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Engineers Can Do Public Relations, Too

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2/9/2011

There are better ways to generate publicity than sending out another news release. The media sees far too many of them. After all, PR doesn't stand for press release. Let's use our imagination; there are other great marketing resources just waiting to be tapped.

With all the talk about integrated marketing communications, how about getting the people who create the technology products in on the act? Integrating engineering into the high-tech marketing communications mix can be a valuable way to demonstrate a company's core competencies. Giving management a share-of-voice has always been an essential PR strategy. Managers must be involved in high-tech marketing, and that includes engineering managers.

In the technology marketing realm, it's only natural to show the world your stuff through engineers' active participation in technical article publishing and speaking at key industry forums. Some enlightened companies have even set up a reward and recognition system for engineering team members who write or speak on the company's behalf. These are valuable auxiliary activities that deserve extra compensation and recognition.

In some companies, engineers may already be writing and speaking, but they're not aware that it's part of the company's PR program. Worse yet, the marketing and public relations department may not have a clue that any of these good things are happening among the engineers. Getting communications integrated, so both the left and right hands know what they're doing, is a great first step. Just because people work in different departments, for different supervisors, doesn't mean they can't integrate their efforts. After all, it's supposed to be one company.

Getting engineering involved in a publicity program demonstrating expertise should be easy. Everyone wins. Engineers get to show their stuff to their peers. Marketing gets to apply engineering's talent to help build market awareness and credibility for the company. People who might not have ever met get to team up, and this helps build greater interdepartmental understanding and unity. Individuals get an opportunity to contribute in a new way.

Engineers get to learn a little about how public relations helps their business. Public relations folks learn more about what sets their company or client apart from the rest. Online marketing scores another way to create SEO results with linkbacks to the company Website. Sales gets a reprinted article it can use as a customer visit leave-behind or to wow customer prospects in presentations. Trade editors gain a piece of solid contributed editorial that interests their readers.

With so many benefits, why don't engineers do PR more often? Departmental rivalries, some strange idea that public relations is beneath engineering's higher calling, and any number of other out-of-date notions may get in the way. Top managers can break these barriers and get people working together. Creating an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual benefit starts at the top. In larger companies, human resources managers can help by building rewards into compensation packages.

More simply, engineers who elect to work on public relations projects can be rewarded with company-paid cash prizes or gifts. One of my clients has a sliding scale of rewards, including weekends at Pebble Beach, ski-lift tickets, dinners at great restaurants, and reservations at bed and breakfasts. The company's preference is to reward its people with great memories, rather than money that would probably just be used to pay bills.

If you think this is excessive, consider that a technical article typically runs multiple pages in a trade publication and has far more credibility than a full page of advertising. The full-page ad would probably cost marketing thousands to produce and another \$10,000 to \$30,000 to run, in print and/or online. In addition, reprint rights for a PDF, used for up to a year as a promotional tool on the company's Website, may cost another \$1,500.

It's clear that the payback for rewarding interested engineering team members for their extra efforts is a cost-effective investment, to say the least. Even if the engineer only acts as a resource for an external technical feature writer charging perhaps \$4,000 for writing services, it's still a bargain.

Often the best basis for a technical trade feature article is an engineering paper delivered at an obscure conference. Why? The technical paper isn't pushing a product -- it's demonstrating the company's know-how or discovery. Education, with the goal of persuading a particular audience, is the essence of effective public relations. The key to uncovering topics for engineers and other technical team members for editorial contribution is approaching technology from the conceptual standpoint.

Another way to generate topics is to discuss industry trends, issues, and standards. Your company doesn't need to be IBM or Intel to have an opinion on what's driving the computer and electronics business. In fact, editors like hearing new points of view on important topics from players other than the "usual suspects." So, get your engineering team members involved in the public relations program. They've got a lot to offer. You may just find a whole new way of telling your company's story. Engineers can do public relations, too.