



Earned

Owned

Paid

The Hodges Playbook

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preface

Public Relations: The Early Days (aka The 1980s)

by Josh Dare
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When I set out to find my first job in public relations nearly 40 years ago, I did what many newly minted English majors did — I pored through the classified section of *The Washington Post*, running my finger down the column past ads seeking pharmacists and physical therapists,



Josh speaks with the then-head of the National Endowment for the Arts circa 1985.

psychologists and public health workers, to that largely ambiguous category: public relations. I'm not sure I had a clear idea what *public relations* really was, but I knew it had something to do with writing, so I thought it would be a pretty good fit and likely an easier job to get than writing for *Mad* magazine, my other career interest at the time.

Back then, public relations was nowhere near as popular as it is today. The few undergraduates who had an inkling that they might want to pursue a PR career likely were journalism majors, or, in my case, English. Public relations as a college major at the time was as rare as a rerun of "[Hello Larry](#)." And so my eyebrows would leap whenever I happened

upon a classified listing for PR, although invariably the job listing would include "must have a neat appearance and reliable transportation." While we like our folks at The Hodges Partnership to largely be neat and reliable, those are hardly the prime attributes we look for when assessing whether someone has the communications skills to join our team.

In looking back, the world of public relations that I jumped into in 1980 was a dinosaur, a paper-laden undertaking that required as much dexterity and skill on the phone as anything else. I recall an early job interview in which the prospective employer asked if I had any "phone experience," and my naivety about the question shone through in my answer, "you mean, like dialing?"

I didn't get that job.

However, I eventually landed a position and soon took a spin in the now-antiquated dance between public relations people and the media, the steps of which went something like this:

1. Draft a news release, and, in some cases, put together an entire news kit, replete with fact sheets, photos, bios and all sorts of other tidbits that filled reporters' desk in-boxes and, likely a short time later, trash bins.
2. Figure out who you were going to send the release/kit to. To do that, you generally had to call an outlet to determine who at that organization should get the information. If you were lucky, your call would make its way to the newsroom. If you were super lucky, you'd find someone who could direct you to the right person. And if you weren't calling newsrooms, you were scouring media directories thicker than the yellow pages (anyone remember those?), but you knew those listings were out of date before they even went to print.
3. Talk to the reporter (or editor) and pitch your story idea. If this sounds akin to the kind of cold calls we now regularly get from salespeople, it felt like that too, especially to reporters. That's why so many reporters were reluctant to answer their phones, and because there was no voicemail back then, that meant calling them back later until you actually heard someone breathing on the other end. At some point, you'd give up and send the information anyway.
4. Wait for reporters to respond in one of these typical ways:
 - "Doesn't sound like something I'd be interested in. Thanks anyway."
 - "Not sure, but send me something, and I'll take a look."
 - "Sounds interesting. Shoot me some information and then get back to me."
 - "Who gave you my number?"
5. Hold a "stuffing party," those mind-numbing occasions when you were sending a bulk mailing to dozens or even hundreds of outlets. The staff would gather in Henry Ford assembly-line fashion behind stacks of releases, envelopes and whatever else needed to go in the media kit. The worst job was the "licker," the person responsible for sealing the envelopes, but mercifully someone invented this little plastic tube with a tiny sponge on the end of it, which could be used to swipe the envelopes' adhesive flap. (Those who were particularly proficient with the tube/sponge could swipe 5-10 envelopes at a time, all laid out in a row, flaps open.)
6. Follow up with the reporters you sent the information to, typically three or four days later. It doesn't matter whether you sent it "blind" or had spoken to the reporter, there was an incredibly high chance

that the reporter would have absolutely no memory of talking to you or of getting the information you had sent with such high hopes. And so, cheerily, you would offer to resend it, and then you'd continue this shampoo, rinse, repeat routine until you got an answer directly, assumed the answer was no or moved on to another job.

Of course, there were plenty of occasions when the process worked seamlessly, notwithstanding its snail's pace.

Over time, that pace quickened. The arrival of fax machines in the mid-1980s accelerated our capacity to get information to reporters quicker, at least in theory. Unfortunately, there were not enough fax machines to handle the volume of faxes that we PR folks were sending, and so you got a busy signal more often than not. Sometimes, when reporters really wanted/needed your information, they'd share a top-secret fax number that was good only for a limited time before the word got out, and then that fax machine would be as clogged as the others. And to add another level of frustration, back then, the fax machines had no rollover feature — in other words, you had to connect with them in real time. You needed to luck into that precise moment when someone else's fax had just finished going through. It was like being the 12th caller on some radio call-in contest. You could spend your day trying to get a single fax to go through. Best to pack a lunch.

Not much later, however, came desktop computers. I have a vivid memory of that moment when my life as a PR professional changed. I was working as a press secretary on Capitol Hill, and because the congresswoman I worked for was from Rhode Island, I had a regular relationship with the two reporters in the D.C. office of *the Providence Journal*. One afternoon, I was letting one of them know that I'd be faxing over a news release, and he said, "you know, I think there is a way for you to send that release from your computer to my computer." There was a long silence on the phone, as I was not really sure what this guy was trying to tell me. To be able to send information from one screen to another was, in my mind, akin to people actually traveling through those lines as well. But sure enough, he walked me through the process, and before I knew it, he was reading the same words on his screen that were on mine.

And so I firmly believe that history will judge that moment as the dawn of a new age of public relations.

In fact, the changes have been profound, and the digitization of our industry has led to an incredible transformation of how we communicate — not only its speed, but also its capacity for greater breadth, its potential for enhanced efficiency and even greater levels of creativity.

On the media relations front, the protocols for interacting with the news media have compressed what used to take days into mere minutes. Building

media lists no longer requires phoning outlets but simply logging onto online journalist databases with easy-to-manuever search fields. Want to find who covers environmental issues for *The Boston Globe*, the automotive beat for *the Los Angeles Times* or the new products editor for *Garden & Gun*? Their email addresses and Twitter handles are just a few keystrokes away.

And, of course, once you have those addresses, it's easy to shoot a quick email to see if your story idea piques their interest. But that doesn't mean that media relations has gotten any easier as a practical matter.

“ **From 2004 to 2013, the number of full-time news media jobs in the U.S. fell by 17 percent, from 52,550 to 43,630.**”

Yes, our tools are more efficient and timely, but the competition is still just as fierce. Reporters tell us that hundreds of email pitches a day can find their way to their in-boxes, and so breaking through that competitive clutter means ensuring that [your pitch is compelling](#), that it's being sent

to the [right reporter](#) and that it's personalized in a way as to [resonate with that particular reporter or outlet](#).

The fact that newsrooms around the country — especially for print dailies — are shrinking only adds to the intensity of the competition for placing stories. From 2004 to 2013, the number of full-time news media jobs in the U.S. fell by 17 percent, from 52,550 to 43,630. The reporters still on the job are being asked to do more, rushing to get stories posted online, updating information throughout the day and expanding the scope of their beats. Against that decrease in the newsroom has been explosion of public relations professionals. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics tells us that in the 10 years leading up to 2013, the number of PR jobs grew by almost 22 percent to more than 200,000. Do the math: there are nearly five times more PR people than there are reporters. Put another way, there is one beleaguered reporter for every five of us trying to get their attention. Yes, media relations is competitive, and despite all these technological advances, it's still hard.

The good news for our industry is that concurrent with the contracting traditional media landscape has been the growth of social media platforms, and these new outlets — Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, SnapChat — are giving PR pros new highly efficient tools through which to work our trade. The emerging Earned-Owned-Paid paradigm is quickly reshaping how we are helping our clients broaden their reach, enhance their credibility and fill the sales pipeline. While media relations is an important part of this new trilogy (that's the “earned” part of the equation), media placements are no longer the be-all, end-all that they once were but simply one component of a larger strategy.

The EOP Era of Public Relations

Public relations is, to some degree, forever changing. To stay ahead of the curve, there's always some new tool or technique that needs mastering. But every so often, these changes are so dramatic, or reach a particular tipping point, that they demand entirely new strategies and skill sets. The rise of social and digital media has created such disruption. At the same time, given the changing nature of the traditional media landscape, digital platforms have profoundly transformed the very nature of our work.

Public relations used to involve a lot of grunt work, all aimed at encouraging reporters to cover your news. This emphasis on media relations was so pronounced for a compelling reason: Few other channels existed for reaching target audiences, enhancing credibility and broadening awareness.

Fast forward to today, where various platforms not only exist for reaching customers and potential customers directly, but also make it easier and cheaper than ever to create, publish and promote your own content. While the rise of these platforms has some doomsday naysayers preaching the death of media relations, the fact is that earned media and social platforms will live comfortably next to one another for quite some time.

So where does this leave the public relations industry? This “Brave New World” of PR isn't one to be feared, and in fact, quite the contrary. Our profession arguably has never had tools like we do now, tools that offer unprecedented levels of community building, analysis and response.

This new PR paradigm has three main components: Earned, Owned and Paid (EOP) media. They are the pillars of a newly reconstructed foundation for public relations. But before you dive into the EOP pool, keep a few key things in mind:



1. Virtually every marketing toolbox needs some combination of the three.
2. The mix of these will look different for everyone, depending on your specific business goals. Focusing on certain platforms may be a no-brainer while others may not be applicable at all. Budgets and other resources also will dictate what the right mix may look like.
3. You must have a clear and thorough understanding of your business' goals, audience and expertise.

Earned Media

For decades, public relations agencies everywhere kept their doors open thanks to media relations — ours included. The whole concept of third-party credibility as derived from media placements is the cornerstone of our profession. And even though digital media has exploded in the past 10 years, a well-positioned media placement still is one of the most effective ways to increase brand awareness, enhance reputations and establish expertise positions. According to a [2014 Nielson study](#), editorial content was shown to be 88 percent more effective than branded content at raising brand awareness.

With all that said, you should be spending all your time reaching out to the media, right? Not so much.

Here's the bad news. The average reporter receives several hundred PR pitches a day. And PR professionals outnumber reporters 5:1. Even some of the largest, most established news outlets, such as *USA Today* and *The New York Times*, have laid off dozens of newsroom staff in the past three years.

Given the state of the industry, it is all the more important to know what you're doing when it comes to pitching the media. More than ever, earned media is a game of patience, precision and persistence.

“ This is not an assignment you simply give to your intern because she has grown up around social platforms.”

Owned Media

Think of earned media as a series of peaks and valleys, with no real control for how long the valleys between stories can be. Owned media, on the other hand, is something you can control. The trade-off being you have to figure out:

1. Who your customers are and what insight you can provide that they would care about.
2. Where and what format your customers prefer to receive this content.
3. How you'll come up with the time and resources to produce it all.

These three points are where a lot of organizations fall off the rails. Many simply talk about how great they are, which goes against the No. 1 rule of grade-school English classes, “show, don’t tell.” It also runs counter to common social medial protocols of resisting the temptation to sell. Then there are those who might come up with a compelling piece of content, but are publishing it on platforms their customers don’t use. The point is worth repeating, you need to know what you’re doing. (Read: This is not an assignment you simply give to your intern because she has grown up around social platforms.)

Paid Media

As we keep saying, social and digital platforms give you all kinds of publishing opportunities that didn’t exist 10 years ago. Great! However, Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg and other social media giants slowly have chipped away at businesses’ ability to rely solely on organic reach, upping the need to invest in social advertisements (e.g., boosted posts, sidebar advertisements, etc.).

While it is certainly the case that platforms like Facebook rely on such advertising revenue to make investors happy, the data that these platforms make available to advertisers makes boosted content even more effective than viral reach ever could be. On Facebook, for example, you can target your posts to someone who rents an apartment and has recently been approved for a mortgage and also returned from a trip two weeks ago.

And that brings us to this reality, that if you don’t spend some amount of money on your social channels, only a small minority of your fans and followers will see your content. The good news is that with the right investment, you have an incredible opportunity to make sure your content is seen by exactly those you’re trying to reach. Not only that, these social platforms provide some of the clearest marketing metrics available, empirical data that shows how effective your ads and content have been at achieving your objectives.

Earned Media: Finding Success in the Changing Landscape

So, you think you have a good story to tell. Do you? What makes you think so? What makes your story stand out? Why are you different? Why should the media care?

A lot goes into media relations, a lot more than most people think. Granted, there are slam dunks, such as helping a new retailer open a location in your town or announcing the new CEO of a Fortune 500 company. But even promoting newsmakers like that can require a great deal of work.

Now, more than ever, earned media is just that — earned.

Beyond the shrinking newsroom where journalists now juggle several beats rather than concentrate on one, media relations is exceedingly tough because it takes time, patience, more time and more patience.

Reporters and editors are inundated with hundreds of pitches, ideas, greetings and who knows what else from PR professionals every day. Every day. Clay Risen, an opinion editor at *The New York Times*, told us that he and his fellow editors get several hundred submissions a day. As we inundate reporters and editors with our ideas, it's quite possible that we have a good story that simply wasn't good enough that day, week or even month.

So, how do you make your story stand out?

For starters, let's start with the story itself. All too often, small businesses, CEOs or nonprofits believe what they are doing is really newsworthy. Look in the mirror. Is it really? Have you seen your peers in the press for similar things? Have you seen similar stories in *The Washington Post* or *Fast Company* or heard a piece on NPR?

We encounter too many companies that don't have a realistic sense as to the newsworthiness of their stories, so step one is to really take stock in who

you are as well as to have some grounding about the level of interest your story will likely have to the media. If it is a good story, then the chances are obviously much higher that it can garner coverage.

What makes a good story?

Something new and different often is a good recipe. Someone making an impact. A company with a great back story. Something unique. Be careful going overboard describing yourself as unique if you do many of the same things as your competitor. Fair warning: Journalists have grown weary of jargon and exaggeration.

To elaborate, here are a few examples of some of the good stories we've enjoyed working with:

- A small, gourmet peanut butter entrepreneur who makes the product out of his mom's kitchen and is seeing impressive growth. And oh yeah, it's the best peanut butter you'll ever taste. (That's our bragging, not the client's.)
- A high-end dress shirt favored by many celebrities from a company started by a pair of businessmen who had no fashion experience before learning how to make shirts.
- A guy who traded his million-dollar company to start a nonprofit that helps storm-ravaged areas.
- A company focused exclusively on finding jobs for the part-time and hourly worker community.

Setting the right expectations

Once you determine what your story is, it's crucial to set realistic expectations for it.

For years, we used to cringe when we'd talk with prospective clients who would mention they'd like to be on the TODAY show. That's easier said than done, although our team did, in fact, land the peanut butter maker several mentions on the NBC morning show back in the day. Even so, if your company specializes in creating software that improves logistics for truckers, the likelihood that you'll find yourself chatting with Matt and Savannah is pretty remote.

So take a hard look in the mirror. When was the last time you saw someone like yourself doing an interview on a morning show? Or in *The Wall Street Journal*? Or even your local paper? There could very well likely be an outlet receptive to your story; it just may not be the first one that comes to mind.

So, in addition to asking “what makes us different,” focus on outlets that are most likely to cover your industry.

Just as important is understanding exactly what the goal is and how to attain it. Our peanut butter entrepreneur never personally appeared on the TODAY show, but his product was mentioned a handful of times in various segments over a couple years. Each time, the peanut butter was part of a larger segment that included other brands. If our goal and expectation was truly to have the company featured (by itself), we would have failed. Similarly, taking a *New York Times*-or-bust approach on an opinion piece likely isn't going to be the best strategy since you'll be in competition with several hundred other thought leaders, some of whom have led major corporations or even nations or have names that every reader would recognize.

“With fewer and fewer reporters and editors, it's paramount now more than ever to research before hitting send on a pitch.”

Our way of working with the media

Part of setting expectations comes with understanding the media.

One of the loudest criticisms of the PR industry is that we barrage reporters with stuff we hope will somehow stick, most of the time not taking the time to consider or research whether or not the targeted reporters might have even the least bit of interest in what we send.

With fewer and fewer reporters and editors, it's paramount now more than ever to research before hitting send on a pitch. When was the last time the targeted reporter wrote about a company like yours? When the reporter quotes experts, are they from well-known companies or do they ever speak to CEOs like yours? Does the reporter even cover the same beat as the one you're pitching? With the number of emails and calls coming into newsrooms each day, reporters and editors don't have time for stuff that doesn't concern them.

Take the time, do the research. That's the first real step after coming to the conclusion that you have a good idea to pitch. See what your targeted reporters have written. Take a look at their social accounts to see what they might be working on or what they share. Interact with them, where appropriate, by sharing stories with your contacts on social media. In short, you're trying to find the *right* person to share your story and possibly start a professional relationship with that *right* person. Referencing the tweet that they just spent a week in Elmira might be a nice icebreaker when you share with them that you grew up in Elmira. (For a worksheet to help you hone your message and an example pitch, see the [appendix at the end of this book](#).)

Don't screw it up

Once a reporter says, "Sounds great, I'd love to write about this," the fun really begins. The two most important things to do now are to be responsive and make good on whatever you promised in the pitch. Remember, reporters are juggling a lot of responsibilities these days, and they generally don't have a lot of time to wait for you to get back with more information, pictures and interview times. It's OK if you need to confirm a time with your spokesperson for an interview, but let the reporter know ASAP that you're looking into it, and then make arranging that interview your top priority. Media relations is all about building relationship with the media, and failing to deliver on a story you pitched is a sure-fire way to ruin that relationship.

The waiting game

Be patient. Sometimes you'll get a note back. Most times you won't. Follow-up notes after a few days or a week or so are perfectly fine. Following up daily isn't advised. We've had experiences when a reporter has contacted us about an idea or expert we sent months and even years before. If reporters like what you sent, they will let you know or file it away for later. If you don't hear back after a couple attempts, it's time to move on. Research another reporter or editor; reach out to a different outlet.

But don't give up.

Rejection is all just part of the job. You've got a good story to tell.

Tips for successful media pitching

Other quick tips on pitching a reporter include:

- Keep your pitch short and sweet.
- Avoid jargon at all costs; say it in plain English.
- Avoid blasting hundreds of reporters at a time in an impersonal way — chances are, you're not a company such as Amazon, Google or Walmart, who actually have hundreds of reporters watching their every move.
- Personalize your note by referencing you've seen their work and done your homework.
- Keep your pitch short and sweet.
- Don't call the reporter asking if they got your email (unless it truly is breaking/important news).
- Don't send attachments until asked.
- Don't send large photos that could jam their inbox (to be safe, if you have to send something large, keep it under 1 MB or risk going to a dreaded spam folder never to be seen again).
- Pitch during morning hours, preferably avoiding Mondays and Fridays; remember reporters often are meeting deadlines in the afternoon hours; don't call in the mid-to-late afternoon unless absolutely necessary.

You may have noticed a redundancy in that list: Keep your pitch short and sweet.

Think of it like speed dating. Picture a hotel ballroom filled with 50 ladies and gentlemen, all dressed to the nines and ready to meet their match. Each has a minute or two to make an impression. Now, remember that your email is among some 300 emails (or more!) from companies like yours or PR firms like ours all starving for attention. Brevity is king. If you don't pique the reporter's interest in the first couple of sentences, your note likely is destined to be deleted, no matter if Ernest Hemingway — once famously a journalist himself — wrote your news release.

Owned Media: Sharing Your Story in Your Own Way

While there is, and likely always will be, a place for media relations and traditional news delivery, the audience for this type of information is shrinking. According to the [Pew Research Center's State of the News Media Report](#), circulation numbers for 2015 in the newspaper industry alone were down 7 percent from the prior year. Compounding that, advertising — both print and digital — was down 8 percent.

The implications for individual publications are staggering with staff being slashed, the elimination of entire newspaper sections and in dire cases, the long tradition of print being replaced by digital-only dailies. It's an uphill battle for media relations practitioners, who in 2013 outnumbered reporters nearly 5:1.

Fortunately, in today's digital world, where everyone is a publisher, you can seize other tactics to supplement media relations valleys. Organizations can continue their cadence of storytelling on the platforms they own and, in doing so, build their perceived expertise and make their organization easier to find by searching.

But how do you know what story to tell? And where?

Understanding your goals

Building your content machine starts with understanding your collective goals at the enterprise level, within your marketing department and with key stakeholders. What do you want your owned content to do for your business? Is it primarily for awareness? Is it a vehicle to meaningfully engage with and build community among prospects and customers? Is it a lead generation tool? Is it a mix of all these?

Once you answer that question and recognize how the various stakeholders view the role of your digital presence, then you'll begin to have a roadmap for what success could look like.

Figuring out your core message

Frankly, this is where many organizations miss the mark. Instead of speaking to their audiences' needs, they'd rather talk about how great they are — one of the cardinal sins of social media. Instead, your message should be at the intersection of where your expertise meets the needs of your audience. And without knowing the needs of your audience, it's nearly impossible to create ongoing, relevant content.

Finding this sweet spot is not an elusive task, but it does take some quality time with both your internal stakeholders who interact with your clients and then the clients themselves. Start with your internal team — the account managers who interact with them on a daily basis, the product managers creating solutions to their problems and the sales people courting their attention. These internal conversations will help bring your customers' needs and interests into focus, which forms the basis of your content strategy.

Do *not* stop there, though. You have to talk to a sample of your target audience as well. Research purists may suggest focus groups and third-party surveys, which, yes, are tremendously helpful and insightful, but also are costly and out of reach for many organizations. But something is better than nothing, so at the very least, identify 3-5 existing customers who are willing to speak to you for 30-60 minutes about the issues and information they're interested in, as it relates to your services and expertise. From there, you can even develop and send out a free online survey to a wider group of customers to gather some quantitative data to use as benchmarking.

It's tempting to skip over this for time's sake, but this extra step frequently highlights minor — and sometimes major — inconsistencies between how your organization perceives your customers and how they perceive themselves. This extra step is critical in making sure your customers feel like you are there to help them and not sell to them.

Deciding where to tell your stories

So you know what you to say, now you need to know where to say it. While your website should be the place where your content resides, your audience won't just show up — you've gotta drive them there, which means you have to know where to find them. And in today's digital environment, most everyone is using search, social or both.

Look at the media consumption behaviors of your audience — the publications they like to read, the sites they visit to solve their problems, the social platforms they belong to for personal and professional purposes — to determine where your organization should be sharing its information.

As you determine where to share content — your platform mix — internal resources and team bandwidth will be a major factor. Don't bite off more than you can chew. If your audience is in four places but you only have the staff and budget to be in two places, then choose the best two, manage those profiles well and build a case for greater investment to expand your presence and reach additional audiences.

Keeping the train going

Keeping a content strategy going involves a sort of pingpong between the audience and the organization. We ask ourselves: What does the audience need, how do they behave, and then we go back to the organization and ask ourselves, how we can address those tendencies? Who are the internal subject-matter experts (SMEs) who understand our business and industry? Who are the people within our organization who have an existing voice (or audience?) Which internal thought leaders would we like to have a louder voice? Looking internally and asking those questions will help you better understand the pillars of your content strategy — the topic categories that you can come back to time and time again that will help your audience solve its problems while serving the needs of your organization.

To avoid getting bogged down in the weeds of your company's expertise and messaging, start with a 30,000-foot view of the types of content your audience cares about — industry trends, company news, tips, product updates and applications, even curated news from other sources.

Trust us, identifying a month's worth of content for an organization's social media platforms and its website can be overwhelming. Segmenting the content in these areas helps make that process much more manageable.

Tapping into your organization's experts

The best content is insightful, authentic and relevant. While you might be best equipped to wordsmith a piece, your SMEs are the ones who should be providing the meat of your content. This is not to say they have to write it, but tapping into these people on an ongoing basis to understand what other people are talking about will help your organization be a meaningful contributor to the conversation. Ultimately, humans relate to other humans, so personalizing your story and putting faces to the facts and information will make your content more interesting and ultimately more relevant.

Owned Media: Keeping the content train on track

Owning your story is one thing. Telling it consistently month after month with a fresh and interesting perspective is another. Based on our experience, the reason most owned content strategies fail — or at least don't reach their full potential — is because not enough resources and time were devoted to the many steps and dimensions that are essential to an effective strategy.

Building the infrastructure

A critical first step is identifying subject-matter experts (SMEs), but a word of warning: More often than not, these internal experts have their own priorities and workloads — and tending to your content needs is typically not among them. Going to them too often can make them start looking at you as a well-intended nuisance, and if you see them avoiding you in the hall, you can guess why.

So from the outset, it's a good idea to set up some ground rules so that you and your SMEs are on the same page when it comes to your needs and what they can comfortably deliver. While this varies from company to company, we have found that once a month is a good starting cadence. Get that meeting on your calendars and make sure they know the kind of storylines and expertise you're looking for. It's often helpful to go as far as developing a script or agenda for these conversations, rather than just winging it.

You'll likely find that coming up with new ideas and angles can be one of the most difficult parts of content generation, but don't put that burden totally on them. Come to the meeting with some ideas and even a set of questions, and you'll find the session will be a lot more productive and make your internal experts feel like you've made good use of their time.

Choosing the best vehicle

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously stated, "the medium is the message," meaning the format of a message (e.g., book, TV commercial, blog post) is just as important, if not more so, than the message itself. And when it comes to owned content, we couldn't agree more.

“ According to Kissmetrics, content with images or video gets, on average, 94 percent more views.”

In fact, the presentation of content is one of the most overlooked aspects of a content strategy. It's important, for example, to stay abreast of the changing nature and audiences of the various social platforms. Let's say you're trying to reach a college audience. Too many marketers today are still defaulting to Facebook, a fantastic platform, but not where the youngest Millennials are living today. (That would be Snapchat and Instagram.) So even though you might have a greater familiarity with Facebook, you'd be trying to reach an audience that is largely not there (unless they are reading posts from their parents).

Then there's the matter of giving your posts more pop. Written posts might be the easiest and cheapest way to communicate, but research confirms what we instinctively know — that adding graphics, video, photos, animation or other multimedia materials makes your posts shout out rather than

whisper. [According to Kissmetrics](#), content with images or video gets, on average, 94 percent more views.

Staying organized

It's difficult to be brilliant every day. So if you're waking up on a daily basis trying to figure out what to post, then you're in for a rough ride. Instead, develop an editorial calendar once a month that organizes the actual blog posts and social status updates — not just the content ideas. Having a month's worth of content in one place makes it easier to make sure tone, variety and consistency are all in sync. (For keeping individual blog posts organized, we use a template that has prompts for each piece of content and metadata related to a post. We've included an example in the [appendix at the end of this book](#).)

Something to keep in mind as you develop your editorial calendar: No more than 20 percent of your content should focus on your particular business while the other 80 percent should benefit your audience. (Read this as many times you need to for it to sink in. This is another common pitfall for businesses. If your content strategy is dominated with posts about how terrific you are and you are not providing value to your audience members, then you are largely wasting your time — and probably theirs.)

Getting sign off

Every once in a while, you'll hear of a communications professional getting fired for an ill-advised social post to a company page. These stories are regrettable — and avoidable. Editorial calendars provide a structure and process that makes it easy for others to review and sign off on what you plan to post, and so no one is ever caught off guard by what is posted online. Even if you receive negative feedback when the content goes live, it's significantly easier to defend your post if you have a formal approval process for all content.

For more technical and industry-specific content, work with your SMEs to make sure you've captured the essence of their expertise. You'll also want to have a few proofreaders at the ready to help ensure the tone is right, and the information you're sharing is accurate and error free. A read-behind from a colleague and an approval process with management typically does the trick.

Blasting the horns

At this point, you've done the hard work, but it's not quite time to kick up your feet. The last piece — distribution — is where your content strategy has the biggest potential to fall flat. There's no point in creating content if you don't build in promotional vehicles to push your message to your target audience.

Share it across your social platforms. Leverage staff, partners and evangelists by encouraging them to share your content. And we wouldn't be PR practitioners if we didn't reiterate the power of traditional media relations: Share your content with traditional media outlets, digital outlets, bloggers and influencers (but only if it rises to the level of newsworthiness).

As we'll get into in the next chapter, social platforms have become advertising platforms, and you're only reaching a small portion of your existing audience by simply posting. To reach a larger portion of your existing audience, as well as new audiences, you'll need to put dollars behind your content.

Ensuring Your Content Reaches the Right People

By now, you've gotten the message: The public relations landscape has changed significantly over the past few years. We've witnessed an important shift toward owning your own content, which has created new ways for PR professionals to disseminate their organization's message.

But just how should that message be shared with interested audiences? To start, through social media platforms. Social media is just one of the many ways you can communicate directly with consumers and potential clients without having to rely on traditional news media. Social content can help you fill the valleys that come between media placements, but the truth is, it also holds up on its own, even without earned media.

While it seems that social media has been with us only a few years, it is already changing. It used to be enough, for example, to share posts to your Facebook newsfeed or Twitter timeline. Organic reach would get your content to your desired audiences. Facebook posts used to reach a significant percentage of your community, and using the right hashtags could help the right audience see your Twitter content at the right time. But as we've seen these platforms become massive content warehouses with a focus on driving their own revenues, consistently reaching your audiences has become an uphill battle. Enter social media advertising.

Why social media advertising?

Allocating a portion of your marketing budget towards social advertising can help you achieve four important things:

Ensure reach

The algorithms these social platforms use to deliver content places lower emphasis on information from brands, making it less likely that your existing communities will see your content. Social advertising ensures that your content will appear in the newsfeeds of those you target. And, importantly, beyond your existing audience. Various targeting options on social

advertising can guarantee that new audiences — the right audiences that you select — will see your content as well.

Provide a cost-effective way to reach new/existing audiences

Social advertising is extremely cost effective compared to traditional media buys. Minimum spends are often just a few dollars per day, and these advertising campaigns can be turned on/off at the click of a button. You don't have to commit to weeks or months of spending, giving you a unique opportunity to test different messaging or even different audiences.

Track your results

The return on investment on a media placement, as discussed in the previous chapter, can often be hard to quantify. But with social advertising, marketers can easily and directly attribute web traffic, downloads and even purchases to their social advertising investment.

Target more than traditional advertising

Traditional advertising mediums don't allow you to pick and choose exactly who will see (or hear) your ad. But social advertising does. It allows you to be extremely targeted by focusing on demographic characteristics, online behaviors and interest targeting. Need to reach women, between the ages of 25-33 in California who are corporate executives and have a friend with an upcoming birthday? According to Facebook, there are 15,000 of them.

Determining your objectives

Ready to start your social advertising campaign? First, you need to determine your objective(s). Different social platforms allow you to optimize for different objectives, but for the most part, each social platform will serve your ads to people who are most likely to complete your objective. Page likes, link clicks, video views, engagement and lead generation (or conversions) are just a few of the objectives available to marketers on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn.

Social advertising objectives key terms

It's important that you understand social advertising lingo, so here's a quick primer on key terms:

Impressions: Number of times your ad was served to users; this is not a unique number. Choose impressions as your objective if your goal is awareness.

Link clicks: Number of times the link in your social ad has been clicked. Choose link clicks as your objective if your goal is to drive traffic to your website or other web page.

Video views: Number of times your video has been viewed; this is not a unique number. Each social platform has different parameters as to what counts as a video view. Choose this objective if your goal is to increase the number of views your video receives.

Engagement rate: Number of times a user engages with your content; this is the total number of reactions, clicks, comments, retweets or shares. Choose this objective if you want to increase awareness of content that does not link to your website.

For example, a public utility client of ours was launching a content plan, with essentially no existing social community. A necessary first step was building out a community that was interested in reading their content. Based on their budget and timeline, we set an objective of achieving 1,000 likes and followers on their Facebook and Twitter pages, respectively, within a six-month timeframe. By continually testing and refining both owned and paid content, we were able to not only achieve this objective, but also drive the cost-per-like/follower down over this timeframe.

Defining your audience(s)

Equally as important as determining your objective(s) is defining your audience(s). Assuming that you don't have an unlimited budget, you'll want to first identify your target audiences and prioritize their importance. Do you want to reach existing customers or new customers? Are there different segments within those audiences that are different demographically? The targeting options within each social media network's ad platform will allow you to serve ads specifically to those people who match the characteristics, interests, behaviors and demographics of your target audience(s). Keep in mind that the more targeted (or narrow) your target audience becomes, the more expensive it may be to advertise to them. But that expensive audience just might be the most valuable one to your business.

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram also will allow you to use your existing data within their advertising platforms. For example, on Facebook you can upload your list of email subscribers, and within Ads Manager, that list of email subscribers will be matched to existing Facebook users (remember we all use an email address to sign up for Facebook). Additionally, you can place a small piece of code (called a tracking pixel) on pages of your website, which will match your website visitors to Facebook users, allowing you to remarket to those who have already showed interest in your product or service. These custom audiences can become some of your most valuable social advertising targeting tools, considering it is much easier to convert a warm audience than a cold one.

Social advertising targeting key terms:

Interest targeting: Type of targeting based off of actions a user takes while using a particular social platform. For example, if a user likes pages like College GameDay, ESPN, Virginia Tech Football, Facebook will recognize that this user has an interest in college football.

Custom audiences: Targeting based on data you "own." Custom audiences can be created from customer lists and traffic to your website.

Demographic targeting: Targeting via information that users provided — such as age, gender and geographic location — to a social platform. On LinkedIn, demographic targeting can be even more specific, such as job title or job skills.

Behavior targeting: Option often based on data collected about users and actions they take online (off-platform). Facebook/Instagram and Twitter all have behavior targeting options. Some examples include recent homebuyers, users who have given to nonprofit organizations that assist veterans and individuals who purchase K-cups.

Establishing your budget

Allocating a portion of your organization's marketing or PR budget toward social advertising is almost a no-brainer at this point; it is just something that needs to be done. But figuring out exactly what that line item should be on a monthly, quarterly or yearly basis often can be confusing and intimidating. At Hodges, we like to budget for each objective we've identified as important to the success of our overall social advertising strategy; we then use established benchmarks or industry averages to work our way toward a number. We've even created a nifty social advertising budgeting worksheet ([available in the appendix at the end of this book](#)) to help you discover what you should be allocating each month to reach your goals and set realistic expectations.

Tracking your progress

After you define your objectives, determine your target audience, create a budget and actually set up your social ads, your work is not done. In other words, you can't just set them up and forget about them. The key to your long-term success with social advertising is testing and refining. What exactly should you be testing? The short answer: audience, copy and creative. Depending on your budget size, you might be able to test all three at once, or you might have to settle for testing one at a time. A/B testing, comparing different variables like copy, images or audiences, should be an important part of optimizing any digital advertising campaign, whether you're developing ads for Google AdWords or Facebook. Keeping track of your campaigns day to day, week to week or even month to month can help you to better understand what works and what doesn't, allowing you to create ads that use your budget more effectively.

Social advertising has quickly become an integral part of ensuring that the content we create for clients reaches the right person, with the right message at the right time, and it is here to stay. Facebook made an astonishing \$6.2 billion in revenue from its advertising platform in just Q2 of this year, up from \$1.3 billion for all of 2012. And the revenue numbers are expected to continue to grow as more and more marketers learn to use social advertising to promote their organization. If you're ready to start using social advertising to promote your business smartly, remember four simple things: determine your objective(s), define your audience(s), set aside a budget and always be testing and refining.

Measuring Your EOP Success

Measurement has been somewhat of a white whale for the public relations industry for quite some time, if not forever. Not that it's impossible, by any means, but the nature of our work makes quantifying its impact an Ahab-level challenge. While marketers and advertisers can point to clear metrics demonstrating success, PR pros often have struggled to draw a straight line between their victories and bottom-line impact, especially to clients who have a hard time understanding the value of intangibles like good will, reputation and even general awareness.

As we've touched on previously though, the rise of digital media finally has brought the public relations industry the tools necessary to easily and cheaply employ metrics that can show whether and how much our strategies are effectively meeting quantifiable objectives.

Here we will explore how to measure success across an EOP plan, but first an overarching word of advice. Whether you're prepping for a major media relations campaign or a sophisticated social media advertising strategy, it's imperative that you have an understanding of what success means for your organization and how communications can support that. This might seem like a given, but too often — in our experience at least — this step doesn't get the thought and deliberation that is so critical.

Take the time to talk with your leadership team about what success looks like, and don't be afraid to push back if you think those goals are unrealistic or misaligned. At the risk of sounding like a marketing textbook, the best goals for how marketing/communications can support a business are within the acronym SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timed). You must resist the temptation to just start *doing*, especially if sales are lagging and the pressure to act is high.

"We should be in *The Wall Street Journal!*" demand many in the C-suite. An admirable and relevant goal for many organizations to be sure, but even a home run media placement like that will fall flat and not produce the

intended results if there isn't enough thought put toward the strategic rationale for why that placement is so important in the first place.

Even so, connecting the dots of PR measurement can be a head scratcher at times, especially across relatively new platforms that deal in owned and paid content. Here's how to discern the right goals for each piece of an EOP plan.

Earned Media Measurement

Entire graduate programs are built around measuring traditional PR activities, so this brief guide only grazes the surface. Still there are a few tenets that guide the Hodges approach to earned media measurement, informed by decades of experience and by recent research and best practices.

On the earned media front, you need to recognize what you really want from media coverage. If, for example, the underlying reason for wanting coverage is to satisfy an executive's ego, then securing big placements might be important in and of themselves, regardless of whether those hits move your sales needle. Conversely, a CEO or CMO focused solely on sales isn't going to care about a *Forbes* hit if that placement doesn't drive revenue. In reality, most companies exist somewhere along a spectrum from ego to bottom line and even shift along that spectrum, depending on the company's evolving focus at a given time.

For years, one of the most-applied metrics for earned media measurement was advertising value equivalency (AVE), which determines an earned media story's value based on how much it would cost to place an ad of similar size. Finally in 2010, after years of criticism, the PR world's best-and-brightest convened to figure out a better way. The result? The Barcelona Principles, seven principles on which to base PR, particularly media relations, success and measurement, putting the final nail in the AVE coffin.

The main and most damning point of criticism is that AVE looks only at *quantity* (circulation, word count, segment length), and not the *quality* of an outlet and story. Not that magazines and news outlets would ever inflate their circulation numbers, but AVE leaves a lot of room for skepticism given the assumption that thousands (or even millions) of people actually have read your coverage. And once you introduce this kind of skepticism into the equation, it's safe to say your ship is taking on water.

Instead, when identifying the quality of earned media placements, ask the following questions:

- What's the circulation and reach of the news outlet?
- What was your organization's share-of-voice within the article?
- Was the article's tone positive?

- Did your key messages make it into the article? (*This means you need to have defined key messages.*)

As you can probably tell, these aren't questions that lend themselves to immediate answers. Earned media measurement, subjective as it is, takes time and resources, and, as such, needs to be budgeted for accordingly. Whether for hard costs such as clipping services or soft costs such as staff time, you're making an investment in measuring the success of earned media programs.

PR activities need to be tied as closely as possible to business goals. Just a few years ago, it was sometimes hard to convince clients to even share access to their Google Analytics with us, usually because that was typically handled by a different department. But Google Analytics and other similar tools can be an important for connecting the dots between "traditional" earned media success and business goals. Properly configured, you can track success in generating leads back to source traffic with just enough precision to weigh the success of those campaigns, particularly with online media sources.

Owned Media Measurement

Unlike traditional PR campaigns, owned media programs are awash in trackable data. But that doesn't mean it's always immediately apparent what the best metrics are for your owned content campaign.

For that reason, it's common to start by tracking an entire set of metrics, from site visits to Facebook likes. But as your program matures, you'll want to review your progress and identify which metrics are most tightly tied to your business success — whether that's selling a physical product or establishing a consulting relationship.

For our clients, we've seen three main metrics rise to the top of the pile for tracking successful digital marketing campaigns focused on all aspects of the buyer's journey:

- **Traffic:** It starts with getting new eyeballs to notice you and, once they do, get intrigued enough about who you are so that they visit your website and poke around some on it.
- **Conversion:** Turning visitors into leads is the critical next step, and conversion metrics can give you a crystal clear window into what you are doing right and what might need some tweaking.
- **Revenue:** Every marketing program needs to measure how effectively its investment and underlying strategy are driving sales.

We've [written more extensively on these three metrics on our blog](#). For most marketers, this trio of numbers amply represent the tiers of the traditional

marketing funnel. The trick for most of us is setting goals and expectations for each metric.

As we mentioned above, the SMART mnemonic is a handy guide: Pick a metric (like traffic, for example) then set a concrete, achievable goal that fits your business needs. We've yet to meet a client that didn't want to grow its traffic; however, you might find that the first place to focus is not on growing the traffic, but doing more with the traffic you're already getting by establishing and increasing your conversion metric. Remember, quality is often better than quantity.

Paid Media Measurement

As with owned media, measurement opportunities for social advertising abound, with the added bonus that the technologies and opportunities are constantly changing. All the major social media platforms offer advanced targeting and audience customization tools. And they all offer a range of tools for optimizing ad units for clicks, follows, conversions and more.

Despite these advancements, social media advertising is, to some extent, still in its infancy. While some data currently exists about what's a good cost-per-objective (e.g., like, click, download) for different industries, many are left without a clear barometer for gauging whether or not they're spending too much.

So while we're still in the early days of social paid measurement, the key, as we see it, is to make enough small bets to get an idea of what works best for your business and your audiences. Our social media advertising budget worksheet may be useful in your paid media campaign planning.

Bringing It All Together

While finding the right metrics for each "leg" of the EOP stool is important, the real magic happens when you bring those activities together into a single integrated marketing campaign. You can use owned content and paid media to support and amplify earned media success. Blue Apron, the popular meal prep subscription service does this, advertising on Facebook with links to favorable product reviews — and not just from high-profile sources, but independent bloggers as well. And, of course, you can pitch your owned content, such as infographics and survey reports, to trade and consumer media.

Thanks for reading the “Playbook”

We hope you have a better understanding of the “EOP” approach and how you can use it to tell your organization’s story.

We know that just because you are now armed with this knowledge the hurdles still remain. For some, those hurdles are lack of funding; for others, lack of time or organizational understanding.

Please use the tools in this book to help make the case and educate. You may need to start slowly and grow the effort over time. That’s fine. We have seen how applying some of these principles and having a small amount of initial success can unlock doors. We’re happy to help if you need it.

Good luck.



Jon Newman, Co-Founder
The Hodges Partnership

Appendix

Within this book, we've made mention of tools and worksheets we've created to help clients plan their EOP activities. We've included them here for your convenience.

Media Pitching Template

With every media pitch you send, you've got to find a way to grab a reporter's attention in a way that's not overwhelming but is still interesting.

Is there something you'd like to pitch? Answer the following questions to develop a clear and concise pitch for your organization.

What's the most important piece of information you need to convey?

Is there a specific date or time frame that you need to reporter to be aware of?

Why would the reporter care about this news?

What is your ultimate goal of the pitch? (coverage, attendance, photo, meeting)

What are the resources my organization can provide an interested reporter?

Example pitch

Here's an example of a pitch we've used:

Start off on the right foot—spell names correctly!

Hi Allison,

Personalizing isn't always necessary but nice if you've worked together in the past.

I hope you've been well since we last caught up.

Next Tuesday, Lowman's will open its largest grocery store on the East Coast, right here in Richmond. Just as the store opens at 8 a.m. on Tuesday, May 26, there will be a ribbon cutting at the store where Major Williams, Lowman's president and the store manager will participate and say a few words.

Always make a direct ask. Remember, you're reaching out because you want them to do something.

Would you like to attend the ribbon cutting and get an exclusive tour of the store with the president? I can also make sure you speak with any associates, customers or city leaders that you think would add to the story.

Please let me know if you can make it.

Talk soon,

Lindsay

Amp up your social media with social advertising – Budgeting Worksheet

How to use this budgeting worksheet

1. Identify your goals. Before you begin, you'll want to come to a consensus with your organization on what success looks like. How many likes does your organization want, or how many clicks to your blog or website pages would be viewed as a success? Fill out the monthly goals column for the campaign objectives that are relevant to your organization and change the blanks to real numbers.
2. Multiply the numbers (goals) you've set in the monthly goals column by the average cost per action, and use this number to fill in the recommended monthly budget column.
3. Total up the columns to get a sense for what you'll need to budget to reach your goals. If this number is more than what your organization is comfortable spending, you'll want to go back and re-prioritize your goals.

Note: The cost of generating leads is affected by your target audience and the quality of your offers. To determine an average cost per action related to leads, we recommend a period of testing to develop a baseline specific to your organization.

Need help with your social media/content strategy? We can help. [Request a free consultation](#) when we can sit down and discuss how social media, social media advertising and owned content can further your organization's goals.

Pro tip: If you've run any social advertising campaigns in the past — use your average cost per action(s) in place of these averages for a more accurate budget recommendation. Example: If your organization has run a Facebook “like” campaign to a particular audience that you'd like to use again and the average cost per like for that campaign was \$0.75, replace our \$1.00-per-like estimate with your data.

Amp up your social media with social advertising – Budgeting Worksheet

Platform	Campaign Objective	Monthly Goal	Average Cost Per Action	Recommended Monthly Budget
Facebook	Page Like	Likes	\$1.00	
	Boosted Post	Impressions <small>(per 1,000 impressions)</small>	\$3.00	
	Website Clicks	Clicks	\$0.75	
	Lead Gen	Leads	\$3.00 - \$50.00	
			Facebook Total Budget	
Twitter	Followers	Followers	\$1.66	
	Tweet engagement	Engagements	\$0.50	
	Link Clicks	Clicks	\$3.00	
	Leads	Leads	\$15.00 - \$100.00	
				Twitter Total Budget
			Total Overall Budget	

Blog Post Template

Have you ever worked for weeks writing, editing and getting a blog post approved, only to find yourself scrambling at the last minute to locate an image and create social media posts? At [The Hodges Partnership](#), we use this template to make sure we have all the pieces we need when writing and publishing a new blog post, from keywords to social media updates. Feel free to adapt to your own organization's needs.

Quick Blog Checklist	
<i>Item</i>	✓
Keywords	
Title	
Social Media Updates	
Images	
Meta Description	

KEYWORDS

These are the keywords you want to write against in your blog post. Be sure to use them throughout your blog copy as well as in places like the meta description and headline. If your blog has a place to enter keywords in the CMS, you'll also want to use them there.

- Keywords XXX
- Keywords XXX
- Keywords XXX

IMAGE(S)

You should always include images with your blog. You'll want to treat the search or development of images (if you're going to make your own images in-house) as part of the blog writing process. If you are short on time and want to source an image from the internet, here are guidelines on doing so: <https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/29508?hl=en>

TITLE

Enter your post title. Remember: keep it under 70 characters for best search and social visibility.

BLOG COPY

Enter the content of your blog post. Make sure to think about the hierarchy of your post: are you using headings, paragraphs and bulleted lists?

SOCIAL POSTS

Why not take advantage of writing the social media updates you'll use to promote your blog post while you're already in the headspace of writing the post? This'll also make it much easier on you when you go to actually make the post, since you'll have your images (from above) and copy all in one place.

LinkedIn

- #1 LinkedIn post
- #2 LinkedIn post

Facebook

- #1 Facebook post
- #2 Facebook post

Twitter

- #1 Twitter post
- #2 Twitter post
- #3 Twitter Post

META DESCRIPTION

The meta description is a 150 character description of the blog post topic and is the copy that will appear when your blog post shows up in Google search results. You'll want to incorporate your keywords into the description.
