



WHITE PAPER

Press releases as lead generators

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PR Newswire

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PR and marketing professionals who embrace the press-releases-for-lead-gen model will be able to demonstrate targeted, tangible success with almost unlimited potential for their clients.

The humble press release is working much harder these days. Once a vehicle for announcing news to editors, the press release is increasingly being used to influence outcomes – and even to generate qualified leads directly from a target audience – in the age of social media and search engine optimization.

In some ways, it's simple. If you were issuing a press release announcing, say, the release of a new smartphone, why *wouldn't* you include a link to your Web site enabling consumers on the Web to learn more or make a purchase? If you've created excellent original content – a white paper or webinar, for example – why wouldn't you issue a press release about it?

Savvy PR professionals – and even some marketers – are doing these things, and more. Based on interviews conducted for this white paper, they are targeting their press release audiences and measuring lead generation performance using internal CRM systems, social media monitoring analytics and tracking codes and services that provide insight into the number of people clicking on a link, downloading content or registering for an event. Further, they are creating their own branded, helpful content for their community of customers and prospects and using press releases (along with social and other media) to drive engagement with that content.

The result for their clients, PR professionals say, can be valuable leads obtained at very little cost, as well as an expansion of their clients' marketing databases.

Or, as Eric Biener, Vice President of Strategic Accounts at media and marketing company Ziff Davis Enterprise puts it, "The days of ad-hoc marketing/PR tactics are over. Everyone is accountable, and every investment should produce a return."

Based on interviews with PR and marketing professionals, this white paper explores many issues surrounding the growing trend of using press releases to drive demand generation, including:

- Why analytics and brand content are inextricably linked with successful lead generation programs
- How PR feeds lead generation and demonstrates true value
- How to make news by developing and promoting original content
- Using press release content in social media
- What PR professionals are doing to quantify return on releases

Analytics, brand content and tight budgets drive releases toward lead generation

Given that the value of press releases for demand generation seems clear, why has lead generation only recently fallen into the public relations community's orbit? In short, several planets are aligning that are transforming PR platforms into meaningful jumping-off

points for lead generation initiatives – and most of them are new enough that their influence is not widely or fully understood.

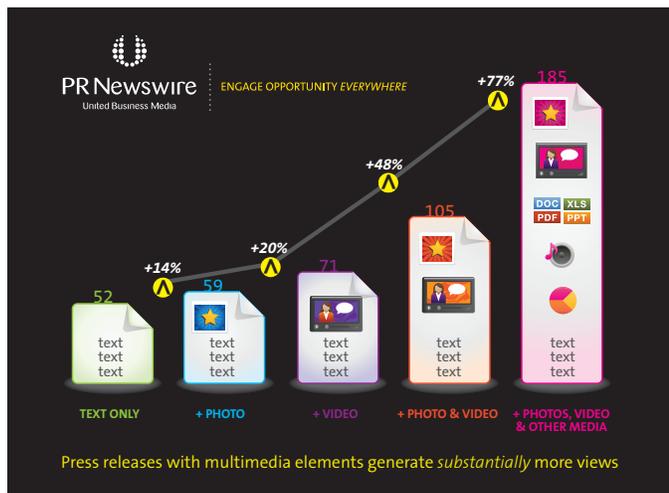
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Chief among these is the rapid emergence of social media and related analytical technology, but there are also tight budgets and the evolving perception of brand content. One of the benefits of leveraging press releases as demand generation vehicles is that the investment is relatively low, especially when compared with most lead generation marketing initiatives. More and more organizations are realizing that low cost combined with extensive reach make press releases fertile lead generation ground.

Discussions with PR professionals also reveal a focus on demand generation via press releases as a way to maximize existing budget dollars and justify further spending.

Importantly, though, at the same time, consumers' perception of a brand's content is rising as the Internet brings them more of that content and as brands raise the bar on the quality of the long-form content they produce.

For example, PR Newswire has seen significant results from using press releases and other multimedia engagement tools to promote its own white papers, webinars, blog posts and surveys. Rachel Meranus, Vice President of Marketing and Communications for PR Newswire, says that white paper downloads from press releases are in the hundreds, and since the company began using press releases to drive visibility for the PR Newswire blog, traffic and blog subscriptions have more than doubled.



“Public relations has always been about influencing audiences to action. The challenge, however, has been in quantifying the results and attributing any return directly to PR efforts,” says Meranus. “As content marketing grows in strategic importance and as marketers look for new ways to reach and engage interested audiences, press releases, especially those utilizing multimedia – photos, video, infographics – are quickly becoming a part of every marketing campaign.”

In fact, an internal analysis of PR Newswire data involving more than 10,000 customer press releases for a four-week period (Feb. 27 to March

26, 2011) showed dramatic increases in response to releases when multimedia was used. As the accompanying chart shows, adding a photo to a press release resulted in a 14% improvement over text-only releases; adding a video, 20%; both photo and video yielded a 48% jump; and, finally, using photo and video plus additional documents (such as PDF, Word or PowerPoint files) led to a 77% leap.

Adds Meranus: “And it’s not simply to generate media exposure, but to actually drive action – webinar sign-ups, white paper downloads, requests for demos or more information and so on. Press releases are relatively inexpensive, provide direct access to audiences via multiple channels and come with built-in analytics. You can’t get much better than that.”

Lead generation demonstrates PR’s value, too

Of note, interviewees explain that a by-product of generating leads via press releases is an overall increase in the sense of value that an organization gets from its PR activities.

Amy Fisher, Marketing Director at Hanley Wood, a media and information company serving the housing and construction industry, says, “Budgets are being slashed all over, so I really have to look hard at what I’m doing and how I’m spending money. Lead gen – or a measurable result tied to campaigns – is being looked at even more closely than before. It goes back to the traditional argument of demonstrating value and how you can be effective. Ultimately, if we can prove we’re contributing to the overall bottom line, there’s certainly an argument for us to get our budgets increased and do more to help with the growth of the business.”

“Lead generation has become a heightened priority among most of our customers,” says Fisher. While her organization is early on in its lead gen efforts, Fisher says the results

of using press releases to drive leads as part of an overall campaign on behalf of Hanley Wood advertisers are obvious nonetheless.

“You can see how certain messages result in spikes in Web page traffic, registrations and other things you’re focused on. Now we’re looking to see how we can measure this, analyze it and make it more effective,” Fisher adds.

Press releases deployed for lead generation can also broaden an organization’s reach through acquisition of new members of its target audience. Ziff Davis Enterprise’s Biener explains that the leads derived from press releases have translated into an increase in audience for clients as well as for ZDE itself.

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Vice President of Strategic Accounts, Ziff Davis Enterprise

“When we run PR with our events programs, we’re probably seeing an additional 2 to 3 percent join our programs outside of our database,” says Biener. “In the long run, this helps not only our clients, because they’re seeing a larger audience, but we’re also turning those people into our opt-in audience. Once they’re in our program, we’re able to sell them on what our value propositions are.”

Adds Jeff Soriano, Senior Manager of Demand Generation and Marketing Operations at PR Newswire: “The use of press releases in lead generation validates the impact that PR has on the bottom line and provides the necessary proof to demand larger PR budgets. What before was difficult to prove now has direct numbers associated with it.”

Releases help to leverage “brand” journalism

Another factor driving the use of press releases as a lead gen platform is the evolution of content marketing and content publishers. While traditional media companies were once considered the sole providers of “trusted” content, people are becoming more willing to consume and rely on content from a wider variety of “publishers.” Savvy marketers are tapping the expertise within their organizations to develop content rivaling any J-school graduate’s, with PR and marketing departments acting as editorial teams.¹

As the definition of content continues to evolve and more and more companies act as content publishers, press releases are being used to promote that content as well as to drive interaction with the content.

Audit, tax and advisory services firm KPMG, for example, regularly produces white papers and other resources for its clients. The company is now using press releases as a vehicle to broaden the reach of those resources, with the ultimate goal of inviting engagement.

1. *Marketing is content*, PR Newswire, December 2010

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Jennifer Samuel
Head of External
Communications, Global
Industries, KPMG

“We very often produce materials for our clients, including white papers, case studies, surveys and other thought leadership pieces,” says Jennifer Samuel, Head of External Communications, Global Industries, KPMG. “We often include links in our press releases to invite users to download a study, to go to our Web site to review the information there or perhaps to register to receive information. We do this as a way to invite engagement, to invite people to interact with us.”

Samuel says KPMG currently tracks page views and downloads, but adds that the metrics they use will get more specific in the future. “This data is increasingly becoming one of our key performance indicators in terms of our marketing and communications outreach,” she explains.

Beccy Blount, Online Marketing and Campaigns Manager at U.K. mobile billing and analytics company Bango, says this model is a more active form of lead generation.

“From a lead generation point of view, there are two different sides to it – press releases that communicate news can generate leads because people are interested in those areas. The other side is direct lead generation,” says Blount. “We’ve written quite a lot of white papers that we’ve promoted in a number of different ways, including press releases around the topic of the white paper. The press release will include a link that will let people download more information about a specific topic.”

A push-pull model elicits more leads

The use of press releases as a lead gen device can also result in a valuable push-pull that influences results.

In one example, Venafi, a technology vendor focused on managing encryption certificates on the Web, used press releases to drive registrants to a webinar. Potential participants were invited to register for the webinar via a link in the release, but they were also invited to answer two questions: “Has your organization experienced downtime due to a certificate failure in the past 12 months?” and “Do you have a strategy in place to prevent this kind of loss in the future?”

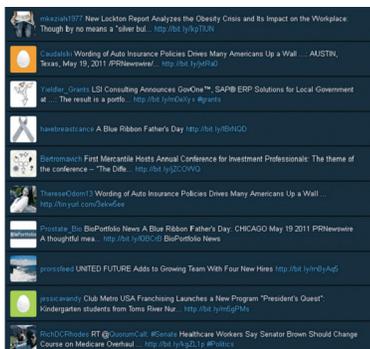
This approach provided Venafi not only with a more qualified audience, but also with data that was used to inform the webinar – a win-win in anyone’s book.

“The webinar pulled more than 200 people, and we knew the demographics of the people responding. We were able to announce in the session that a whopping 78% of organizations had had a failure in the past 12 months and an astonishing 90-plus percent still have no strategy to keep it from happening again,” explains Cheryl Snapp Conner,

Managing Partner, Snapp Conner PR. “So our next press release, for the next webinar, announced that result. Amazing lead generation.”

“Releasing” demand via social media

Also driving the use of press releases as lead generators are social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. In the halcyon days of print media, the pass-around rate of a publication was as important as the actual subscriber base. Today, information gets that same kind of pass-around when it is liked on Facebook, retweeted on Twitter or otherwise shared among a group of people in a social network.



For example, the adjacent screen capture from the Twitterfall analytical application shows tweets relating to 10 different press releases that were tweeted out *within a three-second period* on May 19, 2011.

Research shows the value of social media venues for customer acquisition. A January 2011 survey of 644 marketers found that of those marketing content via LinkedIn, 57% had acquired new customers through that social network. Fifty-seven percent of those using blogs also acquired new customers, as did 48% of those using Facebook and 42% of those using Twitter.²

However, the interviewees agree you can't just cut-and-paste a press release into a Facebook update – and nevermind a 140-character tweet. Instead, the message must be crafted specifically for the platform.

What is typically most effective in generating interest and response from social media venues is content that demonstrates expertise in a subject. Interviewees for a separate white paper devoted to this topic consistently describe it as “fact-based,” “research-oriented,” “instructional,” “actionable” and “news you can use.”³

The trick, says Ted Kohonen, Vice President, Integrated Marketing for brand activation agency Stein + Partners, is to “atomize” in-depth content into “easily consumable and digestible parts that make people want to know more.” That typically means focusing on a key fact or statistic from your release and linking back to it from the social post.

Taking a data-centric view

Hard metrics are becoming increasingly important as press releases continue to drive lead generation. The use of applications such as Omniture and Google Analytics can help professionals determine how many times a link was clicked on, where users originated,

2. *The State of Inbound Marketing*, Hubspot.com, February 2011
3. *Content: marketing “currency” in social media*, PR Newswire, May 2011



their navigation path once they got to the site, what products (such as white papers and e-seminars) they engaged with and how long they stayed on the site.

PR consultant Brenda Christensen has had success embedding links in press releases to specific pages on Web sites to drive sales leads; she uses designated pages that can track generated leads back to the press release. “We will write about a special offer and assign the landing page a ‘/pr’ at the end of the URL so we know it came from the press release,” Christensen explains.

Analyzing the level of engagement with links embedded in press releases can help PR pros **fine-tune the audience** for, and tone of, future promotional campaigns.

Such a data-centric view helps PR professionals drive and target further promotional efforts, say interviewees.

Paula Brici, a senior public relations consultant focused on technology, says the best metrics are those that give you insights into how to tweak future press releases for improved pickup and lead generation. Analyzing the level of engagement with links embedded in press releases can help PR pros fine-tune the audience for, and tone of, future promotional campaigns.

Conclusion: the rise of brand content and analytics creates a major lead gen role for press releases

The PR community is connecting the dots among the changing content landscape, the power of search engine optimization and the advances in technology that enable granular tracking and analysis of audience behavior. Even PR professionals who have only just begun to use press releases as a lead generation tool are already seeing a clear and significant return from their efforts.

PR and marketing professionals who embrace the press-releases-for-lead-gen model – and apply relevant analytics to deliver and drive results – will be able to demonstrate targeted, tangible success with almost unlimited potential for their clients.

Key Takeaways

- **PROVOKE** interest for content, like white papers, by including excerpts in your release and linking to a full version that requires a form submission
- **PROMOTE** webinars and events by introducing the panelists and linking to speaker bios as well as a registration page
- **CREATE** an online buzz by sharing in and linking to social media channels
- **EXPAND** your reach, audience and visibility by optimizing your release for the right keywords
- **USE MULTIMEDIA** to maximize your opportunity for viewer engagement and expand your reach into new channels
- **INFORM** prospects and customers about new products and services and link to more information or a way to purchase them
- **ATOMIZE** in-depth content into easily consumable bits that make people want to know more
- **MONITOR** engagement with products via press releases through the use of analytical applications
- **USE DATA** distilled from relevant analytics to inform the development of future communications (and demonstrate the value of PR and marketing)
- **USE SOCIAL MEDIA** in a purposeful way, targeting messaging and interaction with users specifically for social networking platforms

About PR Newswire

PR Newswire (www.prnewswire.com) is the premier global provider of multimedia platforms and solutions that enable marketers, corporate communicators, sustainability officers, public affairs and investor relations officers to leverage content to engage with all their key audiences. Having pioneered the commercial news distribution industry 56 years ago, PR Newswire today provides end-to-end solutions to produce, optimize and target content – from rich media to online video to multimedia – and then distribute content and measure results across traditional, digital, social, search and mobile channels. Combining the world's largest multi-channel, multi-cultural content distribution and optimization network with comprehensive workflow tools and platforms, PR Newswire enables the world's enterprises to engage opportunity everywhere it exists. PR Newswire serves tens of thousands of clients from offices in the Americas, Europe, Middle East, Africa and the Asia-Pacific region, and is a UBM plc company.

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