

## Use Humor in PR to Be Heard – Not to Be One of the Herd

Humor works. I got *your* attention! Sadly, there's a dearth of humor in public relations efforts, especially from technology companies. There's a reason *Dilbert* skyrocketed to fame – it's rife with truth!

High-tech suffers from terminal seriousness. It's an insidious problem and it means that most tech companies fail to take advantage of opportunities to stand out. Over 80% of everything we hear daily is filtered, and humor helps you be heard in a crowded market.

It's time to think differently about marketing. "Me-too" strategies just won't cut it - unless you aspire to mediocrity. Companies spend millions on technology, but can't spend a few creative brain cycles to do justice to their PR? It's like spending a ton on collateral, without having an effective 30-second pitch! Ridiculous, right?! Great PR doesn't have to be expensive – just creative.

A lack of great PR can be deadly. Many great products and services go under the radar not for lack of quality, but because they have failed to attract attention in a noisy world. The king of the market does not *necessarily* have the best offering. You must not only have great quality, your marketing must take a strategically different approach to stand out. Humor can help!

Humor is not a 4-letter word. Ok, it's a 5-letter word, but the point is if done right, humor can help with the most important aspect of PR – garnering visibility. Most of the editorial press corps read far fewer than half of all releases sent to them. Why? Because companies don't think about content from a perspective that matters to their audiences! Press releases aren't written for *your* benefit. If the trade press can't glean why *their* readers should care, you haven't done your job.

Most releases end up in the "circular" file unread -- because they stink! They are painfully dull, uncreative, self-promotional and without value to readers, lack news, and if your press release floats– its got more "foam" (read: lack of substance) than a styrofoam cup! And at least *they* are *fun* to play with! Hey, sometimes you gotta be cruel to be kind. What was the last great release you read? Exactly!

Questions you need to ask about your PR include:

- What's in it for my audience?
- Do I have a great hook? Do I have an interesting angle of value to readers?
- Is this release part of a well-balanced, integrated marketing program?
- Is my announcement newsworthy? As my favorite 1980's fast-food commercial lamented, "Where's the beef?!" A little sizzle is fine, but you must include the steak!

The good news - by daring to do something different, you'll stand out! Humor isn't the whole meal, but it makes a great appetizer! And there are risk-mitigation strategies any company – or individual - can employ.

### A Great Headline Gets Attention

A great headline gets attention, but relevant news will get the press to continue reading the release. A headline should be short, creative, and stand out. It should highlight the *news* in your announcement. Example: a woman came to a seminar I gave on adding humor to marketing with a topic as dry as a bone: Sarbanes Oxley compliance services. The original release draft she brought, "Firm XY Announces New SOCS Services." Yikes! Serious yawner! And how many SOCS releases do you think the press gets?!

After a few quick exchanges, we came up with: “Don’t Get Caught With Holes in Your SOCs!” The copy then explained why the new service was needed, and what was different about it. But that hook is key! You are asking people for their valuable time to read your release. Make sure it’s worth it.

### **Relate Humor to a Benefit or Issue/Problem Relevant to Your Audience**

A humorous headline should relate to a benefit or differentiation. Humor for humor’s sake is a tough sale. For example, a PR colleague helped a client with a PR campaign around quality. The crux of the campaign: “Quality is boring and boring is cool!”

Was this risky? A little, but the campaign worked because the company backed it up with quality – a key product benefit. The news angle wasn’t the technology per se– it was that the client had the highest quality in the industry for that particular product. We only hear about quality issues when there are defects. My colleague’s client had a stellar record for quality. So “boring quality” was newsworthy: it spoke of innovation that was unparalleled in the market.

### **Test It!**

Third, my colleague with the “quality” campaign did her research. She interviewed a sample from the editorial press and asked for their opinions. The vast majority responded well to her idea because it was a fun and different angle that was backed up with a *real* story. Hence, my next caveat and this is a biggie...

### **Humor Must Be Supported by a Real News Angle**

A humorous headline will catch attention, but won’t interest press in covering your company – or keep your audience reading - unless a real story is involved. The foundation of any great PR campaign must be real news. Not sure what makes a great release? Ask the press! The press is constantly bombarded with “vaporware”— known in high-tech for its lack of news. Humor never substitutes for vapor. What’s news to a company might not be news to the editorial press. For example, a new large client or partnership may not be worthy of press coverage. However, if the partnership is novel and different, it could be. Be creative.

Example: “Company XY launches workshops to educate kids on STDs.”

That’s interesting, but it could be better. How about the following re-write:

“Company XY Joins Forces with The Improv Comedy Store to Educate kids on STDs.”

Then, the story is about a unique approach to education using humor. This is a new, fresh, even *fun* approach to a serious topic. You bet you’ll stand out and generate some press to boot!

Bottom-line: even a little humor makes a big difference. If well researched, backed up by a real story, and focused on product benefits (like quality), humor can help a company cut through the noise and garner visibility with trade press, customers, and prospects. Isn’t that the point of PR?!

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