catalyst for success.

Others might argue that the secret to success is rooted in timeless truths. Good storytelling, for example, has no expiration date and is just as compelling in a Tik Tok video lasting seconds as in a quarterly review.

The purpose of this white paper is to explore how you can build strong relationships with credible journalists and influencers to tell engaging stories - and how you can do it faster and more effectively than the competition.

> "Public relations are a key component of any operation in this day of instant communications."
>
> Alvin Adams, Shipping Magnate (1804 to 1877)

Where PR Teams Find Themselves in 2022

While the tools PR and communications teams use have evolved over the years, the methodology remains familiar.

Responsibility for building relationships comes down to the skill of the individual PR professional; however, in order to build a successful campaign, PR teams need not only a solid media contact list, a well crafted pitch and a targeted outreach strategy, they need the ability to measure performance and extract insights as well.

Sourcing and assembling journalist and influencer contacts is not the immediate challenge. PR teams have been able to choose from a variety of list-building platforms for years, most of which provide data collection. Now, PR teams are hungry to extract additional insight from their databases, and that is a feature that only the more innovative platforms offer. Elsewhere, real-time databases might have replaced the Rolodex, and email or Twitter DMs ousted the phone call, but the foundation of good PR is solid. Yet many feel the surrounding sands have shifted.

- Good stories no longer start and end in the newsroom by default. You are just as likely to need a direct line to the coffee shop as the conference room.

- From a brand perspective, PR pros have seen journalists and influencers take more ownership of their own publicity, particularly on social media.

- Today's news is not just 24/7 and global. It is under new ownership as citizen journalists can jump on and run with trending hashtags on their beat.

- Public trust in the media is at a record low, particularly coming out of the pandemic. **The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer** puts trust in social media at just 37 percent and traditional media at 57 percent.

- Stricter regulation in the form of **GDPR** calls for a more transparent approach to data. If your contact list is not fully opted in, there could be serious legal consequences.

The irony is that technology has made it easier than before for you to reach out to a journalist or influencer, but harder than ever to capture their attention. Noise is a recurring issue, as are dwindling attention spans.

As a result, you have a fresh challenge in proving your value to Marketing departments who might demand granular detail on everything from call logs to media mentions. With so many voices turning up the volume on any given topic, it's harder to distinguish the experts who can articulate a clear, authentic position.

Unless, that is, the starting point is a list of media contacts that is deep in quality, diverse in capacity, and primed for action.
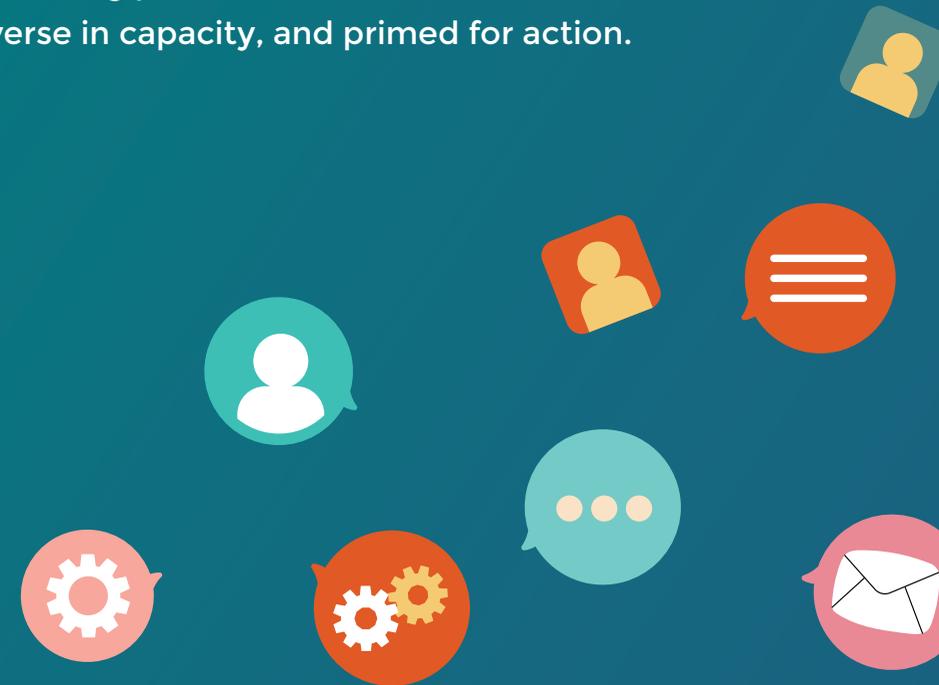
What Does Your PR Team Need From Their Contact Lists?

In PR, relationships with journalists (and now a growing number of influencers) are essential to the job. When it comes to building those relationships, it starts with a list.

Building and maintaining that list has always been demanding, but a surprising proportion of PR pros still lack the time and resources to unlock the full list of features their platform can offer. They are still inputting manually when they could be automating routine tasks such as managing contacts, monitoring mentions, sending messages or tracking performance.

It's time to ask not what you can do for your list, but what your list can do for you. Essentially, you can streamline and refocus your efforts with a list that allows you to pitch using more effective messaging to a selection of more relevant contacts.

In turn, accessing the data to craft personalized, relevant pitches enables you to address one of the recurring complaints heard where PR and journalism meet: "It's just spam with a follow-up reminder."

According to the findings of our 2022 Global State of the Media Report, more than 1 in 4 journalists receive 100+ pitches per week. And if they're overwhelmed by the volume, they're underwhelmed by the content. Too many journalists report a steady stream of poorly focused, incorrectly targeted and incomplete pitches.

However, with some improved communication between the two camps, journalists and PR pros can work together to launch more successful campaigns.

Smart and Relevant: The Secret of Successful Campaigns

Without the list to support the launch, no PR campaign is likely to succeed. At the same time, you are stretched enough as it is without having to allocate valuable resources to maintaining media contact and influencer lists.

Those resources can be better spent building mutually beneficial relationships with the right journalists and influencers. Remember, journalists today are under significant pressure themselves to prove their value against detailed audience metrics. In other words, they need you as much as you need them.

In the digital age, journalists need stories that will attract eyeballs and generate shares. Give them original research, insightful data, relevant quotes and graphics or images to support the content and they won't be deleting your pitches.

In the following chapter we'll dig deeper into what you need to do to create a powerful database of credible journalists and influencers, as well as how you can use the database to anticipate, monitor and act quickly upon developing stories.

CHAPTER 2

The Dream Database

We talk of the contact list, but really it's part of a living, breathing network in which connections spark and evolve continuously between brand, PR, influencer and audience. It's dynamic, and in the nature of communications, a database is always fractionally out of date, just as the news cycle can never quite catch up with events.

To some extent, you can never log into the same database twice. In between sessions, it has changed. Reputations and influence wane, people move, audience perceptions shift.

What Smart PR Teams Look for in a Database

As a PR professional, how can you be present at any chosen event, wherever and whenever it is, with a message to share? You just need a portal - a complete communications platform that does more than just sort and categorize journalists and influencers.

In a few clicks, you need to be able to scan a crowded, noisy landscape, identify a particular voice, and communicate a message. But right now, that's not the experience many PR pros have with the media databases they have at their disposal.

Undertanding this, it's time to change the status quo. Instead of conforming to what the current technology allows us to do, we should be dreaming of what it can liberate us to accomplish.

Dreaming of Data

Clarity and speed

As a bare minimum, our dream communications platform should allow us to target a search for freelancers, editors, bloggers and influencers by location, sector or topic, as well as location, industry and publication. And do it quickly. Results should turn up at the same lightning speed we're accustomed to with the search engines we use every day.

Insight

We need an engine that can aggregate essential details for quick reference. That means we need more than a list of names to follow up on. We need full contact details, pitching preferences, linked social media profiles, areas of expertise and rating. And a tracker of recent news coverage to see who's the current trusted mouthpiece for a chosen topic? Yes, we'll take that too.

Focus

Average contact databases pull in large amounts of data indiscriminately, leaving PR pros to do the legwork. Outstanding databases narrow and rank the selection, revealing important details that provide context for the names that make the shortlist.

Scale

We're not always searching for the needle in the haystack. Sometimes, the task is to broadcast at volume. In that case, we also need a database that supports mass outreach, and it needs to be up to date. That allows us to send out press releases to entire lists without generating an immediate influx of bounces, returns and unsubscribes. If deliverability falls below the acceptable benchmark of 85% alarm bells should be ringing.

Measurement

As George Bernard Shaw observed, "The problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place." In terms of PR, nothing should be assumed until we have a full report of the engagement metrics, open rates and other KPIs. Our media list has to provide a complete picture not just of who we can reach out to, but how we can expect our campaigns to perform once we do.

Monitor

Reporting is one piece of the puzzle, but having the scope to listen in to daily news stories, broadcast channels, online forums and more enables you to build out a PR ecosystem that is proactive instead of reactive. In a world where the latest story quickly becomes yesterday's news, having full oversight of the media landscape means your PR campaigns will be better informed from the get-go.

Are we asking too much? So far, we have only sketched out the architecture of our dream PR platform. The next step involves populating it with the right contacts.

The Importance of the Quality and Credibility of Contacts

As a reference for what we should be looking for in a best-in-class media contact database, it's worth considering the not entirely dissimilar task of building a successful e-commerce list.

In both PR and e-commerce, the brutal truth is that the majority of the audience is not paying attention, or the seats are simply empty. The average open rate for Public Relations emails in the UK is 16.95% according to our research, while the click through rate is 3.98%. And these numbers are good compared to many other sectors.

Regardless of the quality of content, the vast quantity of communication disappears into the void. That makes it even more important to populate the list with contacts who will at least act once their interest is piqued.

The approach that doesn't work in e-commerce is to fill the email list with as many names as possible and to broadcast relentlessly. But you cannot spam contacts into submission. Brands that lured in customers with cheap tricks or false promises don't grow, whereas those that attract engaged customers in search of a solution flourish.

In the same vein, it's more effective and efficient to build a smaller database of credible, authoritative influencers around a certain sector or topic, rather than pulling in hundreds of thousands of names with no quality control. That way, when the moment comes to reach out to a journalist, blogger or influencer for a particular campaign, you don't suddenly discover that they no longer represent the publication or profile they did previously.

How do you measure quality and credibility? Third-party tools can help aggregate social media feeds, but your own contacts database should be building a real-time profile of each contact and even assigning a score. After all, we're in an age when every single post is shared, rated or reported. Likewise, each blog, article or report your contacts create leaves a digital trail that data analytics can track.

What Stands Between PRs and Their Dream Communications Platforms?

We've allowed ourselves to picture the shape of our dream comms platform and take a peek at the moving parts that make it work. Why, then, can't we fit it all together right now and unlock the benefits?

The following obstacles can stand in the way of progress and will be familiar to any database user, no matter the sector.

Out of date data
Particularly where contacts are inputted manually, maintaining an accurate and up-to-date database takes time and resources that few PR teams have.

Poor sources of data
Some data doesn't even need to degrade within the contact list. In many cases, it's inaccurate at the point of entry. Without the capacity to quality score and verify contacts coming into the database, a good database can quickly lose value.

Churn
Left to its own devices, any contacts database will slowly devour itself through churn. Even voluntary subscription databases typically lose 5% to 10% of their contacts each year. A healthy database needs constant maintenance and oversight.

Regulation
GDPR in particular has transformed the way organizations can collect, store and share contact data. The key consideration is consent. Unless you have a clear, unambiguous opt-in from your contacts to receive communications, you could face serious penalties for sharing their data or sending them unsolicited communications. At least there is a strong case for legitimate interest whenever PR pros are reaching out to other media professionals.

Sophistication
It used to be straightforward to source journalists in niche areas. Every sector had its trade publication. As news outlets have consolidated, disappeared, or cut back on their specialist reporters, however, niche talent has been scattered across an assortment of blogs, newsletters and social media feeds that may not always command the numbers to register on the radar. To find this talent, your contact database needs to be able to sweep for granular detail - with the same accuracy as it does for more general contacts.

We now have a vision for how you can find and engage credible journalists and influencers. In the next chapter, we'll examine how the multi-faceted communications platform can provide the basis for mutually beneficial working relationships.

CHAPTER 3

Creating Working Relationships

Before we explore how PR pros and journalists can work better together, it's important to acknowledge that PR pros and journalists are not adversaries. While both sides may have their gripes about each other's working practices and conventions, they have more in common than meets the eye, and it's is these commonalities that make them valuable partners to each other. Here are three in particular:

Overlapping Skills

There is a constant flow of traffic between the two professions, right up to executive level. Some of the most effective PRs are former editors and correspondents, while PRs who go into journalism often find their nose for a story is no less keen than their seasoned peers.

Changing Landscape

The journalism industry has experienced a cataclysmic upheaval in recent decades that has fundamentally changed the relationship between journalists and their counterparts in PR and marketing. Since the beginning of this century, thousands of local newspapers have closed, national newspaper sales have fallen significantly, and newsrooms have been stripped of full-time editorial staff. As a result, there are now thousands of freelancers and bloggers, often experts in their subject, who are no longer affiliated with a specific publication. And they need PR support to secure their work.

Digital Content

While print media has floundered, digital publications continue to prosper. Readers want a different experience, however, with more snackable content that is easy to scan. Brands have stepped up to the challenge, offering a steady supply of ideas that leverage the power of infographics, surveys, celebrity-led features and so on. Sponsored content now sits comfortably alongside editorial in most online publications.

In short, PR and journalism enjoy a symbiotic relationship in pursuit of a similar goal. With that in mind, what can PR professionals do to accumulate the best possible contact list of quality journalists?

How to Find the Right Journalist for the Job

We shouldn't expect a database to form the basis of a healthy relationship. It can only be the introduction. From that point on, the success of the PR-journalist relationship will largely depend on the extent to which it is mutually beneficial.

- PR pros need reliable, authoritative writers and broadcasters who will handle their brand sensitively and responsibly.

- Journalists need fresh ideas and trending stories, not to mention well-connected figures who can unlock opportunities for interviews, press trips and exclusive access.

- PR pros want reach and exposure.

- Journalists want to break stories that drive online traffic or readership figures.

- PR pros value journalists and influencers who can collaborate according to their campaign timelines.

- Journalists value PRs who understand their news cycle and respect their peak editorial deadlines.

These factors concern the modus operandi, but there's also the importance of matching the right professional to the appropriate job. Although journalists are versatile by nature – 47% cover five or more beats – many will have a specific area of expertise, geographic location or signature perspective they bring to their writing. The communications platform needs to gauge and assimilate these, and a well-targeted pitch is hard to create without that granular level of detail.

The Secret to Better Collaboration and Communication

How should PRs make a good first impression? Unfortunately, the cold pitching numbers do not make for encouraging reading. As mentioned earlier, according to our own research, one in four journalists receive 100+ pitches per week - not all of which would be inside their niche.

Even where there is relevance, 70% of journalists typically spend less than a minute on each email they actually open. Clearly, there's a struggle involved when it comes to grabbing attention.

At the same time, these rates are no worse than we're accustomed to elsewhere. The average click-through rate for a Facebook ad is under 1%, email open rates in general hover at around 18%, and as copywriting guru Dave Trott is never tired of repeating, 89% of advertising is never noticed at all.

Rejection and ambivalence are essential features of communications. There is simply no way every great pitch could find a target audience. At the same time, there is no way a poorly targeted pitch that lacks relevance will find any audience.

The first step for PR pros, therefore, is to use the contact database to identify only those journalists and influencers who match their search criteria for the particular content. With that shortlist in hand, following these trusted tips will make for a better working relationship:

Avoid these common pet peeves:

- Pitching content outside a journalist's scope, or to the wrong person. Even today, the inboxes of editors-in-chief and managing editors (largely managerial roles) fill up with pitches for stories.

- Sending 'broadcast' press releases that sound like marketing brochures. Journalists are looking for ideas, not advertising.

- Following up repeatedly. While most journalists tolerate one or two follow up messages, anything more, and you may end up permanently blocked from their inbox.

Practice this instead:

- Have a clear understanding of the media and beat a journalist's covers, and be confident in sharing your familiarity with their previous work.

- Steer clear of pushing advertorial. These need to be handled by the advertising department.

- Offer exclusive quotes, photos, survey results or any other content that anticipates the writer's task ahead.

Surprisingly, journalists are far more conventional in what they want from their PR contacts than one might expect. In our recent survey, some 63% of journalists picked press releases as their most valued item in the inbox. No gimmicks, no excessive schmoozing necessary. When it comes to creating memorable stories that stick, it appears that simple facts are sufficient.

Niching Down as Necessary

Mix-ups between PR pros and journalists do not always stem from one sending too much (irrelevant) information too often to the other. In some cases, the problem is an apparent dearth of information. So how do you go about finding the more elusive experts in niche areas, and building long-term relationships when there might not necessarily be a steady stream of content to promote?

Again, it comes back to the granular reach of your database. Micro-influencers and trade journalists might be fewer in number, but they tend to be prolific in output. Social media in particular is useful for identifying the thought leaders and connectors within a chosen subject, and if they're recently active on Twitter, for example, they should be catching the attention of your database.

The key consideration is that micro-influencers and niche writers require bespoke pitches. If the aim is to put your campaign in their hands and introduce your brand to their network, the ideal starting point is an approach that acknowledges their standing in that sector, as well as the nuances of what they can and cannot add to the conversation.

Observing these formalities, both micro-influencers and trade journalists can be some of the most rewarding contacts to work with. Not only are they less likely to be deluged with press releases on a daily basis, making it more likely to get their attention, but the close affinity they often enjoy with their adopted audience can make for some compelling content.

In our final chapter, we'll look at the next steps for unlocking the value of a media list, and how they can deliver tangible insights into campaign performance.

CHAPTER 4

The Extra Step

Your communications platform and media database is functioning properly, stocked with a fresh supply of quality journalists and influencers. The campaign is planned, and the pitch is targeted, relevant and beneficial to both pubicist and writer. Success might be tangible, yet the job is far from done. Without the ability to monitor or measure, no campaign can reach its conclusion. With the tools to monitor the latest stories, and track and analyze each interaction, however, PR professionals can unlock valuable insights that will assist in the future growth of their brand.

Monitoring the Media

Keeping ahead of the news cycle is a Sisyphean Task, with millions of new posts and comments augmenting social media noise every day. But you don't have to listen to it all as long as you're listening actively, filtering out the background chatter and honing in precisely to the salient viewpoints. With a powerful media monitoring platform, that is possible. It gives you the potential to:

- Identify and follow trends

- Track stories and breaking news

- Watch brand mentions and sentiments evolve over time

A tool that can switch off or mute what's irrelevant and eavesdrop for what matters? That sounds like a clear competitive advantage.

Delivering PR Success

There is a common misconception that PR success cannot truly be measured; however, that is simply not true, particularly in the digital era, when we can now analyze campaigns down to the last impression.

The confusion might stem from the fact that some PR campaigns operate within sectors that have a traditionally longer sales cycle (especially B2B) with a greater number of touchpoints from prospect to conversion. Or it might relate to skewed perceptions around the relative value of engagement and sentiment. Whereas an online advertising campaign can show a straight trajectory from ad placement to purchase, PR campaigns often take a more circuitous route. Is one more valuable than the other? Is a single customer who makes a one-time-only purchase more valuable than a prospect who has yet to buy, but has shared a campaign snippet with their network?

No answer is necessary here. What does matter is establishing the relevant SMART goals for a PR campaign from inception, with the caveat that vast data streams down the pipeline can become overwhelming. It's far better to focus on a narrow set of metrics and dig deeper into the insight than to scour a bursting dashboard for any spike or curve that suggests success.

Towards Tangible Insights

Many of the tools that reveal insight are freely available and (for the most part) intuitive. Google Analytics is a go-to resource, as are the analytics dashboards for each social media platform (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) The only drawback is that the data frequently doesn't tally, at least not exactly. Facebook might report click throughs to a landing page that do not match Google Analytics visitor numbers over the same period, for example. That can be frustrating for in-house PR teams, but the greater concern is the resources required to jump from one platform to another to gather information.

Perhaps we are getting ahead of ourselves, however. One worrying report suggests that 82% of PR pros don't know what metrics to analyze to measure the success of a campaign (although "can't agree on" is probably fairer). That's through no fault of their own. Our research shows that 70% simply don't have the data and analytics to properly attribute value.

As we've indicated earlier, 'value' is open to interpretation. An advertising campaign has a budget, a conclusion and a transparent ROI. A PR campaign, on the other hand, keeps on giving. Stories are recycled, repurposed and revisited - counter-arguments added and bandwagons jumped on. Every time a 'next big thing' is unveiled, those that preceded it are often pulled from the archives for a digital comeback tour. Journalists get to put their stories to bed, but PR campaigns tend to toss and turn.

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The Measure of a Successful Campaign

With the quirks of the PR campaign duly noted, let's focus on the metrics that will reveal most insight. The following statistics will also help PR teams get a better idea of which media contacts are performing at a higher level, making it easier to optimize and tighten the database for future campaigns.

The Battle for Earned Media Value

Media Impressions - as straightforward as it sounds, but as neutral too. 'Seen' tells us little, but it's a start.

Engagement - including shares, likes and comments. The point at which a campaign moves from passive to active engagement indicates the content is fulfilling its purpose. But not all engagement is equal.

Sentiment - positive engagement is the prize, but neutral does not imply a failure of messaging. Even negative engagement is not necessarily bad if it provokes debate and creates intrigue.

Brand Mentions - an extremely useful metric that can be far more authentic than inbound traffic to a website. Since 96% of people who mention brands online do not follow those brands' owned channels, there's a great opportunity to eavesdrop and learn.

Share of Voice - a measure of a brand's relative standing and influence within a sector. With the right influencers in your database, SoV will increase.

Reach - covering the website traffic to the landing page (measured in views, repeat visitors, etc.) as well as more tangible metrics such as shopping cart revenue, orders or sign-ups. It's hard to argue that a PR campaign is ineffective if it's driving revenue.

Audience Insights - the 'who' of your audience, rather than the 'why' or 'how'. Reveal the age, gender, income and other demographics for those who are engaging with your message.

CONCLUSION

PR professionals have a lot of elements to handle, some important considerations to bear in mind when doing so, and an outpouring of data to analyze in order to evaluate the success of their campaign. In short, there are a lot of moving parts and keeping track of it all can feel seemingly impossible. But that's where we can help.

For year, leading PR teams have been relying on the Cision Communications Cloud to help them build, manage, track and streamline all of their efforts, all in one platform. The result is more efficient use of their time and more effective campaigns. We invite you to find out how it can work for you.

To learn more about Cision's Communications Cloud® platform, schedule a custom demo.