

# The Hard Side of Soft



**It's not your father's PR—social media plus tracking software equals measurable results.**

Public relations has sometimes gotten an undeserved bad rap, as many executives consider it to be the “soft” side of advertising and marketing. “As long as we’re getting our name out there,” the thinking often goes, “we’re generating publicity, and this will eventually lead to new business.”

When it comes to PR in the 21st century, however, the rules of the game have changed—drastically.

The revolution in PR started with the Internet, which introduced a new medium through which publicity can be generated and contacts made between businesses and the media. It is now picking up even more steam with the explosion of social media, which makes it much easier for companies to effectively create their own PR, said Peter Shankman, a PR veteran who lives in New York City and the founder of the Help A Reporter Out website (helpareporter.com), which connects writers and reporters with sources.

“I’ve always believed that businesses need to tie everything they do from a communications standpoint—whether it’s advertising, marketing, or PR—back to revenue,” said Shankman. “Today’s PR tools make that easier to do than ever.”

### Don’t underestimate social media

Consider the traditional press release. Pre-Internet, press releases were mailed or faxed to the media. Today, press releases can of course be e-mailed to media contact lists, but that’s just the start. A plethora of online distribution services are now available that enable targeted press release distribution and tracking,



including PR Newswire, PitchEngine, and PitchRate.

“Press releases still serve the same basic function they always have, but in different ways now,” said Sasha Muradali, a digital project manager for New York City-based Burson-Marsteller and the author of the Little Pink Book PR blog ([littlepinkbookpr.com](http://littlepinkbookpr.com)), where she blogs on PR trends.

For example, some press release distribution services allow integration of releases with social media sites and personal blogs. “Integration of all your PR efforts is very important because all the mediums are now connected,” Muradali added.

She is an big fan of PitchEngine, which she calls “a completely social media-optimized PR outlet. It’s foolish to expect your audience to look for you in all the different social media places: Facebook, Twitter, your blog, website, etc.” She also thinks businesspeople underestimate the power of Twitter: “You can find out what people are thinking about your PR efforts in seconds with Twitter.”

These new distribution methods have significantly lowered the cost of getting press releases out to the media, noted Shankman. Something that used to cost as much as \$1,500 per release can now be as little as a few hundred dollars. However, they require more technological sophistication when it comes to writing them, said Andrea Rizk, founder and CEO of Rizk Public Relations in Atlanta, Ga.

“Today’s press release needs to be search engine-optimized, with the right links and tags embedded,” said Rizk. Obviously, the success of a press release still comes down to the content and the hook. “Just because it’s optimized doesn’t mean it’s a great press release,” said Muradali.

### Don’t forget to integrate

Rizk is a huge proponent of using social media as part of a PR program that’s integrated with a company’s advertising and marketing efforts. “Getting Facebook fans, Twitter followers, and regular blog readers is the easiest way to get positive PR today,” she said. “It can be very impactful and valuable when done right.”

And there’s that word *integration* again. “Companies need to realize the importance of using the positive PR they get as a sales and marketing tool,” said Rizk. This means doing things like getting reprints of bylined articles you’ve written or been quoted in and distributing them to customers and prospects,



as well as featuring links to these articles prominently on your website.

This is an especially good time for writing and placing bylined articles, Rizk added, with the editors of many cash-strapped magazines on the lookout for well-written articles written by industry experts. “Bylined articles are a great way to get in front of a specific audience and establish your credibility and expertise.”

The key to article placement success, said Rizk, is to identify the right publications and then hit the editors with tight, well-targeted pitches that succinctly describe your proposed topic, how the information will benefit readers, and why you’re an expert on the subject.

### Gauging effectiveness

But the most important question is this: Is it possible to effectively measure your PR efforts to gauge their effectiveness? Shankman can’t imagine doing PR any other way. “I can’t see someone today going to their boss with a communications or PR plan and saying, ‘We’re not going to make any money on this. We’re just going to get our name out there.’ That’s a cop-out.”

Like any serious business initiative, PR starts with setting measurable goals—and the commonly stated PR goal of “getting our name out there” doesn’t cut it. Instead, Shankman recommends saying something like, “We want to increase sales by 20% over the next three months as a direct result of our PR efforts.”

“The good news is that now you can actually measure something like this,” said Shankman. For example, suppose an online business launches a PR initiative geared toward driving more traffic to its website and receives 1,000 more visitors than normal during the first month. With the right tracking software, the company can determine how many sales resulted from the additional visitors and compare this to the goal of a 20% increase.

“More and more, I’m seeing businesses that want measurable, actionable results from their public relations,” explained Shankman. “Business-savvy owners and executives are no longer content with just being quoted in *The New York Times*.” ☰

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