

Why



Is Your Best Marketing Tool — and how to do it

By Vivek Wadhwa

“**O**ur corporate motto should be ‘We’ve never heard of you either!’”—that was how we joked at my first startup, Seer Technologies, which was founded in 1990.

We assumed that business success would automatically translate into recognition. And we were overly cautious about what we said in public—so that we were “known for the right things.”

We had broken records by growing a nascent software company into a \$118 million-per-year revenue machine. And we had pulled off a successful IPO in just five years. Not even the legends of that time—Microsoft and Oracle—had achieved such a feat. Yet people would say they had never heard of us.

To say that this was frustrating would be an understatement. It was a matter not of ego, but of credibility and awareness. Because we weren’t known, we had to struggle to find

every sales lead. On every sales call, we wasted valuable time explaining who the company was before we could talk about our products.

It wasn’t for lack of investment or effort. We spent a fortune on marketing. Our oversized marketing department hired overpriced agencies to design logos and develop marketing materials. They produced beautiful videos and gorgeous brochures. We hosted extravagant customer events. We purchased full-page ads in magazines.

The problem was that we didn’t understand the most powerful marketing tool of all: public relations (PR). We assumed that business success would automatically translate into recognition. And we were overly cautious about what we said in public—once again, so that we were “known for the right things.”

Over a period of six years, our company was featured in 20 to 30

articles in total, mostly in small trade publications or the local press.

When I founded my own business, Relativity Technologies, in 1997, I decided to take a completely different tack. We gave PR precedence over marketing and decided we would talk about whatever the media was interested in. My employees and I might make mistakes, be misquoted, and perhaps give out too much information, but I was willing to take the chance. We would have a policy of being accessible to and totally open with the media, customers, and investors. We would let our guards down and be ourselves.

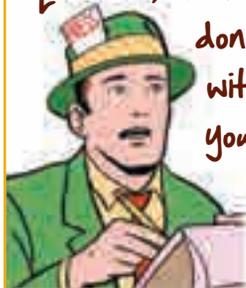
Our products were really boring: we produced legacy-systems modernization software. So we had to find a different way of getting attention. We decided that Relativity’s best buzz generator would be our staff of Russian programmers, who had formerly performed top-secret coding for the

Russian military and intelligence. We began selling ourselves as an exciting company with a James Bond edge.

The strategy worked. Even though we were located in what was then a technology backwater—Durham, North Carolina—we were getting as much attention as the hot dot-com startups during the Internet bubble. In just the first five years, we were featured on all the major TV networks and in more than 1,000 articles in major business publications worldwide. *Fortune Magazine* lauded us as one of the 25 “coolest” companies in the world. *The Wall Street Journal* featured us in more than a dozen articles—including two on its front page.

Most of these articles weren’t about our products but about our opinions. That was okay, because, as we saw, the credibility that you build as an opinion leader spills over into everything else that you do.

Focus on the needs of the journalist and not your own. No one is interested in your product. If a journalist asks you a question, answer it, and don't obsess with getting your product covered.



As a result, our mailboxes were flooded with inquiries from potential customers and job applicants. Our employees showed a much greater sense of pride. At a time when the worth of a technology company was measured by how well it was known, our market valuation increased by a factor of 12. We were able to raise millions in order to expand.

You may ask, “How does one get PR—and what does it cost?”

The good news is that PR doesn’t have to cost much. You don’t need to hire high-priced agencies that specialize in racking up big bills and spamming journalists. But it does require corporate executives—preferably the CEO—to take a proactive approach and to be open and available.

Here are my tips.

Read dozens of business publications. Understand what topics are newsworthy and which journalist writes about what topic. You will find that journalists are always under tight deadlines, have specific “beats” that they cover, and are looking to inform their readers of the latest trends and explain their meaning. Write to them and offer your insights. You will find that most journalists do write back to you.

Focus on the needs of the journalist and not your own. No one is interested in your product. If a journalist asks you a question, answer it, and don’t obsess with getting your product covered. Build a relationship over time, and it will likely pay off with your getting the coverage you are looking for.

If you do have something to announce, put it in the context of a “news hook.” Make your message timely and relevant to what is happening in the industry or the world.

Don’t ignore small or regional publications. You may want to be in *The Wall Street Journal*, but it isn’t likely to cover you until you have built great credibility. Your best starting point is small, industry-oriented or regional publications. They are a lot easier to approach and will likely be interested in breaking your story.

Be available—even when you are busy. Journalists on tight deadlines need sources to quote as fast as they can get them. The first to respond usually get featured.

Be honest. You will find that journalists have excellent “bullshit detectors.” If you mislead them even once, not only will they never write about you in a positive way, they’re likely to tell their associates about their experience. I confide in journalists all the time. I have never had even one journalist report on something that I stated was off the record or was on background.

Be yourself, and express strong opinions. If you’re going to hedge your bets or be diplomatic, your message will drown in caveats.

When all else fails, write your own story yourself. The blogosphere has democratized journalism over the past few years, and there are hundreds of blog sites where you can post your opinions. You can even set up your own. If you keep it fresh and provide reasons for people to come back for more, you will find that you build a loyal following.

It doesn’t work as in the movie *Field of Dreams*: If you build it, they won’t necessarily come. That takes effort! So create the nice marketing plans, fancy logos, slick slogans, and great brand names. But remember that what really makes an impact is getting the word out. **N**

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