How to Do PR When You're Bootstrapped and Don't Have Connections

September 23, 2020 10 min read

Opinions expressed by *Entrepreneur* contributors are their own.

The startup life is nothing short of an adventure that is made of a series of mini-quests along the way. Those quests become increasingly difficult to complete when operating in bootstrapped mode, which forces entrepreneurs to do more with less. The ability to delegate any type of task becomes a luxury, and regardless of strong suits and weak points — everything needs to be taken on as a DIY project.

The initial steps behind most initiatives are easy enough to approach. It doesn't take much effort to set up email addresses, secure domains, and use a simple template to populate some kind of a decent website. But it's safe to say that most entrepreneurs behind tech companies come from more of a product-focused mindset, rather than one that revolves around marketing, advertising, and/or public relations. They quickly learn the hard way that it isn't enough to just have a stellar product. Word must spread of the product/service. But how can bootstrapped entrepreneurs launch PR and brand awareness campaigns, especially if they don't have clout themselves?

PR plans typically go hand-in-hand with online marketing strategies, because the goal is to get in front of as many eyeballs as possible while maintaining relevance in an effort to develop business opportunities over the long haul. One

cannot realistically count on virality to take over, or for quick wins to happen with effects that last.

There are many pieces to the puzzle, and it takes time to build brand awareness and credibility to be appealing enough to gain coverage from journalists. According to Alona Stein, the VP and Partner of award-winning global tech PR firm ReBlonde, "'Bootstrapping' means not having extra budget for branding campaigns, especially at the beginning. When a company makes the decision to bootstrap, it should utilize other marketing channels that can help them get the word out and fall on the right ears. PR campaigns need to be smart, accurate, and mostly results driven. The efforts and spending need to grow with the company's revenues. It's also important to note that the 'door opening' approach in PR is different from the 'brand awareness' approach that companies and entrepreneurs usually associate with PR. PR is good for brand building, but it's certainly not its sole purpose. The right story written by the most relevant journalist can have an incomparable positive impact on the company's road map."

PR is not a one-shot deal. It is an ongoing effort, which may seem painstaking at first, but once one gets into the groove of it, it can become second-nature to maintain.

Here's the tried and tested way to get around with tackling PR initiatives while bootstrapped.

Research everything before coming up with a strategy

Before even thinking about PR campaigns, entrepreneurs best have a good idea of their target audiences and a sense of their best marketing touchpoints. It falls under basic market research and helps set the stage in terms of how strategies should pan out. The next step is to clearly identify what the publicity goals would be, and work backward from there.

For example, if the goal is to attract potential customers or angel investors, further research would need to be conducted to determine where they spend the most time. Which media outlets do they keep tabs on? Which blogs do they frequent? The answers to these questions will serve as the basis of a media wishlist, which can later be broken down to tiers based on popularity or approachability.

Work on making social media work for you

Once the media wishlist is populated, the next step is to follow each of those outlets across the major social networks, both under one's personal and brand accounts. Between that and regular engagement, that would raise the likelihood of being noticed by writers, editors, bloggers, journalists and reporters.

On that note, it's crucial to ensure that valuable interactions are only done with the most relevant members of the media. According to an article by Global Speaker and Tech Journalist Hillel Fuld, "You need to make sure you know what you're up against. Who is the relevant journalist? Have they written about your space? Your competitors? Do they love them? Hate them? Are they active on Twitter?" After all, it would be counterproductive (and downright embarrassing) to pitch the wrong people who would be sure to give a hard pass.

As with any other relationship, social media relationships take time to build and require much effort in nurturing. When interacting with targets, it's important to not be self-serving. Instead, it would be far more meaningful to share/praise their content, share helpful information, and answer their questions. Members of the media are naturally most responsive towards people who demonstrate familiarity with their content.

Tastefully charm journalists over

To add to the previous section, it’s important to be tactful when trying to be appealing to journalists, and plan a few steps ahead as if playing a game of chess. People respond best when there are common interests.

So in an effort to be a few steps ahead of the conversational game, one can set up Google Alerts on relevant industry terms, to get a better understanding on who is focusing on what types of subject matter at any given time, and try to figure out a way to incorporate one’s own brand into that story as well.

For example, if the ABC123 Convention is the hot topic of the month which a journalist wrote about, an entrepreneur can use that as an opportunity to record a quick video on predictions, or write a post on the convention, and quote the journalist on it. Once the material goes live, the journalist can get a shoutout on social media for their insights. That might be a great segue into connecting on LinkedIn, and formally introducing oneself.

The bootstrapped startup life calls for wearing many hats, and one of those hats is the editor one. It always needs to be worn in order to capitalize on opportunities, so anything and everything can turn into a PR opportunity.

Master networking offline

Entrepreneurs must realize the significance of networking at events, even in the earliest of stages. After all, founding team members are the face of the product and the ultimate representative of the company. By sparking friendships with other founders, influencers, or even just general enthusiasts in the space, there would be a list of connections one can later refer back to for things such as important intros, references, promotional assistance, or even collaboration.

According to Yoav Vilner, the CEO of sales automation startup Walnut, offline networking is priceless. “As a repeat founder, I know the trials and tribulations of bootstrapping. That’s something I can always more/less identify with,” says Vilner. “Networking in events really is everything. People who may have otherwise been standoffish online walk into these events with an open mind, and make themselves more receptive. Many of the relationships that spark in industry events quickly become real friendships in which both parties help one another. I know time is not on the side of bootstrapped entrepreneurs, but they must network both online and off as much as possible.”

It would also be a great idea, if possible, to invite top tier connections to meet up over lunch, to further familiarize them with the product/service and its mission.

Consider making use of (free) newswire services

I have mixed feelings about including this point, but I’ll still put it in.

Newswire services can be a hit or miss, but when a hit, the best ones are the paid ones, such as Cision, PR Newswire, Business Wire, Newswire, Marketwired, and PRWeb. But when spending hundreds of dollars towards PR distribution is not an option, the free services are worth considering.

Some popular free services include PR.com, and NewswireToday.com, and PRlog.org. One cannot expect an abundance of coverage to come out of these, but it’s still better to be on those than not on any newswire service at all. If anything, it serves as a booster in legitimacy to have multiple news stories coming out of the same company on newswire services, and (to a degree) can also help with SEO.

Bear in mind, free newswire services each come with their own catch. They would ask for payment for things such as adding an extra hyperlink, adding an image, prominent placement in their directories, and of course for premium distribution services. Free listings are bare bones at best, but again, at least they're something.

Take the first steps towards becoming a thought leader

One thing all entrepreneurs have in common is an overwhelming sense of passion that inspired them to take that crazy leap of faith into the volatile business world. With that passion comes expertise, and strong opinions. They might as well turn those insights and opinions into credentials by becoming a published expert in the field.

In addition to publishing content (with consistency) in the form of a blog/vlog/podcast/etc, it is also recommended to reach out to industry publications/blogs and inquire about guest posts, or interview opportunities. This would be one of the ultimate clout-builders, and also inherently help put the bootstrapped company and its website on the map. By later pushing for coverage across a wider range of respected publications, the exposure to potential VC's-of-interest will rise considerably.

Promote/cross promote original content for visibility

Entrepreneurs should leverage their own networks and social media communities to share exciting updates from the company. These updates include press releases, media mentions, and of course- thought leadership pieces. Cross promoting would also be a great idea. For example, a new product explainer video may be uploaded on YouTube, uploaded onto IGTV, featured on

Facebook and LinkedIn, and even embedded into a post on Medium. The more exposure, the better.

According to an article by Jennifer Spencer, the CEO of Energent Media, “A strong company brand is vital to your success. Technology and online search engines make it easier than ever for customers to research companies before making a purchase. They’re becoming more discerning in their choices and selecting companies that are seen as trustworthy and authentic.”

One size does not fit all in the business world, especially not when it comes to PR campaigns. There are many variables to consider, which vary depending on the culture of the industry itself. At the end of the day, consistency is key, and the best PR messages are those that focus on the concept and potential impact of the product/service in a way that would enable the entrepreneur to deliver accordingly and live up to the hype.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/355997