

Don't Damage a Product's Launch with a Bad PR Campaign

A well thought out and executed PR campaign is a critical element in successfully launching a new consumer technology product. Do it well, and a PR program can help create awareness of new product, drive initial sales and create lasting excitement. Do it wrong, and waste a bunch of money – or in the worst cases, damage a product's reputation for success.

Having spent nearly two decades launching consumer technology products and observing how others launch products, I tend to see the same mistakes come up again and again. It appears that different companies make similar mistakes because they allow the same corporate culture that drives the company every day to drive the launch process. For example, in mid-sized companies, while a CEO may be the best spokesperson for corporate news, investors and major sales pitches, sometimes they are not the right person to talk to the consumer technology press about a new product. The consumer technology press is often more interested in the product details than seeing how the CEO is doing or finding out how it fits into a corporate strategy. But often, because the corporate culture says "they are always the spokesperson," the CEO is the person who ends up briefing the press. A CEO will often try to pack 40 hours of meetings and 36 hours of travel into a week when they are also trying to deal with every other activity that happens at launch time. Typically there is someone left in the office who is articulate, knows the product inside and out, exudes passion and has more time to work with the media on the media's schedule.

I have found that the following 10 tips can help companies avoid this big mistake and others companies typically make when launching consumer technology products:

1) *Know a product's weaknesses and problems ahead of time and figure out a way to address them.* Nothing hurts a product more than negative comments in the press. All too often companies work so hard on trying to explain what is great about a product and never stop to look at the weaknesses. This can result in a product going to market with serious flaws that are never addressed. When the press find these weaknesses the products typically take a beating. But if these weaknesses are addressed through slight repositioning or an explanation like "tradeoffs made during the design process," the products tend to fare better in the end. The media will find a product's weaknesses and problems, so it's best to have a company's own explanation out there.

2) *Understand that there are two distinct audiences that need to be educated about a product at launch: Techies and consumers.* While consumers are the purchasers of many new consumer technology products today, buyers still often turn to technically savvy friends for advice before purchase. If these techies don't know about and believe in a product, consumers may stop considering it for purchase. Both consumers and techies learn about new products in different ways, from different media and with different vocabularies. A successful product launch will address both of these groups with separate strategies.

3) *Send the best spokesperson as the spokesperson.* Companies often default to sending the CEO or product manager on press tours, because "that is the way it's always done." Around launch time, the CEO or product manager sometimes gets so busy they don't have adequate time to prepare for press tours and interviews.

If there are charismatic, articulate people who can represent the company and product well, let them be the spokespeople. Different media outlets also require different spokespeople. Send the passionate techies to the technology publications and send the plain-speaking, fashion-conscious people to the lifestyle publications.

4) *Remember it's still about messaging.* Creating great messages is critical to all PR programs—especially product launches. Great product messages go beyond talking about what a product does to explain why that product is important. One of these messages always needs to be about newness or differentiation.

5) *Consider that every product may not be for every person.* The more a company can choose a target customer, the more successful the PR campaign. With so many products in every category and with so many niche media outlets, customer targeting is more important than ever. Products that try to target too wide an audience usually end up succeeding with none. The digital camera companies have mastered this. These companies understand that a \$900 digital SLR is for photo enthusiasts, while a \$249 point-and-shoot is family memory keepers. They design different PR campaigns for each audience.

6) *Launching a product requires an integrated marketing approach – but not necessarily an identical marketing approach.* Advertising, PR and other marketing functions need to be coordinated early in the launch-planning process. Although the campaign may carry some common themes, they do not need to be identical. One may be a brand building campaign and the other may be a sales driver.

7) *Don't launch too early.* Often, the purpose of the PR campaign is to drive sales, so articles about the product in mainstream press should not appear until the product is available for consumers to purchase. Even with the best planning, there will be last-minute product delays, so this needs to be taken into account when planning the PR campaign.

8) *Great PR photography is critical.* The better product photos a company gives to the media the better chances it has of an article. Newspapers, magazines and online sites are always looking for great images but too often companies just repurpose advertising or packaging images. Companies need to study the media they want to be in and create photos that match the images those outlets typically use. In general a “pop-out” shot that shows the product on a white background and an “environment” shot that shows it with a simple subject (like a hand) are good starting points.

9) *Realize how much the media has changed in the past few years.* We are currently in the midst of a media revolution. Newspapers are becoming about analysis, not news. Talk radio is growing rapidly, and blogs are influencing the influencers. The media in general, is moving faster and faster, and, thankfully for the technology industry, it’s once again interested in technology—even the most consumer-oriented publications. For companies, this means that the media list and approach that worked for last year’s product launch may not be the one that works for this year’s.

10) *Hire a launch specialist.* Launches are completely different types of activities than ongoing PR and marketing efforts. Launch specialists not only bring unique experience but they typically inject fresh energy and perspective just at the moment when others are burning out need it most.

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