



# Advance Your Career Using Public Relations

BY JACK MOLISANI

“I don’t need to promote myself—my work speaks for itself.”

Do you have this viewpoint? At one point in my writing career, so did I. Eventually, however, I realized that doing good work was not enough to ensure that my career would advance at the pace I wanted. I now know what was missing—public relations (PR).

## What Is PR?

I recently went back to school to get my MBA (Masters in Business Administration); afterwards, I was very much looking forward to applying what I had learned to my career. I was an independent contractor when I started the program, and I was primarily interested in how to better market my services.

I found out that before I could take the marketing courses I wanted, I had to take a course in public relations. While I was eager to study marketing, I was definitely *not* interested in learning about public relations. I had always considered PR as something big companies did to justify questionable business acts.

However, I soon learned that there are many definitions for the term “public relations.” For example, the newsmagazine *Public Relations News* defines PR as follows:



# Management

The management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.

That definition sounds like it might apply to Exxon or General Motors, but not to me. Scott Cutlip and Allen Center, authors of the book *Effective Public Relations*, described PR this way:

Empathetic listening and persuasive communication.

This definition sounds more like something a lone technical writer might practice. But the definition that convinced me that PR was something that could really benefit my career came from “A Redefined Definition of PR,” an article by L. Ron Hubbard. He defines PR as follows:

Effective cause well demonstrated.

I knew I could *apply* Hubbard’s definition to my career, since I wanted prospective clients to recognize that I could add value to their products by delivering well-written documentation. Once I realized that PR could apply to my career, I was much more interested in studying it.

## Creating a PR Campaign

As I progressed through the course, I learned the four basic steps in applying PR to an area. Let’s look at each.

### Research

Before you can demonstrate that your services are causing desirable effects, you need to know what your company or client actually wants, and what they think about the area in question.

A caution: Don’t confuse *knowing* what your audience wants with *thinking you know* what your audience wants. As I will describe later, surveying your target audience can reveal some surprising data.

The research phase identifies what is important to your audience and what is not. You will need this information once you start communicating about your accomplishments.

### Planning

Once you identify what you want to handle or communicate, you need to plan how you are going to proceed. Since it is hardly practical for individuals to take out full-page ads in industry journals to sing the praises of their own work, you have to do what you can with the resources available.

After some searching, I discovered I had the following resources:

- *Publication awards*—There’s little if anything more effective than winning awards in publication competitions (such as the ones sponsored by STC—see pages 28–32 for more details) to show that you produce quality work. As soon as I got serious about marketing my services, I started entering my work in publication competitions.
- *Samples of my work*—I found one great example demonstrating how I transformed an engineer’s scribble into an easy-to-understand process. I knew that this work showed I was good at my craft.
- *Volunteering*—While I truly enjoyed volunteering in my STC chapter, I had no idea just how much “good PR” came with holding an office in STC, even at the chapter level. When I was later elected president of the chapter, I was perceived as not only a good writer but also as a good manager. You really do get more out of volunteering than you put in!
- *Teaching workshops and speaking at conferences*—There are few more effective ways to show that you know what you are doing than teaching a subject to others.
- *Getting published*—Writing how-to articles for professional journals or newsletters provides authoritative proof that you know your craft. Most newsletter editors welcome submissions, so write an article and work to get it published.
- *Reference letters*—Satisfied-client letters and reference letters go a long way to demonstrate to others that you are an effective communicator. Don’t be afraid to ask for a “success story” at the end of a project.
- *Metrics*—One of the companies I worked for had a published standard on how many pages per day a writer

working on an “average product” should produce. I knew how productive I was, so I could use that standard to demonstrate my proficiency. Also, before-and-after tech-support figures can demonstrate your effectiveness.

### Communicating

Once you have begun gathering the “evidence” that you are a competent and talented technical communicator, you have to make others aware of your skill. How you do that depends on your situation.

If you are a contractor, you need to communicate your skill to prospective clients. If you are interviewing for a new job, you need to communicate your abilities to a prospective employer. If you’re an employee, you need to show your manager and others in your company what value you bring to the organization.

You will need to find the best vehicles for promoting your work. Here are some suggestions:

- *Your work*—Nothing will change how your employer or clients perceive you if you do not produce quality work. Learn your craft, learn your tools, and then turn out high-quality, cost-effective products. Your work is the best representation of your skill.
- *Industry Publications*—When you are published in a journal, magazine, or newsletter, you are automatically reaching everyone who reads the publication. However, don’t forget to circulate a copy of the article to your boss and other appropriate people in your office. If you are a contractor, send copies to your clients or prospects. (I have had articles published on Web sites and have simply e-mailed the Web address to the persons I think should be aware of the article.)
- *Conferences*—Speaking at regional, and national, and international conferences gets you exposure to the attendees. Be sure to let potential attendees know ahead of time that you are speaking so they can attend your session. If you are an employee, circulate the conference program to your boss and others in the company.
- *Company newsletters*—If you are an employee, get your accomplishments published in your corporate newsletter.



ter. If you win an award, speak at a conference, or volunteer at a local charity, make sure you send a “press release” to the newsletter editor. It’s up to you to make sure the editor gets the information. If you are an independent contractor, write your own quarterly newsletter and mail it to all your clients and prospects. Remember, you want others to realize that *you* are the one who made the event(s) happen: If you have to tell them yourself, do so.

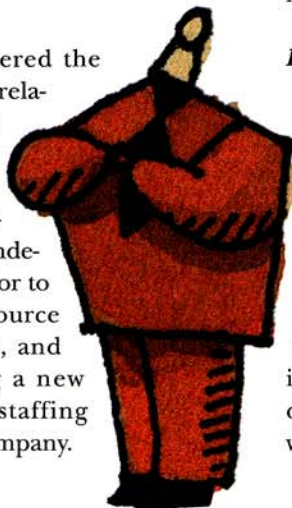
- **Your portfolio**—Whenever you do something that demonstrates your skill or knowledge, make sure you put a copy of the item (newsletter article, publications award, etc.) in your portfolio, even if you are not currently looking for a job. The perfect opportunity may come knocking—or you may be downsized—so be sure your portfolio is up-to-date and contains the best samples of your work.
- **Reports**—Whenever you have quantifiable data such as “Support calls decreased by 15 percent after we published a quick reference guide,” be sure to document the data and send copies to your supervisor or clients. You want your accomplishments documented and *known*.

### Evaluating Your Success

As with other endeavors, you should evaluate your performance at the end of the project. Whether you measure the effectiveness of your PR campaign with a survey (see below) or by the increase in your paycheck, you must strengthen what worked in your plan and change what didn’t.

### Results

Since I discovered the power of public relations, I have applied it to two main areas of my career: transitioning from an independent contractor to starting an outsource writing business, and then launching a new recruiting and staffing division of my company.



### Outsource Writing

For my research phase, I enlisted the help of a friend and surveyed product managers in the top fifty companies in my area regarding their views on documentation and technical writers. I didn’t expect to learn much, since I was *convinced* I knew what my clients wanted in their technical documents. Was I wrong!

Before I did the survey, I was sure that I knew what was most important to prospective clients—that their documentation be technically accurate. However, when asked how they would benefit from having ideal documentation, prospective clients put technical accuracy *last* on the list. The top answers were “less stress” and “not having to worry about it.”

Although we did only a sample survey, the exercise taught me an important lesson: Don’t assume you know what your audience wants; ask them.

As a result of the survey, I stopped emphasizing that that we create accurate documentation (even though we do) and started emphasizing that we can help managers reduce their workload if they outsource some of their projects. The response to our mailings tripled.

To demonstrate that we were effective writers (once I got an interview), I walked a prospective client through a complete project plan (also known as a “document plan”) that I had recently added to my portfolio. Suddenly I started landing more and more work. The reason? When I did the evaluation step on my PR campaign, almost all my new clients said, “Other candidates *said* they knew how to create good documentation. You *showed* me.”

### Recruiting and Staffing

I knew when we started the new staffing division that there were already many “headhunting” companies out there and that I would somehow have to set my company apart from others. The biggest “button” that came out of the market research (surveys) I did was that human resource managers were tired of receiving resumes of candidates who were not qualified for the jobs for which they were applying.

Armed with the results of my market research, I created my PR and marketing plan. First I told prospective clients that we would send only qualified candidates, and I started getting jobs to fill. Then I made sure I *did* send only qualified candidates, and soon made my first placement.

After my candidate accepted her job offer, I asked the company for a satisfied-client letter (so I could demonstrate to other companies that we are effective recruiters). Do you know what they liked best about working with us?

That we sent only qualified candidates.

So what do you know—PR and marketing works!

### Summary

Public relations is not just mounting a slick publicity campaign or putting a positive spin on an unfortunate event. Think of it as Hubbard’s *effective cause well demonstrated*, and you’ll start to see opportunities expand in your own career.

Whether you are an employee, contractor, or business owner, your livelihood depends on others wanting your services and paying you in exchange for them.

You are responsible for showing your target audience how effective you are.

Got it? Now get going! ■