



Making the most of networks and Public Relations (PR)



What are networks and PR and why are they important?

Public relations (PR) is essentially about establishing a positive connection between your organisation and its stakeholders. PR enables you to reach your customers, beneficiaries and key influencers in a variety of ways. In some cases, you and your team are the ones doing the communicating (e.g. public speaking at events) while other times this is done through third parties (magazines, online media).

Unlike advertising, public relations are not usually paid for, and therefore have a higher level of legitimacy. Public relations are so important to organisations that an entire 'PR' profession has been created to manage the process. However, it is something that every organisation can engage with relatively easily.

Social enterprises have an advantage in terms of public relations because there is always a need to be met or a social or environmental issue to talk about. If you manage your public relations effectively, you can benefit from people's interest in ethical, social and green issues. There is an increasing number of media covering such trends that may be able to promote various aspect of your business, from your projects to your social impact.

Public relations should be an integral element of your Marketing and Communication plan. It is also an ideal way to generate publicity about your social enterprise at little or no cost. It can complement traditional marketing objectives, such as attracting more customers or getting people to attend your events. It does this by helping you raise awareness about social issues, engage your stakeholders as well as build your reputation or improve your brand.

Networking is a great asset for successful public relations. It enables you to connect with like-minded people, build new business relationships and generate all kinds of opportunities. Networks are about the people you know, the people they know, and so on. They tend to group in clusters or communities of interest and are generally easily identifiable and working towards similar goals. Networks go much further than your list of marketing and business contacts. They are sometimes formalised through memberships, regular events, internal communications and, increasingly, online social networking groups.

Examples of networks include the Social Enterprise London network, the Social Enterprise Coalition, Social Firms UK, the Hub, CSR blokes and CSR chicks and the London Community Resource Network. Networks are a low cost activity and are the source of many business deals.

Public relations and networks are powerful means of communication that can help you to build relationships with your target audiences. For a social enterprise, this means the potential to yield opportunities for your business as well as engaging with or reaching out to key influencers or key opinion leaders. This can help you to influence opinions and agendas, raise awareness about your work and perhaps even lead to specific actions, such as invitations to join further specific networks, boards or access to events and contacts.

How do networks and PR work?

A PR campaign can have many components and it is up to you to decide which are the most appropriate for your business needs, given your time and budget constraints. Some social enterprises choose to delegate their public relations to agencies that are specialised in this field. In the third sector, these are agencies such as Society Media, ngo.media or Futerra. Most small social enterprises take care of their public relations internally, either through their marketing staff or as an ongoing effort from all team members, especially the founders themselves.

Here is a list of the types of things that could be included in your public relations:

- Developing relations with the media (e.g. trade journals, Third Sector publications such as Social Enterprise Magazine, Third Sector magazine, etc)
- Online communications and copy writing (e.g. newsletters, websites, blogs, twitter)
- Events (e.g. speaking opportunities, running workshops and sharing your experience)
- Writing articles or editorials (e.g. raising awareness about the social or environmental need you are tackling), contributing to other people's publications.

You may need a longer-term strategy for some of these, for example building relations with the media. Whereas others may be more straightforward but may involve paying a membership fee to an organisation or the price of registering to an event. On the other hand, a newsletter or Twitter feed may be fairly cheap and quick to write. However, it is dependent upon other parts of your business, such as having a good database of contacts and an exciting story or project to talk about.

Networks are also very important in terms of the information that comes to you. You can learn about innovations in your industry, trends, events and other important opportunities, such as potential new partnerships. Word of mouth is a very powerful means of communication – it saves time and crucially it is about information passing between people who have already established relationships of trust. This is worth its weight in gold.

How can your social enterprise get involved?

Before beginning your public relations campaign, you need to be really clear about several things. Familiarity with your business plan, and your vision, mission and values in particular, will help you to win hearts and minds. A robust marketing strategy and marketing and communications plan will also be required and will necessitate that you have:

- clearly defined your products and services
- set your aims and objectives
- identified your customers, beneficiaries and key influencers
- determined the key messages you want to communicate to each of your stakeholders through public relations (see our guide on Communicating key messages).

Make sure that your key messages are relevant, catchy and newsworthy. There are hundreds of news items every day so it is worth being specific and inspiring so that the media and other organisations will want to share your news. A good way to achieve this is to tell stories about people and add a personal touch. For example, instead of promoting the fact that you have been contracted to deliver a training programme to get homeless people back to work, you could tell the story of one of your beneficiaries, Bob, homeless for 12 years, whose life has changed after attending your programme, and who now works for a well known social firm in East London.

The next step is to develop an understanding of your audience. You may already have identified your stakeholders, but you also need to have an idea of where they will get their information from, what they are looking for and who they already trust. Once you know this, you can work out how to target them in the most efficient way.

For example, if you would like some press coverage, you will need to think of the media as your target audience as well as the readers. This means you should be aware of what is already current in the news and what kinds of stories a publication looks for. There is inevitably a balancing act in this kind of process in terms of what you want people to read as well as what a publication will accept as newsworthy.

Building and executing a full public relations campaign takes time and effort, but there are many ways that you can create an instant impact too. Make a list of all the ways you can think of that could open up new networks and build your PR. These could include:

- attending events (but selecting the right ones to attend!)
- hosting events of your own (but be aware of the time implication –this maybe something you can do in partnership with another group)
- presenting case studies and sharing best practice with your networks
- joining membership organisations
- making a list of 100 well networked people that you already know
- identifying individuals you would like to meet and then finding a way to speak to them

- joining relevant email lists to ensure that you keep up-to-date with what's coming up
- asking for a favour from a friend, a family member or a partner organisation if they have a useful or relevant contact in the media, in government or elsewhere.

Once you have a list, decide what will be the most effective means of helping you right now and what may help you more at another time. Finally, take action on the plan that you have made!

Things to look out for with networks and PR

- Promote anything news-worthy and keep several copies of any articles about you, your organisation, your projects and your team that have appeared in the press. You can show these to new people you meet or make reference to them in your marketing materials, newsletters and even tender responses.
- Aim to make life easier for the people who you want to help you. Journalists, for example, are extremely busy. Keep emails short and precise and perhaps even write the article for them!
- Keep your message consistent but relevant to your audience. Remember to relate to the people in your networks in the most appropriate way – professional or informal, but above all, meaningful and interesting.
- Take care not to linger longer than is comfortable when talking to people at events or in meetings. This includes your level of comfort as well as your ability to read theirs. Make sure you know how to bring the conversation to a close in a way that is polite and considerate.
- Make sure you have some means of follow up if possible, such as a further meeting, or a new piece of information to research. It is very disappointing to have made the effort of networking only to come away with nothing more than a few pleasant conversations.
- Networks and public relations can also work against you so the more people know about you, the more people can become aware about the things you would rather they did not know. So make sure that you are above reproach by ensuring your organisation meets legal requirements, has the right policies in place and is able to manage the risk of being in the public eye.
- Finally, always remember to keep business cards on you and remind your team to do so as well.

Further information

Visit the Social Enterprise Magazine website :
www.socialenterprisemag.co.uk

View the Society Media website:
www.societymedia.co.uk

Visit the Ngo.media website:
www.ngomedia.org.uk

View The British Library Business and IP Centre website
www.bl.uk/bipc

Visit the Social Enterprise London and London Social Enterprise Network website:
www.sel.org.uk

View the Social Enterprise Coalition website :
www.sec.org.uk

NHS Social Enterprise Network:
www.networks.nhs.uk/networks/page/155

Social Firms UK website:
www.socialfirms.co.uk

Visit the School for Social Entrepreneurs website:

www.sse.org.uk

CAN and CAN's free national directory of UK social entrepreneurs, social enterprises and enterprising charities:

www.can-online.org.uk

Visit theThird Sector magazine website:

www.thirdsector.co.uk

Look at the LinkedIn website, for online networking for professionals:

www.linkedin.com

Read our guide on Identifying your stakeholders:

www.blondon.com/SocialEnterprise/SettingUp/Firststeps/Identifyingyourstakeholders.aspx

Read our guide on Vision, mission and values:

www.blondon.com/SocialEnterprise/SettingUp/Settingobjectives/Visionmissionandvalues.aspx

Read our guide on Collaborations and Partnerships:

www.blondon.com/SocialEnterprise/Operations/Planning/Collaborationsandpartnerships.aspx