



AIRFOIL

Building your
brand
in the local community

The emotions of brand success

Every successful national brand relies to a large extent on public relations, either as a lead strategy or as a method of supporting and extending its advertising and other marketing efforts.

But few brands can be built effectively with campaigns targeted exclusively to broad national audiences. If brand strength is the degree to which consumers develop emotional attachments to a product or service, then those relationships must be developed where the consumer lives, works and plays. The way the consumer experiences the brand in his or her set of communities — neighborhoods, offices, entertainment centers or social institutions — creates brand awareness and preference, but those experiences vary considerably from region to region, city to city.

Local sensitivities, traditions, tastes and preferences all play important roles in the successful emergence of emotional connections to a brand. A brand must go beyond developing a national awareness to establishing a powerful emotional tie with consumers at the local level, and that is where public relations can make a compelling impact.

The brand value of local public relations

The greatest value of public relations in promoting a brand is its ability to create and extend a positive emotional connection with consumers in their own communities. Marketers know that for a new piece of technology to create a buzz, they must get it into the hands of influencers in communities, campus centers and workplaces. Auto makers schedule ride-and-drive events in communities across the country, and novelists go on tours to sign books at local stores and to schedule interviews with local radio personalities. Any national retailer with a footprint in virtually every market needs a local-level strategy to support its brand.

Beyond the fact that consumers are making decisions based

on first-hand experiences, PR at the local level also can differentiate one brand from a competitor's by stimulating word-of-mouth about a product, spreading name familiarity and endorsement by trusted sources. Local-level public relations provides more touch points for the product message and can produce the tipping point for product preference and purchase after the consumer has seen coverage in the local media, has heard a local executive speak about the product or has seen the product displayed or demonstrated locally.

Local public relations — PR conducted on a city-by-city basis to build a product or corporate brand — is a difficult undertaking. It's a specialty requiring experience in understanding local markets and in preparing company spokespersons to work with local sources and publics, but it's a practice in which Airfoil Public Relations has a particularly deep level of understanding and success. This whitepaper presents some of the strategic approaches and tactics that can serve as a sturdy foundation of a local-media public relations program, an effort that demands creative concept development and flawless execution.

Strategic aspects of local-level media relations: Ensuring local relevance

New research indicates that small to mid-size businesses view their local media outlets and broadcasts more favorably and more credibly than they do large national publications. While large national brands often tend to measure PR success by the coverage they receive in a *New York Times* or a *USA Today*, these studies confirm that, if they wish to influence the majority of business decision-makers in America, they'd be much better served by interviews with the *Miami Herald*, *Crain's Cleveland Business* or *Good Morning San Antonio*.

Further, entrepreneurs tend to identify themselves, not in the large and amorphous category of "small-business owners," but

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rather by their trade — as plumbers, accountants or graphic designers, for example. Their inclination, then, is to read and value trade publications that cover their specific business segment and local media that report on their particular marketplace environment. They want to know what steps other small businesses have taken to become successful, and they are eager to network with them to share best practices.

In reaching these local media influencers, national brands should call on their PR team to mold their messages to local media. This means the company's news should focus on:

- Local issues: How does the brand message relate to the community's economic development, the type of work in which most local residents are engaged, political issues that impact business and other matters that vary among communities?

Equally important, how do local issues relate to national developments in ways that enable the PR team to:

- Localize a national trend: What are local businesses or consumers doing that suggest their adoption (or rejection) of national trends? The PR effort should focus on local users of a product or service whose experiences carve a place for each community in the brand's national story.
- Build on local customs relating to seasonal stories: What is the brand doing that is special to a particular community's celebration of holiday seasons? How is the brand participating in the community's own seasonal events, from Oktoberfest Zinzinnati to Seafair Seattle.
- Local customers: In gathering testimonials, seeking product trial and demo and gauging consumer reactions, the PR team should use local customers to attain increased credibility and to take advantage of regional differences in attitudes and product needs.
- Local executives: When a national brand is structured with field teams, it should always use local executives as spokespersons. Business reporters for media within a given metro area generally prefer to interview a local executive, a business person who understands the community and can discuss the impact of business changes, trends and announcements in the local marketplace. The marketplace generally will be much more receptive to messages from someone within the community than from a headquarters executive, who may not live a similar lifestyle or deal with similar challenges. Exceptions may include national corporate personalities—for example, Bill Gates from Microsoft, Bill Ford from Ford Motor Company, or Martha Stewart—who are closely identified with the founding of a brand. Even in these instances, however, local executives

should be prominent in their introduction of the newsmaker to reporters and in providing local angles to them. Once the national corporate leader leaves town, the local executive will need to continue to carry the water for the brand in his or her community; the PR team should use the top executive's appearance as an opportunity to heighten the local spokesperson's visibility.

- Local channel partners: If the national brand works through local partners, the public relations team should emphasize the role that partners play in the brand's development and familiarize local consumers with the partners' capabilities, locations and leadership. Channel partners should be included in media interviews as examples of how the brand is shaped to the needs of local businesses and consumers.

Media fragmentation and local-market strategies

To take advantage of a local-level PR program, companies do not need to attempt to reach out to thousands of communities across the continent. The top-50 demographic marketing areas (DMA's) incorporate 50 percent of all businesses in the United States and nearly 84 percent of all the nation's businesses with between 100 and 500 employees, according to 2001-2002 census figures. These figures provide a more focused audience for a public relations campaign designed to reach small and mid-size businesses by employing news media to carry a large portion of the messages in these markets.

Region-to-region readership patterns for traditional print newspapers vary considerably. These regional disparities were noted in a 2006 study by the Newspaper Association of America. The study determined that an average daily newspaper issue reaches 54 percent of adults who live in the Northeast, but only 43 percent of those in the South. Some 49 percent in the

North Central region and 45 percent in the West receive a daily paper. On Sundays, the percentages are higher but still vary geographically and with different rankings. Sunday editions reach 60 percent of adults in the North Central, 59 percent in the Northeast, 53 percent in the South and 51 percent in the West.

These variances likely are attributable in considerable part to local practices and interests, but they also are a result of the fragmentation of media. The well-documented decline in print newspaper readership does not mean consumers are paying less attention to local and national news but rather that they are seeking out other ways to receive it.

Whereas print newspapers once were the primary or only source of news for most families, today they often are a tertiary source, after online news sites/e-mail and broadcast outlets. In every community, we now are able to choose our primary source of news information from a much greater array of specialized and general news sources. These range from the constantly updated online editions of local and national papers to 24/7 cable TV networks. They include alerts e-mailed to our desktops by news organizations and satellite radio, as well as podcasts from traditional news outlets like *The Washington Post*, *San Francisco Chronicle* and any number of other local papers — even from news novices with blogs. Bloggers also are becoming sources of news for conventional news organizations.

Fragmentation presents new opportunities for companies attempting to reach targeted audiences to bolster their brands at the local level. Interviews with newspaper journalists are likely to become available in the publication's online edition much more rapidly than in the print version. The same is true for interviews with local TV and radio news reporters. Furthermore, because "hard" news and "breaking news" are available to the public many hours before the next print edition of

the local paper, newspapers have fragmented their content to provide more specialized columns and departments (not just a Business section, for example, but also subsections on technology, air travel, automotive news, money, marketing and other focused areas). Each of these sections, with its own local, specialized reporter, can represent a key target for a PR campaign. Newspapers, therefore, offer many opportunities to find a relevant local angle to a brand's story, whether it be the technology behind the brand, financial implications, impact on consumer issues, entertainment value or other aspects.

Fragmentation results in local media's becoming a much more efficient way for businesses to reach a particular demographic through PR. Companies can extend their stories to huge sections of their marketplace more easily and impact decision-makers more readily. These efficiencies increase when PR extends its reach beyond the local paper to send its geographically targeted messages through all the media available to consumers in a community. Many local newspapers and business journals have Web editions — often with a separate editorial staff — where brands can project a local flavor. These online publications may regularly send news "alerts" to local subscribers with important local stories. Consumers and executives no longer even need to be at their desks to explore or receive such online news—it can be sent through handheld mobile devices in the field.

Beyond the more established local press, every community has its own set of exclusively online media that concentrates on news with a local angle, relating to local lifestyle, recreation, health, business, politics or other arenas. Broadcast outlets present additional opportunities to reach segmented local audiences, with compelling and entertaining visuals for television and substantive analysis or predictions from local company executives.

National companies can best gain the brand boost available through local-media public relations, then, by ensuring that their news is:

- Tailored and presented as being important to each local area, or as “breaking news” that will impact the consumer’s day, the executive’s way of doing business or the community’s lifestyle
- Transmitted by local spokespersons, not out-of-town executives, recognizing that local company representatives

are people with whom the community can identify, who carry credibility because they are part of the community and who can be held accountable for the progress of the brand in the community

- Built around local issues so that it is perceived as highly relevant to local residents
- Supported by local figures, personalities and/or businesses to provide additional relevance

When local executives make themselves available to reporters, they should understand what the **media** are seeking.

Tactical aspects of local-level media relations

Developing local spokespersons

The first step in taking advantage of local-level public relations is to develop local spokespersons. These should be people associated with the national brand preferably who are based in the local region and have a stake in their community. The company must make clear to its field organization members the importance of their role in public relations and should provide them the background they need to feel comfortable in dealing with the media. A methodology should be established to identify and support these local spokespersons internally and to provide an incentive for their participation. Some organizations make local media participation a part of the job description. Others may offer recognition through internal newsletters or special messages or at company events.

To support local staff, the company’s public relations firm can provide media training — coaching in what to do before, during and after a news interview — either through a seminar in each community or through a less formal method, ranging from telephonic or online coaching to e-mailed tips and techniques.

The public relations staff also should work with the local executive and corporate to develop consistent brand messaging for the news announcement or event, but it should be shaped to each community’s situation and needs. For example, a message relating to the versatility of a new vehicle on tour across the United States might feature its ruggedness in weather-battered Michigan (a ding-proof skin and heated wiper fluid), but its convenience in beach-oriented Southern California (an easily converted storage space for surfboards or a wide sunroof).

The company also must develop a system for connecting the local executives with the media. Supporting efforts

from the PR team are vital. The national PR team may provide advanced briefings for each locality, offering the local executive for interviews. Media advisories and news releases featuring quotes from the executive may be provided to local reporters. PR professionals also will pitch stories to individual local reporters and editors to arrange interviews with the executive. Often local executives can conduct radio news interviews in advance of a local event to stimulate attendance and media interest and then gain additional coverage during and after the event. They should continue to stay in contact with community reporters after the event, providing follow-up information, opportunities for more interviews on new topics and background information on company developments so that an enduring business-type relationship is established with key local journalists.

All media efforts at the local level must be founded on three tactical factors:

- **Timeliness:** The brand story must be a “today” story. It must be provided to the media while the story is still newsworthy. Sometimes this newsworthiness derives from a story’s relationship to something else going on in the community, the nation or the world, such as a newly announced trend survey, a report from a government agency, a development in the business world or some other consumer-related news story. The national brand should be prepared to offer up its own take on the development at the local level in a timely fashion. Alternatively, the brand may wish to create its own timely story by generating local media interest around the brand’s announcement of a new product, service or campaign. Media contact must be tied to the timing of the announcement — often with pre-announcement media briefings or interviews — to ensure it is viewed as a fresh story.
- **Local angles:** The national brand must relate its story to the geography and consumer or business preferences of the

communities in which it is conducting its media efforts. In other words, it must find the local angle in the story. For example, consider how the opening of a series of new upscale restaurants would be viewed by news media in New Orleans (an expression of faith in the community's future), downtown Detroit (an affirmation of the rebirth of the city's core), Las Vegas (competition for other upscale restaurants) or Springfield, Ohio (the city's first upscale restaurant). By examining the potential impact of the brand announcement from a local perspective, the PR campaign can gain considerably more media attention. In addition, local company executives should be quoted in news releases and similar materials to help media identify the brand with local spokespersons.

- **Relevance:** The story presented by the national brand must have relevance to the specific publication or newspaper section to which it is being pitched. A local business journal may want to explore the story behind development of the product as much as the product's features. If local businesses are suppliers or distributors for the national brand, the local business section likely will want to examine that angle. Differences in consumer preferences also should be noted. People in Los Angeles may use a new brand of music player, for example, primarily for entertainment, while those in San Jose may value it more as a data storage device. Insights should be gained from the brand's local executives in the field before determining the story angles that will be presented to the media in each community.

Developing a corps of local-market spokespersons

To execute a local-level PR effort, the company needs a corps of spokespersons, local executives who translate the national message to the local market. The company must develop a

system for orienting these local executives and engaging them with local media. These local managers and their PR teams will need to put in the time to study their market, to understand the consumer and business forces in their communities and to develop a particular point of view that is of interest to local media. While perhaps 75 percent of the national brand's story will be consistent across the country, the most newsworthy angles must be tailored to the specific community and spokesperson in each market.

It's common for the corporate office to find occasional resistance among its managers in the field. Many of them may be reluctant to place themselves in the unfamiliar and possibly uncomfortable public position before the media. These executives must receive extensive support from the corporate office and its PR team, and corporate must work to develop their individual local spokespersons. Among the steps that corporate should take in orienting its representatives on the local level are:

- Familiarizing spokespersons with the company's messaging so that a consistent overarching message is maintained and then supported with local messages that may be peculiar to a specific community
- Offering message-development techniques to enable the spokesperson to develop ongoing local messages
- Providing media training to enable the executives to prepare for, conduct and follow up interviews successfully
- Offering presentation training to help local executives maximize the effectiveness of remarks they make to local business and community groups
- Developing media materials and briefing documents on reporters to provide background for interviews
- Creating question-and-answer documents anticipating the types of questions the local executive may be asked by reporters

- Providing corporate's analysis of the national marketplace and whatever additional insight corporate can offer on a market-by-market basis
- Ensuring feedback mechanisms are in place to help the executive understand his or her strengths and challenges in dealing with the media
- Providing a PR contact to offer guidance during the local campaign

Corporate communications must explain to the local executive how his or her involvement in the campaign is essential to stimulating media interest and how local public relations can better support awareness and preference for the company's products and services. Further, corporate should delineate the local executive's role in the company's public relations efforts, noting that advancement in the organization relates in part to the executive's ability to carry the company's message to the local level. It's not unusual for undiscovered executive stars to emerge from this process and to begin impacting the company in new ways.

National brands handle their spokesperson assignments in different ways, depending on their structure. Technology companies may have regional and local sales offices from which to draw executives. National non-profit organizations with local chapters, on the other hand, may rely on a local volunteer chairman. National retailers are likely to call on store managers or marketing directors in each community.

When Starbucks conducted a series of regional campaigns to further differentiate its products from those of competitors, it focused on a combination of store managers and "Coffee Masters," specially trained coffee experts in each store. When Airfoil conducted the local-level campaign for Starbucks stores in Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania, it matched media and store employees not just in a metropolitan area but also in

discrete communities within each area, reaching local broadcast, metro newspapers, community newspapers and neighborhood publications.

"Using local-level strategies, Airfoil generated a greater quantity of coverage and a much more comprehensive scope than we could have achieved with simply a national campaign," reported Starbucks Marketing Manager Diane DeForest. "Our customers now perceive our local partners to be experts in coffee selection and brewing because they have seen them in their local newspapers and on television. We could not have gained this kind of local preference with a national spokesperson alone."

In preparing for local-level PR campaigns, corporate should develop policies that help local executives determine when to speak and with whom; and the national office must be willing to give up a measure of control over the media relations process. While mistakes may be made on occasion in the field, corporate needs to commit to the effort and see the net positive value in the program, rather than react hastily to one difficult experience.

Tailoring media relations to local markets

When local executives make themselves available to reporters, they should understand what the media are seeking. Foremost, media want to understand the impact of the product or service on their own particular audiences. Typically this means, why should my readers or viewers care about this story? They also seek local sources to validate the company's claims, so in tailoring the story, the local spokesperson should offer testimonials from local customers and, when practical, connect the reporter with these customers for additional interviews. Case studies from local companies and news releases about local activities of the company also help shape the story to the local marketplace that the reporter covers.

The executive's goal should be to develop a relationship with the local reporters who are covering the story — to become a valuable resource to these journalists for this and future stories about the company and the marketplace. These kinds of local relationships are especially important when bad news about the company erupts. Reporters have stated that if they know and trust a local source, they are much more likely to give “equal time” to the company's point of view regarding a crisis or accusation than if they have no background on the company's presence in the community.

Even an online brand with a global reputation like eBay found local PR at the hands-on level to be essential. For the fifth anniversary of eBay Motors — the leading online site for buying and selling vehicles, parts and accessories — the organization wanted to put a face on its largely anonymous online operations. Airfoil recommended that eBay Motors develop an exhibit and a presence at the 2005 Woodward Dream Cruise, America's most renowned classic-car celebration, where some 1.4 million people and 40,000 cars gathered to cruise 16 miles of a nostalgic boulevard in suburban Detroit. eBay Motors had no local presence around the nation, so Airfoil prepared its top executives (car buffs themselves) in San Jose, Calif., with questions, issues and remarks relating to the local Detroit market, where the majority of the nation's automotive writers reside. The event featured local and regional residents who had bought classic vehicles on eBay, and demonstrations of how to buy and sell on eBay were carried out right along the side of the road on Woodward Avenue in eBay's highly visible display.

“Even though eBay Motors is the top site on the Web for all things automotive,” said Tracey Parry, vice president of Airfoil's business-to-consumer practice, “we realized the value of carrying out a public relations effort locally in Detroit, where key influencers were based. Classic-car enthusiasts formed the foundation

of eBay Motors in its early years and still represent a significant portion of its business, so it made sense for us visit them in their hometown to continue to strengthen the eBay Motors brand.”

Clearly, top marketers today appreciate the value of local-level PR and are seeking public relations professionals who are experienced in the expert techniques required to extend and support a brand outward from the town square.

Beyond media relations

While gaining coverage in the news media may be the least expensive and most broadly effective way of promoting a national brand's message locally, it's also important for local spokespersons to become known in the community through other venues. Any local-level public relations effort should include the development of speaking engagements for local executives, occasions where they are viewed both as experts in their business segment and as individuals with a stake in their own community.

The PR team can develop a standard presentation for the executive that may be modified for use with a variety of audiences. Speaking at a luncheon meeting of a local business organization, such as the Rotary Club or local economic club, often can uncover businesses seeking the company's product and lead to further engagements. Likewise, making presentations to community groups, ranging from neighborhood organizations to civic leagues, can generate broader consumer interest in the brand message. Other speaking opportunities may emerge from education groups, local charitable and civic events, and such local institutions as museums and community centers.

Scheduling special events also can help the brand place its products and messaging directly before the consumers it desires to reach. A “how-to” seminar with a presentation from the local executive, a seasonal event to which the public is invited and

Brand trust grows with familiarity and hands-on experience.

other gatherings where the executive can interface directly with consumers can be effective PR techniques for gaining credibility and local support.

The ultimate value of local-level public relations

Those companies that make consistent use of local-level PR discover value that extends beyond the immediate campaign. Their brand is transformed from an image rooted in logos and

national ad slogans to one based on a loyal local following with roots in each geographic market. By putting a local face on the brand, corporations are making it easier for consumers to develop the emotional connections that brand success requires. Brand trust grows with familiarity and hands-on experience. Local-level public relations provides opportunities for national brands to nourish that trust along Main Streets, across back fences and between cubicles in metro areas across the nation.



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