

Digital PR: How to Define What 'Good' Looks Like & Drive Measurable Gains via @lauralhampton

Failure.

This concept comes up from time to time in digital PR.

And lockdown – with its many webinars, social media updates, and the inherent challenges of the media landscape right now – has brought the idea of expectations to the forefront once again.

There are various viewpoints around this.

Some webinars/events/content have spoken of unfair expectations and the notion that the campaigns we publicly celebrate could be setting false ideas of what's possible.

At the same time, digital PR is a difficult job – and for good reason!

Link building and the more traditionally SEO-based techniques that underpin any good link acquisition strategy are relatively straightforward.

But the value of digital PR lies in its ability to **earn** links from highly targeted, high quality, important publications that drive equity and move the needle when it comes to rankings, traffic, and sales.

Rather than suggesting we be more open about failure, I

believe we, as an industry and as individual practitioners, have an opportunity to improve the way we set expectations and to target success through our strategies.

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The purpose of this post is to explore that topic and hopefully inspire some more discussion on ensuring our craft continues to evolve in a positive way.

Redefining Failure

In the many webinars and social chats I've attended through lockdown, one of the common themes has been that of perceived failure in digital PR.

What is usually meant by failure is that the campaign has failed to live up to the expectations that, if we're completely honest, we've put upon ourselves.

This notion that every single campaign will gain widespread national coverage is the one many of us seem to cling to when we commence our own outreach, and when it doesn't happen, we feel bad.

But this isn't about what other people/brands/agencies are shouting about on social media, nor is it about the highly linked campaigns celebrated at awards events.

It's about us. As individuals.

Deciding that what we see external to ourselves is what we should strive for internally.

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Not achieving a million links every day is not a **failure**.

Not meeting client KPIs, however, is.

Setting Expectations

One of the most valuable lessons I've learned (in my decade, plus a bit, in this industry) is to always set clear expectations.

If you/your client don't know **what good looks like**, it's difficult to know when you get there, right?

It's a simple premise, but one that holds true in digital PR more than (I'd argue) most professions.

That's because the scope of what can be achieved is so vast but the reality still remains that if we want to celebrate, we need to know what we're aiming for.

This means setting clear KPIs (key performance indicators) with your client/team. What are the metrics we need to address to understand how well a project is going?

Defining Our 'Owned Goals'

One concept I've found works really well in setting expectations is to define the goals that we as digital PRs can genuinely affect.

Now, this doesn't mean the goals set here are going to be **easy**.

It isn't an easy job.

That's why it's full of such amazing people.

Celebrate the struggle.

What it does mean is taking ownership of those things that,

bottom line, we're paid to do.

That might mean we need to measure ourselves against KPIs relating to:

Number of Links

That's the crux of it, right?

As link builders / link earners / PRs, much of the time our job exists with the purpose of gaining links to our/our client's site.

Simple.

Did they include a hyperlink to our target website?

Yes?

Excellent – celebrate!

No?

Meh, try again.

The number of links needn't be tens or hundreds or thousands.

In fact, on the basis that Google assesses how **natural** a link profile is as well as how good its links are, the benefit of a consistent though lower volume link acquisition is arguably greater than that of flash in the pan mega-wins that drive hundreds of links to one-off campaign pages.

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(In fact, I have a deep-down fear that one day Google could just say, "You know what, that's your lot, we're no longer valuing massive influxes of links into orphan pages" and boom – a whole bunch of PR campaign value would be lost. But, I digress...)

The number of links should be specified, either with actual numbers (we're aiming for X links) or with, at the very least, articulation of the need – which usually comes down to whether the website will benefit most from **more** links or a **higher quality** of links.

How do you know?

Well, for me, I focus on what the data tells me.

So tools like Ahrefs will show quite clearly the quality and size of the existing link profile.

If the website has a lot of links already but they are not of great quality, it would benefit from (maybe a disavow and) high quality, relevant links to address that balance.

If the website doesn't have many links at all, it's likely they need more.

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And, coming from a starting point of having not many, it's likely they'll struggle to achieve super high DR links, so the focus is more on high DR/DA.

Some agencies/businesses also use link scores, which is a concept I'm really interested in and would love to know your thoughts on in the comments.

Quality of Links

On the whole, the links we achieve are the ones we seek.

OK, scratch that. In the early stages of a campaign, the links we achieve are the ones we seek.

What I mean here is that a campaign may snowball and pick up links organically, but in the outreach stage, we're targeting

specific publications.

So in this way, we take ownership of the quality of the links we aim to gain, which I would measure in terms of DR (or DA).

Of course, quality isn't just about a score out of 100...

Relevance of Links

This is (I believe) more difficult to quantify (let me know if you have a way though!).

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The relevance of links is so important, especially in light of Google's E-A-T focus, so ensuring the publications we target to give us links are relevant to our brand and topical focus is a really key part of what we should be doing as PRs.

One framework I like to use to help with this is that of circles of focus.

It encourages us to define the topics of greatest relevance to us/our clients at the core and then to agree on the topics we're willing to explore one or two steps away from that.

The further away from the core topic we get, the higher up the marketing funnel the consumer is likely to be.

We also ensure the topic is relevant to some level of the funnel and never completely irrelevant to the brand.

Placement of Links

The placement of links refers to where on the site the publication linking to you targets its link(s) – whether it's going to the homepage or to the campaign page or to the product page.

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If we think about how links pass value, perhaps comparing it to a champagne fountain (pour in the top and the champers runs down), we can visualize how the passage of equity will benefit our/our client's site.

So if we're trying to affect broader goals relating to the ranking position of a specific page, for example, we'll want to:

- Consider whether we're trying to earn links to that page or whether it makes sense to drive links to an adjacent page.
- Recognize the reduced value that will pass through, crafting strategies that drive as much value as possible so the internal link equity loss is not a problem.

Defining Our 'Shared Goals'

The shared goals refer to those wider aspirations we're trying to affect with our actions, that we as digital PRs might not directly control.

This might be:

Keyword Ranking Positions

The concept of building links to drive ranking improvements is the very basis of digital PR as a discipline, so it's not uncommon to work on campaigns where the ultimate goal is to drive better keyword visibility.

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The important thing here then is to ensure that your PR team

works closely with your SEO team to define the keywords you're trying to improve.

This might be a specific keyword, or it might be a set of keywords, such as a category of products on an ecommerce site, or the topical focuses of a content hub.

Traffic

Traffic to a site is often part of the wider aspirations of a brand.

By focusing on increased rankings and visibility, the traffic to the site will likely be expected to improve.

It is possible to be more strategic in your thinking here than just more traffic.

I'd argue the PR team should be fully briefed on aspirations from SEO, wider marketing and the business in general around the **type** of traffic to be attracted.

For example, there might be a specific set of products that you/your client wants to sell more of, perhaps based on:

- Profit margins.
- Warehouse space availability.
- Or maybe you're looking to move into a new market.

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Similarly, it might be about attracting a type of person, using data to identify that the decision-makers around a purchase are typically of a certain demographic or job title, then targeting campaigns to those personas to reap greater rewards in terms of sales and revenue.

A technique you might use to support this is to review your data.

Utilizing audience insight from the likes of GA, reviewing CRM data, conducting audience profiling, investing in Mosaic data, and so on can inform you as to the audience types with the greatest propensity to buy and the greatest value when they do.

Sales

Similar to traffic, it's likely you're trying to drive more bottom line sales but again, let's not stop there.

Rather than knowing we want to drive sales, let's be more granular in our exploration of what that looks like; is it **more** sales, or **more sales of something specific** or **higher value** sales?

We had a client once who was running out of physical space in their warehouse due to having so many garden tables still in stock.

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A PR / PPC campaign was employed to focus on that specific product, this freeing up the space to fit more, new products. It's not always just about 'sales'.

A Note on 'Shared Goals'

The reason these goals are **shared** is that they're not solely influenced by PR.

You can build all the amazing links in the world but if the site isn't technically sound or the content isn't up to scratch, it won't rank.

You can drive all the visitors to your campaign but if the product you are trying to sell goes out of stock or isn't of good quality, or the conversion journey is too difficult, you

can't expect PR alone to drive sales.

Essentially, the shared goals make us more strategically aligned and help us to get the most possible value out of our activities.

Not Every Goal Is an End Goal

In the same way that savvy marketers recognize the value of contributions higher up the marketing funnel as well as the bottom line conversions, those investing and working in digital PR should recognize the contribution of actions that lead to their bottom line goals.

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What I mean by this is that we need to be great project managers.

We need to plan out our campaigns to allow us to give our clients/teams visibility over the roadmap to success as well as the destination.

This allows us then to make judgments according to things like our progress against that roadmap.

For example, if you are part of an agency/team that reports monthly, and you're investing in a campaign that spans multiple months, it's still important to have check-in points along the way such that you can report back monthly (or however frequently is appropriate to you) to say, "Yes, we're on track."

It's also about bringing everyone along on that journey.

If all we ask our client/team to judge us on is the final destination, then we neglect to recognize the value in how we get there.

Specifically, we don't sell **links** (not least because that's against Google guidelines!)

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What we sell is the expertise and work that goes into earning those links.

For this reason, I'm an advocate for making and agreeing on annual plans with more granular quarterly tasks.

Using longer-term thinking allows us to be more strategic in terms of:

- Where we put our campaigns in the calendar.
- How we drive more value from them by revisiting them further down the line.

Gantt charts work well, project management systems like Teamwork or Jira work well, just having regular comms works well.

Whatever it is, ensure you've defined **what success looks like** even if you're not expecting to build links that month.

Plan for Success by Avoiding Failure

The reason I am so passionate about our discipline is that I believe the real craft lies in strategies that drive success in the context of the challenges we face.

It's not a fault of digital PR that not every campaign earns tons of links.

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It's a **characteristic** of digital PR that not every campaign will earn tons of links.

And, in my opinion, that's for good reason.

If earning links was easy, it wouldn't be called earning and it wouldn't hold value.

If every site gets every link how does Google know who should rank at the top?

In which case, it's not a fair representation of PR to suggest that any campaign fails.

Rather, it's important that we as PR practitioners account for the **journey** in reaching the destination.

Put simply, if we think that only 1 in 3 campaigns lands links, then:

- We need to look at why that is.
- We need to make sure we're running plenty of campaigns so we hit that 1 in 3 as frequently as needed to reach our end goals.

Of course, one key way we avoid failure is by defining success and setting clear KPIs as discussed throughout this post.

Thinking too about how we can get more links for each campaign, here are a few practical steps you can take:

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Create Layered Strategies & Split Tests

Whether it's running concurrent campaigns or campaigns with multiple angles, having a layered approach to your PR strategy can reap rewards in terms of perceptions of success and also

the consistent link velocity that's favored by the search engines.

For example, rather than putting all of your eggs in one basket, as it were, consider running various campaigns at one time such that you can target different niches/publications/audiences and then test the results.

Think of it as a split test for PR.

By framing it in this way for your team/client, you're setting the expectation that not everything will achieve the same levels of success, but that for every apparently "fail", you're learning a vital lesson that improves your hit rate moving forward.

I recently ran a survey-based campaign (I love these!) where every one of the 17 questions asked was a news story, no matter which way the audience answered, and that gave me 17 different angles.

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I then created additional angles from a number of these by simply applying the survey insights to other existing datasets.

In total, I've got about 23 different angles I could take depending on the news agenda.

And I've allocated enough time to explore the majority of those (I'll come back to this point).

Just having one story and hoping it flies just isn't sensible, especially at a time when the news agenda can change so quickly.

Giving Enough Time to Each Campaign

When you've got lots of campaign ideas and there's so much great inspiration to give you more, it's easy to see how PRs might plan to do arguably **too many** campaigns each year.

Though admirable, this can lead to not giving enough time to each one.

Every stage of a PR campaign is vital.

- **The research is vital.** Without it there's no inspiration or data-driven insight, no owned or shared goals.
- **The ideation is vital.** Without it, there's no ideas, no analysis of ideas, no stress testing of ideas (and if your team is anything like mine, there are no Oreos and Sensations crisps without ideation sessions!).
- **The asset creation is vital.** Without it, there's nothing to link to.
- **The media list building is vital.** Without it, there's no one to sell the idea to, no one to write the article.
- **The outreach is vital.** Without it, the message doesn't get out.
- **The follow-ups are vital.** Without it, there's no link rec, no identification of the right person to pitch to.
- **The review process is vital.** Without it, there are no lessons learned and no way to get better.

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But while every stage is vital, I've worked with enough digital marketers and PRs to know that it is daunting when you're faced with a client/boss who's asking you to do X, Y, and Z, and you know there's barely enough time for X but you agree to it anyway.

We need to be fairer to ourselves.

Not because PR takes ages, but because good PR comes from the **process**, and every aspect of that process is vital.

Every aspect is also worthy of being paid for – speaking from an agency perspective, it's important clients recognize that the expertise and knowledge that goes into those ideation sessions and so on – even the ones where we're depicted chilling on bean bags with cans of fizzy drink and tennis balls – are The Value.

No one's paying for links. They're paying for the process.

This means that we need to be crafting roadmaps that allow us enough time to:

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- Do our research.
- Conduct our ideation.
- Create our assets.
- Build our media lists.
- Do our outreach.
- Follow up.
- Review our work.

Think you can smash out some outreach in an hour?

You can't!

But rather than panic and say we can deliver more than we know we can, we should instead be confident in pushing back and setting fair expectations that are **fair for everyone**.

Analyze the Granular Data

It's great that we're so open as an industry that we're willing to share data with one another to inform and inspire.

But it's also important to note that what's true on an aggregated level for one agency won't necessarily be true on a granular level for you/your client.

By setting our KPIs and defining our owned and shared goals, we're articulating the context of our own success; as long as that's agreed with our team/client, we're in a good place.

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It might be, for example, that the average number of follow-ups that achieves success in a campaign is 3, or that outreaching on a Thursday morning at 8 a.m. works best, but those things can only be starting points for your activity.

Even if you've been in the PR game for many years, every client has their own unique journey to take, dictated by their own goals, aspirations, audience, marketplace, competitors, SERPs landscape, and so on.

So reviewing data on a client level and taking lessons from that is another thing that will drive better and better results as you continue to work together.

That data might be digital data like GA audience insights, keyword rankings, sales information, or CRM data.

Or it might be something less tangible.

We tend to avoid talking about fluffy metrics like how happy the client is.

But be brave enough to recognize that your client knows more about their industry and audience than you do and prepared to share in their celebration of a particular piece of coverage even if it's DR:1 and you personally just don't get it!

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Take insights from your data, learn lessons, and apply them to be better and better all the time.

Be Fair to Each Other & Fair to Yourself

There have been comments in some places lately that could be interpreted as a suggestion that PRs should reduce their public celebration of campaigns they're proud of.

For me, the notion that PRs would **not** share their successes is sad.

The celebration of success is something I value hugely about our industry because it's through seeing the successes of others that I can be inspired and energized.

Instead, let's **reframe** those celebrations.

We work in PR, so we're going to put a positive spin on our public comms.

But, as people within the industry, we can also note that there's a lot behind those comms that we don't know.

So a campaign got 10,000 links:

- How much time went into it?
- How much budget?
- How many angles did they push to get to that point?

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Rather than thinking, "Crikey, that sets some unrealistic expectations!", let's take it as, "What great inspiration for my next campaign."

Or, more simply, let's celebrate the win with our peers, congratulate them on work they're proud of, and move on if we don't think it serves us. It's all good!

It is only by defining **what good looks like** for ourselves and our clients that we can truly judge success or failure.

More Resources:

<http://tracking.feedpress.it/link/13962/13697768>