



EARNED MEDIA: ACHIEVING SHARE OF VOICE THROUGH THIRD PARTIES

INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW



Thinking of 'PR' simply in terms of media relations is a thing of the past.

In today's multichannel marketing environment, brands can't rely on media relationships or focus all their energies on pursuing editorial coverage.

Influential, independent media are still as important as ever. But they're just one of many communications platforms which need to come together seamlessly and consistently to tell your brand story.

This is what we mean by Integrated Communications: using all relevant channels to reach your target customers, command their attention, engage them with your messages and provoke a response.

This requires a joined-up strategy and a rich mix of relevant, interesting content that works across every category of media – earned, paid, shared and owned.

Here we look at how to communicate your story through earned media to build your reputation and gain share of voice.

EARNED MEDIA

A brand's biggest strength is its reputation and earned media plays a fundamental role in building and maintaining this asset. The more 'traditional' practices of PR, designed to generate independent editorial coverage in third party media outlets, remain fundamental to an earned media strategy.

Print and online coverage achieved through direct interaction with editors or through press releases, customer stories, feature articles, thought leadership and opinion pieces all fall under the earned media category. But, in today's multichannel communications mix, any independent mention of your brand in the public domain – for example in a blog or social media post – also constitutes earned media. Simply put, if you didn't pay for the coverage and you don't own the channel it appears on, then you've 'earned' the exposure.

Earned media is generally considered to be the most valuable channel when it comes to integrated communications, predominantly because customers and prospects tend to be more trusting of earned coverage compared to brand-owned content. Why? Because the material feels more credible for being independent and for the fact that it has been curated and published by someone not directly affiliated with your brand.

A proactive earned media strategy can also be a way of broadening your sphere of influence and reaching new, untapped audiences. And it's also about impact – an influential piece of media coverage is amplified whenever it is re-published in another title or shared on social media, increasing its chances of reaching new audiences and fresh business prospects.

The price of this high level of credibility is that earned media requires you to relinquish full editorial control over your content. Unlike 'paid' and 'owned' media (ads, website copy, customer publications, sales and marketing collateral, etc.), you have little or no say over an editor's interpretation of the information or content you share with them, or the tone and timing of the material they go on to publish. You can shape the narrative and supply content that reflects your message, but the ultimate outcome is in the hands of an independent third party.

Likewise, you have no control over what a customer or influencer says about you in an open forum such as social media. Your narrative and message can be directly altered by responses from the social community. (For more information on this, read our separate guide – *'Shared: Being B2B Social'*).



THE PATH TO EARNED MEDIA SUCCESS

To build a strong profile and maximise opportunities to achieve earned media coverage, you need to engage a broad range of communications tools and tactics, including:

MEDIA RELATIONS

Proactive outreach to key editors and a positive investment in long-term media relationships can establish your brand and spokespeople as a go-to information source for editors and journalists. You can foster these relationships in many ways: through regular face-to-face, phone and email contact, by hosting press events to support major announcements, and by cultivating connections at industry events.

NEWS

A sustained news stream comprising well-written corporate announcements, product launch information, event previews and other genuinely newsworthy material plays a significant role in raising visibility with editors. This helps to ensure your brand is featured in the news sections of the media outlets reaching your customers and prospects.

MONITORING EDITORIAL OPPORTUNITIES

By keeping an open dialogue with editors and proactively monitoring longer-range editorial opportunities you can identify the right openings for your contributed content, for example comments on particular industry issues, customer stories, opinion pieces. It also creates chances to connect editors and freelance contributors with individual subject matter experts within your business.

BYLINED MATERIAL

Editors may welcome contributions of bylined feature material on prominent industry topics or trends, provided it's objectively written and doesn't contain overt product promotion. An in-depth exploration of a topic from the perspective of a knowledgeable spokesperson that advances the reader's understanding could be well received.

OPINION PIECES

Opinion pieces bylined to a knowledgeable company spokesperson are a way of contributing authoritative, credible comment on industry topics and trends. They may help you to influence the editorial agenda in a certain direction, and can form part of a wider thought leadership strategy using a broader range of communications channels.

WHITE PAPERS

White papers are in-depth pieces of editorial content that fully explore an industry trend or technology development. This type of material can be of significant interest to B2B editors as background information or as a feature contribution, as well as forming part of your owned media strategy and lead generation activity.

CUSTOMER STORIES

Customer case studies are independent testimonials that describe the positive impact of your products and services on a customer's business. This content is valued by independent editors, particularly if they have the opportunity to speak with your customer directly for additional insights. The same content can usually be adapted for publication on your own website and social channels, and for use as sales and marketing collateral.

PRESS OFFICE

Once you've established relationships with media outlets you may be approached directly by editors looking for contributions around news stories or other topics. These are invaluable opportunities to build your profile and reinforce core messages. Make sure you're in a position to respond efficiently with valuable content, whether prepared text and images or exclusive access to a company expert.

TWO-WAY MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS

Leading B2B media publications can command significant respect among their readership, making them an important route to market if you want to reach decision makers in a specific industry sector.

However, the growing choice of communications channels and increased investment in digital and social media has tended to come at the expense of traditional B2B media spend. Some publishers have responded to this by blurring the traditional lines between editorial and advertising, to the point where coverage of anything other than the most significant news can become contingent on a commercial commitment to the title in question.

If the editorial vehicle is the perfect channel to reach your target audience then it makes sense to develop an integrated approach using a creative combination of commercial spend and content that is compelling for the readership.

With a sound mutual understanding of your brand objectives, the publisher's needs and the interests of the audience, you can work together to develop a beneficial relationship that delivers for everybody without compromising editorial integrity.

SIX STEPS TO MAXIMISING YOUR EARNED MEDIA POTENTIAL

1. Know your audiences and prioritise the earned media channels that can help you to target them most effectively.
2. Build and nurture relationships between editors and knowledgeable spokespeople who can bring your brand story to life. Be informative, interesting and – importantly – accessible.
3. Be proactive about keeping up a regular flow of meaningful news and feature content that addresses their needs.
4. Stay plugged in to the editorial agenda. Be aware of your industry's talking points, and be ready with a considered opinion when the opportunity arises.
5. Respect editorial integrity. Offer factual, compelling and objective material that is worth reading and sharing. Earned media is not the channel for marketing superlatives or overt product promotion.
6. Consider how to amplify earned media via your owned channels, and how to dovetail with a paid media strategy to maximise your campaign impact.

HOW CAN AD COMMUNICATIONS HELP?

We pride ourselves on the long-standing relationships we've built with multiple publishers and editors over more than three decades. Our work with them has delivered valuable earned media coverage for our clients across a wide variety of publications, building awareness, developing brand reputation, generating leads and driving commercial success.

These strong relationships give us market intelligence and insight that goes far beyond the news and feature pages of the magazine or website. With this expert knowledge, we can maximise all promotional opportunities using the full scope of each publisher's products, contacts and intellectual property.

Based on your objectives and available budget, we'll be happy to work with you and the right publishers to develop a range of initiatives to suit your communication needs. We'll develop and fulfil a tailored, integrated programme that uses today's rich media mix to maximise your ROI.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HOW TO WORK CREATIVELY AND ACHIEVE TANGIBLE RESULTS, PLEASE CONTACT HELEN TOLINO:

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