

Using Public Relations to Leverage Sales

PR as a function of brand awareness

Microsoft Business Solutions (MBS) launched a public relations policy in 1994, at that time under the name 'Navision Software'. Advertising and PR were the two key areas on which Microsoft Business Solutions wanted to build its brand awareness. The management opted to stimulate reporting about the organisation via a mix of press releases, customer testimonials and information sessions for the press. In that way, the progress of the company was "mapped out", and was also given "a face and a voice". That combination appeared ideal as a foundation for trust in a company that was still relatively unknown in 1994.

The company grew fast and the market learned that it had to concentrate on building up a partner network. MBS now has an extensive network of "value added resellers" providing custom solutions. Each reseller specialises in a particular business segment, such as distribution, transport, etc., which means that MBS can cover a particularly large area of expertise.

PR as a function of expansion

Once MBS had acquired considerable brand awareness, a new challenge arose. PR policy would be guided to support expansion by both MBS itself and the reseller channel. Therefore, the emphasis today is placed on clear positioning of the company in each market segment where it has a presence. The solution for this was user stories.

Patrick Dalle, Marketing and Alliance Manager MBS: "PR is better suited than any other marketing instrument to showing which solutions we offer and, above all, to build credibility."

PR methodology

Objectives:

- brand awareness;
- sales support;
- positioning.

Target groups:

- customers and potential customers;
- sales partners;
- employees.

PR resources

- press releases;
- customer stories;
- information sessions;
- interviews.

Measurement techniques:

- input measurement;
- output measurement;
- potential purchaser.

Return on PR:

- potential purchasers;
- market research;
- intuition.

Customer stories

Customer stories (a description of the entire implementation project, including the market-specific challenges) are written after an interview with the customer and used for all kinds of communication purposes. The information is 'recycled' as required (fact sheet, newsletter, seminar text, reference story on website, etc.). The texts are presented via the MBS Solution Center to partners, customers and potential purchasers as an extra means of persuasion; or journalists get the opportunity to re-work some of these texts in greater depth for a specialised magazine; this PR action is also an incentive for partners.

Credibility

Patrick Dalle : "Press articles are tremendously important. They give our solutions a certain credibility because the story is told in the words of a "third party", i.e. the customer. And the press acts as an objective filter. That creates credibility, a prime requirement for success in business."

Measurement provides knowledge

PR objectives and evaluations

MBS defines the PR objectives quarterly as a function of the press articles. The content and the nature of the article are important parameters. But "measurements" are also made, in order to evaluate the impact of a specific action.

Input and output

MBS measures public relations from the 'input' and 'output'.

Input: how many press releases, interviews and other PR actions are on the drawing board? These are then assessed in relation to the overall PR budget.

Output: how many articles have been published about MBS, and how do they relate to the PR actions and the PR budget?

The potential customer is the key element.

Besides measuring input and output, there is a third measuring instrument: the potential customer. When a potential customer contacts the company, he is asked how and why he contacted MBS. The Internet provides support in this task. It is quite simple to find out via on-line questionnaires why and how the potential customer is interested. In this way, it soon becomes clear whether and how public relations are an efficient channel in comparison with other marketing instruments.

About Microsoft Business Solutions

Microsoft Business Solutions, consisting of Great Plains®, Microsoft bCentral™ and Navision a/s, offers a comprehensive range of business applications that help small to medium-sized companies to keep in closer contact with their customers, employees, partners and suppliers. The applications of Microsoft Business Solutions automate complete business processes in finance, distribution, project accounting, e-commerce, human resources and payroll, manufacturing, supply chain management, business intelligence, sales and marketing management and customer service and support. More information about Microsoft Business Solutions is available on <http://www.microsoft.com/Businesssolutions>.

Return on PR

Patrick Dalle: "We understand that there are very ingenious analyses available to measure and evaluate the results of PR activities. But "measurement" alone can never be an end in itself, because that could be a handicap. In addition, that kind of analysis is extremely expensive and its value-added is limited. The combination of our 'simple' measuring system gives us a good insight into the usefulness and return of our PR policy, even if our assessment is partly intuitive, and based on incomplete information."

Katoenatie: public relations as an aid to recruitment

In the summer of 2002, the application of an MBS solution at Katoenatie was distilled into a user story and presented to various media. A strong brand name (Katoenatie) in combination with advanced technology for a clearly-defined sector was an immediate hit. The press articles triggered a wave of spontaneous requests for information from MBS. Meanwhile, based on those contacts, new contracts have already been signed.

Market research

MBS carries out market research from time to time. Recently, the brand awareness of the 'Navision' brand name was investigated. The results of a comparative study show that 15% of businesses spontaneously mentioned Navision when they were asked whether they could name an ERP supplier. That is the 3rd-best result in Europe, after Denmark (the home market of Navision) and Germany. This kind of comparison is a good indication of how PR policy can bear fruit.

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