



Does Good Tech Need PR?

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Behind the scenes of many tech blogs these days, there's a rat race for attention, with PR agents struggling to overcome the noise of feeds, news sites and other agents in order to get coverage for their clients. Tiny web tech companies pay \$5k, \$10k or more per month for PR agents to work the media, old and new, in hopes that it will help them find wider audiences. Big companies spend far, far more on PR.

Is that really necessary? Won't great technologies find their own audiences when their undeniable value is discovered by one person and passed on to the world at large?

Whether or not a PR agency is essential is something many startups struggle with. We argue below that there are strong arguments both for and against hiring a PR firm when you're a web startup. Ultimately, we think PR agents have their place in the industry and there are many of them we really appreciate.

Image above: [PR Stereotype](#) (<http://www.briansolis.com/2007/05/pr-in-face-of-web-20-and-social-media.html>) , by [Brian Solis](#), who is a class act in PR.

Wine and Dine 2.0

Blogger Robert Scoble made a post this morning [asserting that great technology will find its audience naturally](#) (<http://scobleizer.com/2008/08/11/pr-less-launch-kicks-off-a-stack-overflow-of-praise/>) , through word of mouth. Robert told a story about his discovery of [Stack Overflow](#) (<http://stackoverflow.com>) . Someone he trusted had visited the site, loved it and then passed on the word. While that particular example isn't the best one, Stack Overflow founders Joel Spolsky and Jeff Atwood are two of the most well-known software developers in the world right now, the basic premise is worth considering. Does great technology need PR?

Technology gets a lot of PR in the world of new media. If the thought of bloggers put in limos, driven around big cities and drowned in champagne seems absurd to you, rest assured - it happens. More often, though, tech bloggers get drowned in standardized emails.

There are, however, some really good PR people reaching out to bloggers. What do they do for their clients?

The Good Sides of PR

Help with messaging.

Good PR agents work with companies well before a product launch and help them develop a coherent explanation of their technology. Developers are sometimes wonkish, executives long-winded and few people in the world can describe what they are doing as clearly as a trained professional bringing a fresh pair of eyes can.

Unfortunately many PR people don't act as barrier enough between CEOs and press. Some can tell almost the whole story themselves and get back to a writer with quotes or replies as needed. That's great.

If you don't need a PR agent to help you tell your story - that's fantastic. Unfortunately, many companies do.

One of our favorite PR people in terms of help with messaging is Josh Dilworth, from Porter Novelli. He understands and is interested in the technology he represents.

Good communication skills.

As a product launch approaches, dedicated PR people should be unbeatable when it comes to doing the leg work of outreach in a capable way. They should know how the media being targeted operates, they should be good person people and they should communicate like people who specialize in communication with media, new and old.

Company founders have spent their time developing other skills, and many in-house marketing people would probably be higher-paid PR people if they had the same skill-set themselves. It's hard to know whether marketing or PR people deserve more disdain - even people in the businesses will tell you that, bless their hearts. None the less, both are in some cases very good at what they do.

If there is a circle in hell for marketing and PR people it will be because they often hype businesses that they couldn't possibly genuinely believe in. If that's enough to go to hell for, though, a whole lot of us will be there.

Contacts

The primary value proposition of PR used to be getting column inches in print and for many clients that's still what's important. Getting top blog coverage is also a major coup for PR, though, and all these kinds of developed relationships are something PR people offer to

leverage for clients. They know the reporters and know how they like to be communicated with.

That can be true. Good PR people can take care of the details, be choosy about what stories to pitch which journalists with, etc. The intimacy of relationships are sometimes exaggerated, though, and the best PR people will simply show off successful placement of past clients in sought-after media outlets.

Looking at PR from the outside, it appears to be a strange line of work. A good PR person can be very good to have - it's a shame they are so hard to find.

Who's Good at PR?

Who are some PR people we like working with? One of our new favorites is Josh Dilworth, from Porter Novelli. He understands and is interested in the technology he represents. Erica Lee, of Strategiclee, is great to communicate with. **Jonathan Hirshon of Horizon PR knows the business as well as anyone.** Michaela Wilkinson of Dig Communications pays attention to how we prefer to be communicated with and we find her quite effective as a result. Neville Hobson is a rock star and a gentleman. Jeremy Pepper is usually fantastic at cutting through the b.s. There are many examples of good PR people in the industry, so please take our criticisms with a grain of salt.

The Down Sides

There is probably more skepticism about the necessity of PR people than there is about any other players in the tech startup food chain, except perhaps for Venture Capitalists.

Founders should make connections themselves.

Some people argue that company founders should be mixing it up with bloggers and journalists directly. They should be making those connections, taking the temperature of the market and media.

If company executives or marketing people have the time and the skills to do this kind of work themselves, the rewards would be substantial, no doubt. In many cases that's just not the case though.

It's expensive.

Paying the equivalent of a full time employee's salary, much less a high one, for PR work being done 1/4 time or less each week can really sting. Meeting an agency's heavy hitters, then getting matched with very junior agency members once the check clears can really bite.

In many cases, though, that's not how it goes. Horror stories can be told about almost any job title. All media related work is hard and wins are few and far between. For more than a few companies, good PR is money well spent.

Should Tech Be Able to Stand and Thrive on Its Own?

Ultimately, the biggest reason many people argue that PR agencies are unneeded is that great technology shouldn't need them. In some cases that's true. **Steve Rubel writes today** (<http://www.micropersuasion.com/2008/08/does-the-thrill.html>) that tech bloggers love to discover things for themselves and that's one reason why we often don't like PR. There's some truth to that too. Rubel, who works for one of the biggest PR firms in the world, also says the lack of enthusiasm is attributable to the fact that the vast majority of PR pitches aren't worth a piece of gum stuck to the bottom of your shoe. That's a relatively humble PR guy saying that.

Jeremy Toeman, a PR person himself, goes as crazy as a responsible PR guy can **in a post today about this question** (<http://www.stagetwoconsulting.com/7-silly-reasons-your-company-doesnt-need-pr-104/>). He mocks people who think their technology will market itself. To be fair, a number of his clients are confusing or insipid enough that we wish even his brilliant and charming self the best of luck in promoting them. We talk to quite a few PR companies representing companies that are either boring or that insist on having their PR reps pitch non-announcements that are boring.

One example worth considering is **Balsamiq** (<http://balsamiq.com>), a plucky little mock-up creator we wrote about after **it became profitable only 3 weeks after launching** (http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/balsamiq_mockup_creator_is_on_fire.php). It's an awesome little technology that fills a clear need and has taken off. Balsamiq caught fire without even getting any press before we covered it, much less without PR. Will it become a multi-million dollar acquisition that puts a team of people on the beach with cocktails for life? No, it won't. Will millions of people use it? Probably not millions.

The point is that great technologies probably do sell themselves. The web is mostly filled with bad technologies, though, and it's the job of the technology press to find the good ones, with occasional discoveries of greatness. Can PR people help us do that? They can. Is it worth the expense and loss of direct experience for many startups to hire PR people? It probably is.

That won't stop people from rolling their eyes at the mention of the profession, but we appreciate consistently being proven wrong by valuable, skilled PR professionals who assist in our hunt to find and write about good tech.

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