

Marketing and PR: Everything I Ever Needed to Know About Business I Learned In a Rock Band

By Rodger Roeser, APR
President, Eisen Management Group

Those that know me know that I speak allegorically – I have a penchant for using nickel words and often turn to analogy and allusion to make a point. I have always found that it makes complex issues more personal and enables someone to better understand and appreciate an issue or an argument. My favorite analogies and stories typically tie in my experiences as a working, and often times starving, musician. Even as a suit and tie running a successful boutique agency, I am still that same wannabe rock star who practiced public relations and marketing before I even understood the so called “right way.”

There are literally endless ways businesses, personalities, civic and social leaders, and others utilize marketing and public relations in their efforts. In offering some practical and useful advice that I often learned the hard way, created as I went along, or simply worked harder than others would be willing to to make the seemingly impossible happen, understand that everything involved in good marketing and PR can be distilled into a story about rock and roll.

1. Play With Your Heart, Not Your Head

Too often, I see practitioners, either the so called professionals or internal teams, over thinking, over analyzing and over just about everything in an attempt to implement or develop a given marketing or public relations program. We’re likely all familiar with the term “paralysis by analysis,” but in marketing, it seems to be a rampant virus. So often, organizations and practitioners will laboriously fret (get it) over every conceivable outcome and focus on tactical minutia rather than looking at the big picture or worse, failing to see something beautiful in its simplicity that would actually work. Achem’s Razor: All things being equal, sometimes the most obvious is the right choice. Stop over thinking and DO SOMETHING.

I find too often that most would rather talk endlessly about ideas and theories and outcomes instead of finding a simple E chord that would crack someone ribs and really have an impact. Yes, it’s important to be prepared up front, but in looking at your organization, find what will make your customers (the listening audience) passionate and want to sing along to your tune. Stop focusing inward and think outward and let yourself be creative and passionate about what you do and how it makes a difference, solves a problem and tells a beautiful story. Because, as you talk with your customers, they’ll know when you’re playing a song you really love or just going through the motions. Marketing is not about keeping quiet in the cube: Shout it out loud.

2. The Show Must Go On

Things happen. It’s marketing, not rocket science. No matter how much you plan for an event, a grand opening, publicity or even desired outcomes – rarely does everything go exactly as planned. You can plan and you can spend head time on creating desired outcomes and what you believe is every possible contingency, but it will happen that the drummer is going to show up late (trust me), six people and your mom will be in the only ones in attendance, or the fact that you’re lip synching will be exposed on live national television. Things happen, it’s inevitable. How you recover, roll with the punches, and still make everything seamless is the mark of a true professional.

A good pro is prepared when something outside of their control happens. Last I checked, even the best agencies are not the magazine publishers, nor do they tell CNN upon what they should

report. Businesses must understand that fact. It can rain. So as opposed to getting electrocuted when you plug in your amplifier, you are ready in advance for such unexpected opportunities to shine. You're drummer fails to show up, time to grab the acoustic guitars and go "unplugged." Whatever happens, have a back up and be prepared because the event or the interview or the program is in motion. As Frankie says: Relax. Do your job, and be the professional.

3. Know When To Hire a Manager and Outside Professionals

Sometimes, being a good musician (having a great company or product) is simply not enough. Hiring outside marketing professionals, just like hiring a lawyer or accountant, is a prudent move. You play your music well, we'll show you how to take it to the next level and market it accordingly – that's why all the great bands have great publicists. Over my 20 years in this marketing and PR business, I've seen, witnessed, created or otherwise had some involvement in just about everything at one point or another. Not much would shock or surprise me. I've made more mistakes over the years and learned from them than anyone else should have to go through. I taught myself how to play guitar, instead of hiring a teacher – which caused me to fire myself after I discovered guitarist after guitarist was so much better than me. I had a basic understanding, but these guys were good and better than me. They made the entire band (your business) better and I could focus on being the consummate front man.

I see the same thing in business. They "try" to do their marketing and public relations, but trust me, people like me know a heluva lot more about this than you do – it's all we do. I see unintegrated programs, poorly written and self centered articles and press releases, websites developed by your cousin Tony's high school son yet you're a "high end" retailer. A good agency will save you money, not cost you. A good agency will bring hard work, fresh ideas, creativity and also bring to bear all these nifty tools and expertise not afforded to most businesses – particularly small or medium sized ones. And, if you *are* an internal marketing and public relations pro, don't think that hiring outside expertise makes you look bad; rather it's quite the opposite. A good producer can make a good song great. Bet you can name 20 rock bands (you, the client), and not 20 producers (me, the agency). Count on the experts and let them do their job. It will save you time, money and give you a competitive advantage. If you make widgets, make them great – just let someone else market it.

4. So, You Broke a String During the Song

Remember, it's only one song of an entire set, an entire show, and possibly even an entire tour. Put things into perspective and refer back to rule #2. Just grab your second guitar or replace the string while you're drummer does his solo (it's called a distraction). Rarely will one single instant or tactic that may have to be changed or altered affect the overall outcome.

Also, keep in mind that sometimes hitting the "wrong chord" or playing the "wrong note" can lead to a much better song or outcome. Serendipitous mistakes have made for some of the most memorable songs – "Just Look Over Your Shoulder's Baby" – was a mistake by Michael Jackson in a Jackson 5 hit. Never be so rigid in your thinking that you believe there can't be a better way or that a serendipitous mistake can't make a program as a whole even better. A good marketing professional must have the ability to improvise on the fly – and with the good ones – you'll never even notice.

5. We've Got To Play These Kinds of Places First

One of the most amazing things I see in marketing, particularly in public relations and publicity, is how centric most companies and CEOs see their importance in the marketplace. No matter the size of the company or the arena in which it plays, all too often, I see them act and even expect

to be on par with the Microsoft's, IBM's, or Procter & Gamble's of the world. They are amazed that CNN is not interested in devoting 30 minutes to talking about how amazing and brilliant this company or this CEO are – and the fact that they're not in the paper or on TV is because we simply haven't called the media. They refuse to do interviews in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* because they'd rather hold out for *USA Today*. *FastCompany* is the only magazine I'll be interviewed in, they say. I hope that one interview that may never come is a damn good one.

You see, you have to play a lot of dirtball clubs and bars before you get to play Madison Square Garden. I suppose you could rent out MSG (advertising), but who would come anyway? It takes time to build a solid following and also takes time to develop and create programs that will be most attractive to a journalist and media outlet – hard working people that are NOT on MY payroll. Although a good agency would have strong relationships with many journalists and reporters, good reporters have a job to do as well.

A good agency or practitioner can work with an organization or entity and find what is most likely to peak the interest of the media and how they can most likely secure coverage – regularly. Because, one show at a club doesn't mean you get to play MSG the next night. It takes time, takes consistency, and takes tenacity. You must be able to put yourself and your organization on context and be willing to commit to a longer term program.

6. Good Publicity Doesn't Necessarily Mean Good Attendance

Trust me. Most of the bands in the Cleveland area were not real big fans of my group because we were so media savvy (they had a great PR guy). We were on the cover of music magazines, newspapers, did live TV and radio interviews and performances, had press kits, did video and photo shoots, saved whales and still found time to throw TVs out of hotel windows – but that didn't guarantee a packed house. You know what did? Hard work, practice and a heluva show.

In business, nothing is going to make up for a bad experience by the customer. I call it Brand Operational Dissonance (BOD), where the ads and smarmy PR guy say one thing, but the person behind the counter is rude, disinterested or your coffee is cold. Operations and your customer service, and honestly, the expertise of your people or the novelty of your new product is still going to be key. Find good insights. Test and retest with marketing research and secret shoppers in your specific target audience – and remember, you're mom doesn't count. If she likes your songs, you're doing something wrong i.e.: ask your target and don't be afraid of honesty. Use that information to refine and make your service, your product or you better. This is why good brands are always cautious of what appears in the news media or new media – and are protective of those things. Spin is exactly that. You don't have to spin a fantastic new restaurant.

7. Passion Can Make Up for Talent

Just ask KISS (Sorry, couldn't resist throwing that analogy in there). They have never claimed to be great musicians, but they are certainly amazing entertainers and you can feel the love for what they do, witness how hard they work, and experience the passion they have for their fans (your target audience) and their music (their product). They are second only to The Beatles in number of albums certified gold.

I am not the greatest public relations practitioner that ever lived. I'm not the smartest, I'm not the most creative – but I am the hardest working. I have the pleasure of having the best job on earth. I LOVE what I do and, ask my team, it can be sometimes all consuming and often times a challenge for others to keep up. I work late. I work weekends. My mind is always going, looking for other ideas and better ways of going about something. Do I get up at four in the morning to deliver cheeseburgers or flowers or coney's to the news media – yep. Pass out coupons or deliver

hot coffee to the homeless in the dead of winter -- you bet. I stuff press kits, lick envelopes, make cold calls and entertain complete strangers at events. I'm not too proud to do anything that has to be done for the good of my clients or the good of the company, and sadly, I don't see that very often.

This job is a paycheck. I'm too good for that task – it's not my job. That kind of attitude is a killer in business. Again, people are smart and know when you're faking it. Not that every program is perfect or every idea a winner, you just have to practice your passion and not be afraid to surround yourself with great people, talented people – if only they would learn how to play with their heart and not their head (refer them to rule #1).

8. Practice

There is no substitute. They say amateurs practice until they get it right, but professionals practice until they can't get it wrong – it just becomes second nature. I can stand out on stage, play a killer bassline, belt out my song, jump up and down, press the button for the fog machine and point to a "fan" all at the same time without even thinking about it. So, too, must business. You must work with your team over and over and over again. Rehearse your speech, your movements, your key messages, your interviews.

A good agency has, as I've mentioned before, been there, done that with so many different programs – we've practiced. Marketing is not a good place necessarily for trial and error. During the show is probably not the best time to try out your new flaming guitar trick. Keep things simple and do what you know and do it better than anyone within the context of what you're trying to do. Should you shred a lead guitar solo during a slow ballad just because you can – clearly not. Understand how you and your expertise fits in to make the whole greater than the individual parts, then work together in the many facets of your organization or your marketing program to create a comprehensive and leveraged program. Need help? Rule #3.

9. What Comes After 4?

One. With marketing and public relations, it is a process that involves upfront research, assessment, strategic communications and implementation, and finally an evaluation. Many of us are familiar with R.A.C.E. Again, if you're not, refer to Rule #3. But, I've always felt this left something out of the equation – Continual Process Improvement. A good business and a good marketer will constantly find ways to make something work better, work smarter and more efficiently. If what you're doing isn't working, don't keep doing it because 'the plan' says so. If the strategy is solid, but the tactics are not working as expected, don't be afraid to improve upon that process if you've given enough time for the tactics, or personnel, to do their job.

Constantly measure and evaluate based on set key performance indicators, such as traffic, impressions, sales, leads and a host of other measurable objectives. Use unique URLs to track the efficacy of a given advertisement, direct mail or publicity endeavor. Utilize your tracking services and survey programs with clients and customers – items like surveymonkey and zoomerang have made this process simple and efficient. Set your benchmarks at the beginning, run the program well, evaluate then make it better.

10. Turn it Up!

"If life is a radio, turn it to 10." Turn it up. Have fun and enjoy what you do and do your best on each program, each event, each time. Look for fresh ideas and never be afraid to get a "no" from a client, a reporter or a sales prospect. If you never give someone a chance to say "no," they'll never have an opportunity to say "yes." Said another way: "It's better to have loved and lost

than never to have loved at all.” Soak things up like a sponge and take time to learn and be positively influenced and impacted by everyone around you. 10 is sometimes analogous to perfect, but understand that rarely will everything be perfect – marketing and public relations is a process and should be treated as such.

The number ‘10’ also makes me think of surveys and research, which are keys at the beginning of a program and also the rule of thumb as to the percentage of your total budget you should spend on research – competitive, demographic, segmented and the like. Doing your due diligence and investing in that research at the beginning of a program will save time, money and a lot of headaches.

11.

There’s no eleven in music. Unless you play for Spinal Tap. Rock on.

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Rodger Roeser, APR, is the president of integrated buzz marketing, social media and public relations firm Eisen Management Group. The company is headquartered in Cleveland, Ohio, with branch offices in Greater Cincinnati. Roeser is the 2005 president of the Cincinnati Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America and founder of the Blacksmith Awards. Roeser is the former Vice President of Justice & Young Advertising and Public Relations, former Senior Consultant with HSR Business to Business and former General Manager of VMS Ohio. He is an award winning newspaper reporter and editor with the Lorain Morning Journal and Bellevue Gazette Company, and former news anchor and reporter for TV2News and WCPZ102.7FM.