

Building  Equity  
with Public Relations

A white paper from Westside Public Relations  
[www.westsidepr.com](http://www.westsidepr.com)

## Competing in the Healthcare Marketplace

The U.S. healthcare industry is one of the most complex marketplaces in the world. It is sprawling, with 5,800 hospitals and 38,000 medical groups, yet also tightly regulated and increasingly standardized. At the federal level, the FDA regulates drugs and medical devices, while individual states license hospitals and regulate health plan benefits. In addition, agencies ranging from the Joint Commission to the American Medical Association set accreditation rules, define diagnostic terms and update billing codes.

Differentiating your brand will become more challenging as healthcare software and medical devices become increasingly standardized. For example, electronic healthcare records, largely unregulated for many years, now face new standards for functional capabilities and system interoperability.

## Building Brand Equity



No company really “owns” its brand image. A company can trademark its logo, patent its technology and lease its offices, but its brand image resides in the minds of its customers. Unless you engage in a well planned communications program, you won’t make any headway.

A successful campaign starts with basic awareness and builds into customers’ actual preferences. According to Bob Lamons, a B2B brand researcher, brand equity is achieved when customers and prospects cite “familiarity, specific positive attributes and purchase preference” for the company.

## Public Relations: The First Step

Marketing expert Al Ries recommends starting a marketing campaign with public relations because “to get something going from nothing, you need the validity that only third-party endorsements can bring.”

According to Ries, advertising has proliferated so extensively in recent years that it is now “almost universally ignored by its intended audience.” PR has become a powerful tool because it has credibility, and “ideas can move from the media into the mind of the prospect with little chance of rejection.”

Where does PR fit in today’s healthcare marketplace? Public relations is a fast-changing field and includes hundreds of techniques ranging from individual reporter contact and trade shows to blogging and mass distribution via nationwide wire services.

For marketers considering a PR initiative, here are six basic steps to follow.

## 1. Develop a message platform– and stick to it.

The typical consumer is bombarded with more than 2,500 commercial messages every day. The constant barrage of information results in many individuals tuning out all or most marketing messages. To make your company's voice stand out, you need a series of simple, self-describing messages that are repeated throughout all your marketing and PR materials. Sometimes called positioning statements, a message platform is a set of five to 10 phrases, each no longer than 25 words, that communicate the value or unique advantages of your company's products. They should be carefully crafted, easy for customers to understand and used consistently.



A message platform provides  
the mental hook for customers  
to receive and store  
company information.

The message platform should include statements about the company's technology, its position in the industry and the business case for customers. The statements should be based on facts and speak to customers' needs. Journalists, who read hundreds of news releases every day, become frustrated when they see marketing jargon they consider meaningless. Since the media will be one of your key audiences, it is a good idea to edit out "biz-speak" terms such as value-added, core competency, synergy, cutting-edge, feature-rich, process solution, paradigm shift and customer-centric.

## 2. Craft news releases to speak to customer needs.

The news release is not dead – it is as popular as ever. A leading business website reported that in 2009, more than 1 million news releases were distributed on Business Wire, PR Newswire and other news wire sites. News releases remain important because:

1. They remain the number one source of story ideas for reporters in all forms of media.
2. They account for a large portion of the content on social network sites like Facebook, Twitter and Digg.

Too many news releases fall flat because they just report events from the perspective of senior management. For example, a new product announcement may dissolve into a laundry list of obscure new technical capabilities. Or the new product is described in terms of “upgrades” to the old model.

New prospects don't care if Version 3.0 replaces Version 2.0. They want to know what kinds of problems your product solves. An effective B2B news release describes the new product not only in terms of what it does, but also how it solves a particular problem (e.g., HIPAA breach notification, ICD-10 conversion, inventory management). A highly effective news release, one that can create product preference, should include quotes from a customer and a description of results (actual or estimated).

The best company news sites display a steady schedule of news releases throughout the year, at least two to three per month. The steady flow of news releases over recent years should combine to create a company narrative of growth and increased technological sophistication. If the news site shows a “gap” or blank period, create “backfill” news releases and insert them in the vacant months to bolster the image of steady progress. News releases remain important because:



News releases, when posted regularly throughout the year, create a company narrative of growth and stability.

Your company news site should include positive news coverage and an orderly history of news releases, as well as case histories and company background information. These communicate the positive attributes of stability, growth and technical innovation that customers are looking for when making purchasing decisions.

### 3. Earn a first-page listing on Google.

Today, any effective campaign to increase product awareness must include search marketing. For marketers with limited resources, the challenge becomes choosing the search terms to focus on and whether to use organic or paid search. With paid search, you can guarantee your placement on the terms you bid on; however, paying for a top listing on valuable keywords can get expensive. Most marketers consider a high listing in organic search preferable because potential buyers look at the “earned” search listings first and tend to give them more weight than paid ones.

An effective PR campaign will increase your company’s organic search ranking – ideally to one of the top 10 or 20 listings (important because many readers don’t go beyond the first page of listings).

A carefully written, search-optimized news release distributed on a major news wire will quickly increase your ranking under key search terms, often into a top 10 spot. That’s because the release will automatically be published on dozens of high-traffic sites. If you have included the proper hyperlinks, you will also obtain hundreds of valid back links to your website.

Unfortunately, too many companies do not structure their news releases properly; nor do they distribute them effectively. Too often, they sit on the company website, fading into obscurity.

To maximize your news release for search:

- Focus on one set of keyword phrases per release;
- Keep your headline to 65 characters or less;
- Insert two different URL links to separate pages of your website;
- Include links to images (logo, photo, and video).

When drafting the news release, remember that prospective buyers are looking for solutions to specific problems, not company names. They are looking under terms such as “HIPAA breach notification,” “pharmacy inventory management” or “employee scheduling.” In healthcare, these two- to four-word phrases make the most effective keyword phrases. Single words like “hospital” or “pharmacy” are too general to be of much value in search marketing.



A lost opportunity: 85% of news releases are distributed without hyperlinks.

## 4. Engage with selected social media.

“First, do no harm,” a key tenet of the Hippocratic Oath, originated in ancient Greece. It could also be applied today when implementing social media strategy, particularly for a company with a limited budget. A company blog showing only three posts from six months ago will not leave a favorable impression.

A Forrester Research report of 90 enterprise-sized companies found that the majority of corporate blogs kept by B2B firms fail to attract readers outside the company. A major reason for the failure of most corporate blogs is that the marketing department simply didn't have the resources to post cleverly written, fresh content on a daily basis. The Forrester report found that 56% of the company blogs simply “regurgitated old company news.”

B.L. Ochman, publisher of [whatsnextblog.com](http://whatsnextblog.com) and a consultant for many Fortune 500 companies, reports that she is regularly approached by companies who want a CEO blog, and “nine times out of 10, I talk them out of it.”

She says a good corporate blog must have a personal voice and the executive must be willing to post two to three times a week. A meaningful blog post takes two to four hours to research and write, thus entailing a minimum time commitment of six hours a week for the executive. Few CEOs have that kind of time available.

One alternative for an executive who has only a limited amount of time but wants to get started in social media is to selectively engage with a few well-read industry blogs. Monitor the blogs closely, and when one posts a news item relevant to your company, draft a short article (e.g., 200-400 words), using your name and title in the byline.

Five of the more popular and longer-running blogs that cover healthcare information technology (and that accept contributed articles by vendors) are:



- Matthew Holt's The Health Care Blog
- HIStalk
- Neil Versel's Healthcare IT Blog
- The Healthcare IT Guy
- EMR Daily News

## 5. Build credibility with case histories & bylined articles.

A good case history represents one of the ultimate applications of third-party endorsement. The very best case studies show your product in use at a customer's organization, and include results and quotes from users.

Most case studies are divided into four sections:



1. Problem
2. Product selection
3. Implementation and training
4. Results

The more specific and detailed the case study, the more effective it will be. Companies with products in use at highly protective organizations (e.g., Mayo Clinic, Kaiser Permanente) may not be allowed to use the customer's name. In this case, you may need to go with a "blinded" or generic description of the client (e.g., a 250-bed hospital in southern Nevada). You will not be able to include customer quotes, but you may still have enough information about training and results to create a meaningful case study.

If you are a startup without a long track record, or have a product that lacks a highly successful implementation, bylined articles in key trade publications offer a way to establish thought leadership.

These articles, which can run under the byline of a CEO or CTO or other senior executive, fall into two types: first, an "under the hood" explanation of how a new technology can be applied to solve specific problems; and second, a guest opinion article discussing an important business issue. These do not have to be controversial opinions. For example, almost everyone is in favor of lowering healthcare costs, reducing medical errors and improving efficiency in the delivery system. Editors are always looking for executives who can offer a fresh perspective on these kinds of issues. Most guest opinion articles include a photo of the executive, so it is a great way to boost the individual's recognition.

Once they are published, bylined articles can have a long "shelf life," and often continue to show up in search queries several months after they were initially published.

## 6. Review, revise, relaunch.

All public relations campaigns should be reviewed at key points to determine whether they are accomplishing their initial objectives. In many cases, discussion of company products with editors and other opinion leaders yields valuable information about perceptions or market trends. Sometimes this new information can be used for “midcourse corrections” to marketing materials or PR tactics.

Measuring the impact or success of a PR campaign, particularly one with a modest budget, can be more difficult than evaluating an advertising buy, which can be quantified in terms of cost-per-thousand reached.

One popular and low-cost measurement tool for news coverage is Advertising Value Equivalency (AVE). This helps evaluate the benefit to a client from the media coverage obtained through a PR campaign. AVE is generally used to measure the size of the coverage gained and its placement, and to calculate what the equivalent amount of space, if paid for as advertising, would cost.



Generally, marketers use a multiplier of 3x to 5x to allow for the greater credibility factor of news coverage over advertising. If a full-page ad in a leading healthcare monthly magazine costs \$10,000, a single, major news article might be worth \$30,000, given an AVE of 3x.

The ultimate test of the public relations program should be: Is it helping drive the business? Are we getting positive news coverage in key publications? Has our organic search ranking increased? Are we driving traffic to the web site?

Creating brand awareness and product preference is not a destination; it is a journey. The challenge for marketers is to anticipate and manage the changing expectations. By focusing on your message platform, you can communicate your product's advantages to your customers. Building and maintaining brand awareness can make a critical difference in a crowded marketplace.

Westside Public Relations is a leading provider of marketing services to healthcare technology companies across the country. Founded in 1999, the agency has served hospitals, insurers, HIT software vendors and medical device makers.

For more information, see [www.WestsidePR.com](http://www.WestsidePR.com),  
or contact [jharris@westsidepr.com](mailto:jharris@westsidepr.com)

O: 310-398-5565 C: 310-780-7107