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Managing PR and Communications in a Digital Age



Introduction

PR, you've changed

What do you think of when you hear the letters PR? Is it still Patsy and Edwina from Ab Fab – all champagne, parties and hobnobbing without doing much actual work? Do you view it as an unnecessary addition to more quantifiable marketing activities?

If you do, think again.

You more than likely already use PR without knowing it. In fact, even if you just share content on Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn you're already 'doing PR'. But are you doing enough and are you squeezing every drop of value out of your activities?



Why it matters

Everything your business does, from selling, planning and budgeting to research and development, relies on effective communication. The better you communicate, the more productive and profitable you are.

In a constantly connected world, **how, what, when and why you communicate outside your organisation is central to your business's success** but during a time of significant change (say for example a global pandemic or Brexit – remember Brexit..?) it **could be the difference between stagnation or growth.**

What is PR?

The official version: PR is how an organisation communicates with external audiences to create a positive public image, build and protect its reputation, and promote its products and services.

In brief: 'PR is what other people say about you'



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PR then and now

Traditionally, PR operated in a silo and its success was measured by media coverage achieved. Today it's an integral part of an organisation's overall communications strategy, closely aligned with its strategic and commercial objectives and uses multiple off and online channels to achieve them.

More opportunities

The revolution in social media means stories are issued and often published almost immediately and the constant demand for fresh news gives media relation managers more opportunities than ever to get their content to audiences faster and more efficiently than ever before.

More channels

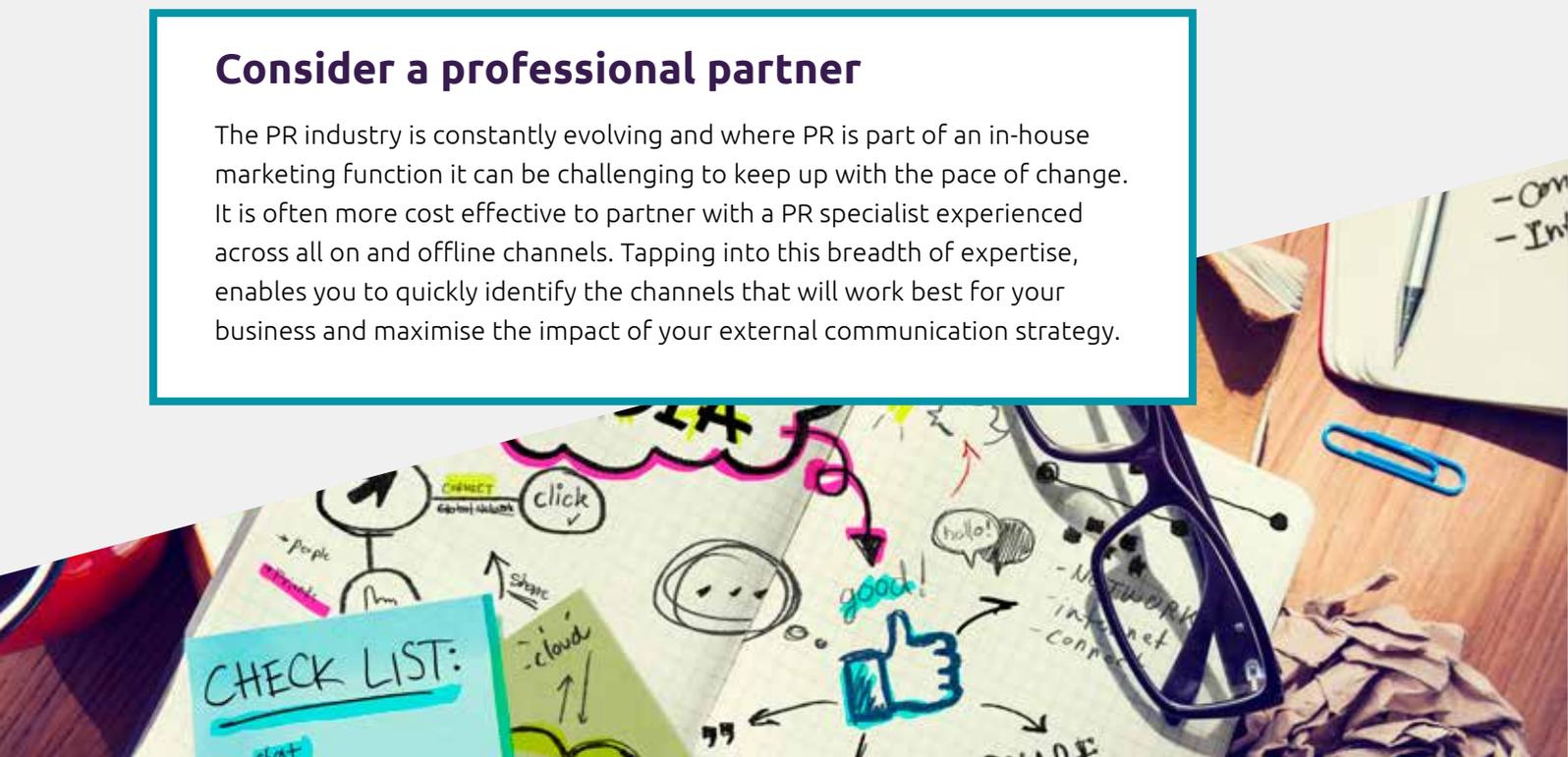
Hard copy trade publications still have a place, particularly in the B2B space, but online content now reigns supreme incorporating not just social media but a whole range of channels including blogs, video and mobile as well as online publications.

More measurement

Digital coverage allows organisations to reach audiences quickly and allows them to measure and track the effectiveness of content published online. A variety of metrics can be used depending on your motivation but could include click through rate, lead generation (and quality), search rankings or social media shares.

Consider a professional partner

The PR industry is constantly evolving and where PR is part of an in-house marketing function it can be challenging to keep up with the pace of change. It is often more cost effective to partner with a PR specialist experienced across all on and offline channels. Tapping into this breadth of expertise, enables you to quickly identify the channels that will work best for your business and maximise the impact of your external communication strategy.



We all love a good news story

In 2020 the fundraising efforts of Captain Tom Moore lifted the spirits of the nation, providing some hope during the early, bewildering early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those of us who work in PR pray for content like that. It's PR gold.

Here's why:

- It's authentic
- It had all the elements of a great story including a hero with a purpose
- It created an emotional connection; the strapline "Tomorrow will be a good day" became a mantra for many getting to grips with the reality of COVID-19
- It had a positive purpose (at last count Captain Tom Moore had raised more than £32m for the NHS)
- It had heritage – a retired army Captain who had already seen off one national threat
- It responded to a need - for something uplifting
- It grew organically; originally reported in the Bedfordshire/Milton Keynes press it quickly spread through social media and word of mouth before hitting national press and broadcasters

And it all stemmed from a well-written, old-school press release and was followed-up with consistent and engaging communications which ensured the story gather momentum.

Clearly, promoting a commercial business is very different to this kind of unique, individual fundraising effort but many of the principles apply. A good business news story is truthful, has integrity, responds to a need, has a positive purpose, and is communicated in a clear and consistent way.



PR for B2B organisations

The overarching goal of your commercial external communication strategy is to increase revenue.

PR begins with the premise that potential customers don't inherently know if (or why) your business is relevant to them unless they're told. PR tells that story; it tells customers not just what your business offers, but why it matters, enhancing your visibility and positioning you as a leader in your field.

While an advert can raise awareness of the fact that your organisation or product exists, it can't go into the kind of detail that a good editorial piece can. And crucially, whereas your market knows that adverts are paid for and so (within reason) say whatever you want them to say, editorial is either written by – or has the endorsement of – the magazine editor, and so is infinitely more credible.

Advertising also limits your exposure to the publication or digital space that you have paid for. PR offers an approach with wider potential, for instance, issuing a press release about a new product could lead to editorial coverage in multiple publications, making it more cost effective.

Regular PR helps to keep your business front of mind. By consistently appearing in the press you're continually gathering a greater following, and when they need the services you provide, the sense of familiarity with your brand will put you in a strong position to win business over your competitors.



The case for the Case Study

For B2B organisations a cost-effective and under-used way to promote your business is the humble case study.

What is a Case Study?

A written piece or video that demonstrates a real-life project you've completed. It usually includes:

- Who the client was
- What their problem or need was
- How your business helped – give enough detail for potential customers to think 'they really know what they're doing'
- What was different about your approach e.g. something about your service offering
- What the impact was on your customer's business e.g. cost savings

Lightly peppered with a few, well-chosen testimonials.

Why case studies work:

- It brings your offering to life
- It demonstrates how you solve your customers problem
- It's objective (well semi-objective); yes you may write it as a promotional content but, especially if you include some customer testimonials, it has additional credibility because it demonstrates an independent party's view of what you do
- It's relatable. A reader of the case study who has the same issues could potentially convert into a new customer

Here's an example of a Case Study we put together for our Marketing Partner, SRL Traffic Systems, the UK and Republic of Ireland's leading manufacturer and supplier of mobile ITS equipment and integrated systems to the traffic management sector.

Urban64® keeps cyclist and pedestrians safe during transformation of Old Street Roundabout

The challenge

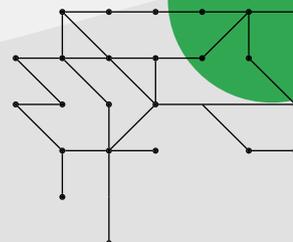
Safety around the Old Street station has been of some concern to Islington and Hackney Councils and Transport for London (TfL) for some time. The roundabout was a collision hot spot and with cyclists making up almost a third of all vehicles, most accidents involved cyclists or pedestrians. With four subways to access Old Street station there was also concern for public safety, particularly at night.

Following a period of consultation plans were agreed to close the north-western arm of the roundabout, creating a new peninsula space with the existing central-island and introducing a two-way signal controlled layout. New cycle lanes and crossings would be created, some segregated from vehicles with cycle-only signals. To improve pedestrian conditions, one of the subways would be closed to create greater footway space and new pedestrian crossings.

The solution

Morgan Sindall was appointed as contractor and Blue Arrow as traffic management contractor on this high profile, complex project.

With works projected to take 18 months, SRL's Urban64® system was chosen as the best temporary solution during the construction phases.



Why Urban64®?

Urban64® is the only permanent technology system designed uniquely for temporary installations. Its design allows for bespoke layouts to be created to suit temporary works.

Urban64® is completely flexible and a major factor for this 18 month long project over different phases of works. A key benefit of using Urban64® is its unique ability to incorporate complex permanent traffic signals facilities in a temporary layout, most noticeable low level cycle signals.

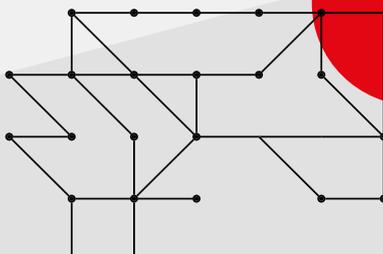
The benefits for Old Street roundabout

SRL worked alongside Red Wilson Associates, experts in traffic signal engineering and design, to create multiple temporary layout designs and method of control to enable the safe flow of vehicles, cyclists and pedestrian traffic during the construction phases.

Urban64® equipment was able to support pedestrian movements and fully segregated cycle tracks using its Low-level cycle signals and thermal detectors, assisting and promoting the safe movement of pedestrians and cyclists during the construction phases.

John Cleary, Managing Director of Urban64® at SRL said,

“We were delighted to bring Urban64® to this project and work alongside TfL, Morgan Sindall, Blue Arrow Traffic Management and Red Wilson Associates. Our combined design and technical expertise and experience working on temporary systems were invaluable. It was exciting to be able to fully utilise Urban64® unique features of incorporating cycle phases and signals into a temporary system, and to see it working so successfully.”



The importance of PR in a time of change

Relevant, robust, reliable – your organisation’s reputation is underpinned by these values. Successful businesses spend time, money and resources promoting these aspects of their products and services. But change is an inevitable feature of business and an organisation’s ability to embrace, navigate and communicate it, is essential when it comes to achieving their strategic objectives.

Whether it’s a business acquisition, new pricing structure, corporate rebranding, new product launches or the development of a new online offering, how effectively you communicate change both internally and externally will be pivotal to its success.

Communicating Change Case Study: SRL Traffic Systems

When SRL Traffic Systems took the strategic decision expand its range of temporary ITS products, its team and break into new markets, it needed to generate a demand for the new products and services among traffic and event management organisations. To do that it needed to communicate what made their offering different to - and better than - existing suppliers.

Trade communication - what FIG did

Industry press release: press release drafted focussing on the strategic nature of the (multi million pound) investment, product features and benefits as well as the infrastructure being developed to support the new offering.

Social media: blogs, LinkedIn articles and social media posts communicating details of the new products and services.

Results

- **May to August 2020: coverage in 12 trade publications.**
Total audience reach: 634,796
- **Positive response from customers and significant demand generated for new products**
- **Significant strengthening of industry profile**



Managing imposed change

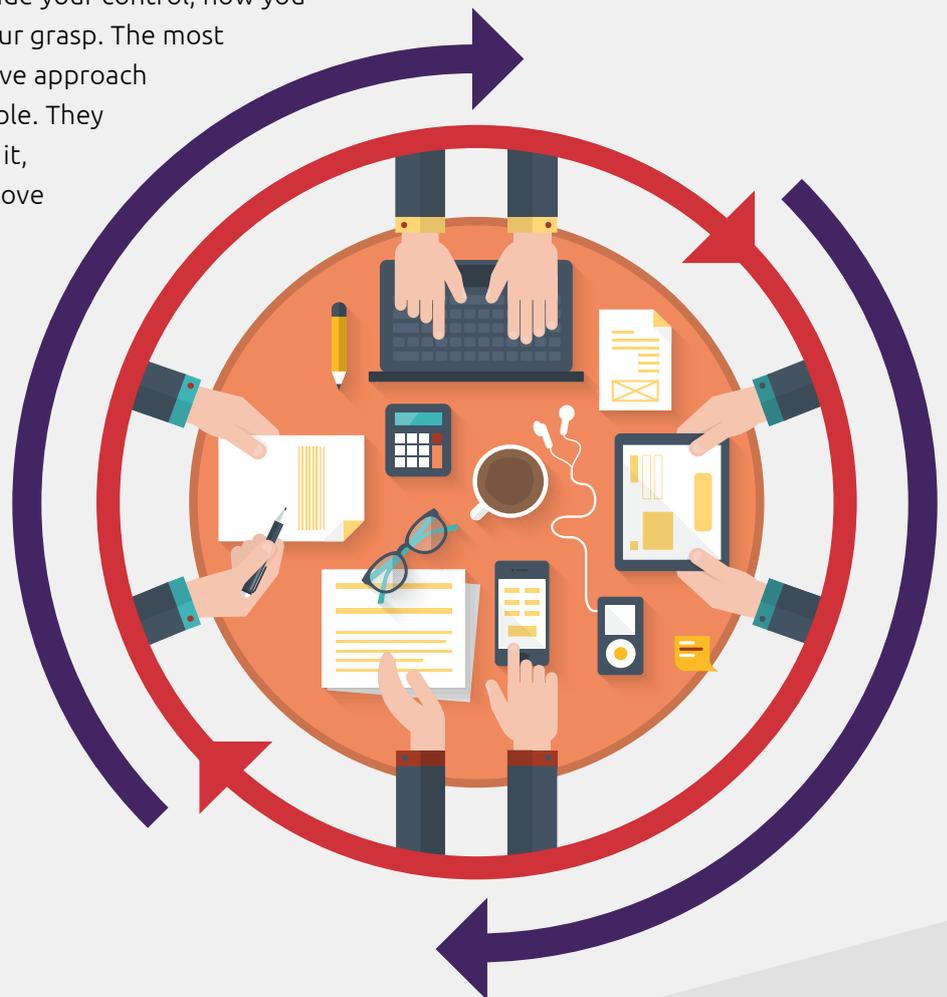
When change is positive and reflects success, public communication is a given but when that change is more difficult and/or out of your control it can be more difficult to manage, for example, in response to economic, political, regulatory change.

Particularly now, when the business (and economic) conversation is dominated by uncertainty and instability, it's tempting to batten down the hatches but in fact those are the times when it's critical to invest in and utilise your PR.

Keep one step ahead

Although change itself may be outside your control, how you respond to it is very much within your grasp. The most successful businesses take a proactive approach to change; they're agile and adaptable. They anticipate it, prepare for it, plan for it, take the lead in embracing it and above all, they communicate it.

Whatever the change and whatever the circumstance, explaining what's happening (or is going to happen), why it's happening, what you expect the impact to be, what you plan to do and why you plan to do it, ensures stakeholders understand you better and trust you more.



Proactive PR

Because an effective PR strategy understands your audience so intrinsically, it doesn't just respond to events - it prepares for and pre-empts them and can make the difference between a positive or negative experience for your customers and therefore your business. Truly proactive PR will have seeded the potential for and the motivations for change in advance, neutralising 'shock' or knee jerk responses.

- **Regular and well-placed PR and external communications develop loyalty and understanding with your audience.** As a result, they'll trust you to navigate change and to maintain your values in doing so.
- **Adopting a range of communication channels** (print and broadcasting /digital and social media) enables you to speak effectively and respond quickly (and sometimes directly) with your audience. By being present and connected, you'll be perceived to be robust and capable.
- **Show, don't tell.** Proactive PR doesn't just let your customers and peers see change – it talks and walks them through it, selling your strengths, reiterating your relevance and keeping the conversation on your terms.

Change and the associated (and sometimes difficult) conversations with audiences are a part of business. But it can be harnessed into powerful and positive force with effective communication and purpose. And with proactive PR at the heart of your business strategy, your business will tend to experience less disruption and be better positioned to identify and take advantage of the opportunities that change can bring.



Maintain your PR focus

Expanding communication channels, content generation, influencer marketing; there's so much noise around new, emerging and industry 'disruptive' ways of communicating with customers, clients and potential markets.

Identifying how, where, and when you should invest resources and time is critical and it can be hard to resist following the latest trend, even though it may not be right for your business. Social media, for example, is an important communication channel and its effect can be immediate, global and quantifiable. But while it's important, it is not a complete solution and - especially in B2B PR – it needs to be harnessed alongside, not instead of, more familiar and practiced communications activities.

Social and digital hits may deliver quick marketing wins, but third-party validation, media and press coverage delivers strong sustained reputational growth. Authority, authenticity and integrity are key messages in a busy marketplace, but you can't just claim these for your own, you have to earn them, and this can only be achieved with a multidimensional PR approach.

A solid, strategic approach that's efficient and effective necessitates integrated, targeted messaging across all four main types of media:

Paid media: content you're paying to place and to have distributed. Traditional outputs would be print, broadcast advertising but it also includes social media marketing such as Google AdWords, retargeting and social media ads.

Earned media: your content and messaging which is distributed on its own merits by journalists, influencers and professional or sector organisations. (Often thought of as true 'PR'.)

Shared media: engaging, shareable content posted to social media sharing platforms including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram.

Owned media: your content and your audience. You own it – you distribute it – you control it.



Most organisations use these channels to some extent already, but they need to be blended in a strategy that develops your 'brand story' via all available channels, always focussing on delivering results and driving growth.

Crisis Management – PR not ER

It's unrealistic to think a PR crisis won't happen to your business. According to research and strategic advisory firm Oxford Metrica, **companies have an 82% chance of facing a crisis in any five-year period.**

What's the crisis?

A crisis is an event, either within or without your organisation's control, that has the potential to damage your reputation and profitability. It can either be a bolt out of the blue (an act of god or, more likely, a cyber attack) or an escalation of an issue you've known about for some time.

What could possibly go wrong....?

- Corporate irregularities e.g. theft, deception
- Sudden/unexpected resignations by board members or other key personnel
- An employee or customer is treated unfairly or subject to discrimination
- An employee is injured or killed in the workplace
- Legal actions
- Social media bloopers

At FIG we've helped handle media interest around a number of 'crises' from a plant closure through to a factory break-in and the imprisonment of a business owner!



Often the greatest reputational damage comes not from the crisis itself but from how you manage it. Unforeseen and unfortunate events are inevitable in businesses but what stakeholders are interested in is how you plan for and cope with it and it's the PR team's responsibility not only to diffuse the situation but to use the opportunity to communicate your brand values and how resilient they are when challenged.

It's important to be decisive and respond quickly - a lack of information can allow time for rumours to circulate. It's wise to have an experienced team in place which can deal with the press directly and efficiently.

3 phases of managing a crisis

- 1. Recognise** what's happened being as honest and transparent as possible. There is a 'golden hour' and how you respond in this limited timeframe will set the tone for the rest of the crisis.
- 2. Regret.** Don't be afraid to say sorry if something is your fault (subject to legal opinion depending on the circumstances) and at the very least express regret - especially if someone's been hurt. Always put any victims first, acknowledging the impact the incident has had on them and outlining what you're doing to help.
- 3. Resolve.** Communicate clearly what you're doing to manage the current crisis as well as what you're doing to update your strategy to prevent a similar incident happening again in future.

Reputation events including cyber attacks and PR crises can have a direct impact on share price and the cost has doubled in the age of social media, according to *2018 Reputation Risk in the Cyber Age* produced by Pentland Analytics and Aon plc.

This study of 125 reputation events over the last decade found that **since the introduction of social media, the financial impact of reputation events on stock prices has doubled.**

At FIG we'd add another R to that list – Ready.

How you plan and prepare for a PR crisis is as important as what you do when one actually happens, especially in a world of social media where bad news travels faster than ever and more people than ever before can have their say when things go wrong.

For example...

When an employee at Taco Bell refused to serve a deaf man trying to order food at a drive thru, his girlfriend filmed the incident and his mother shared it online. As a result, more than 1.5m people viewed the video and more than 15,000 commented on it.

The employee was fired, and the remaining staff had to undergo discrimination training to ensure there were no future incidents of this kind.

Identifying and planning for potential crises saves valuable time, confusion, and stress, ensuring your response is more considered:

- **Establish content ground rules.** Fast but robust proof and approval procedures for all the content your organisation distributes will help avoid problems in the first place but when a crisis happens they'll also ensure you provide a consistent (and more trustworthy) response.
- **Create and communicate a crisis management plan.** Once you've identified potential crisis scenarios (e.g. product recall, fire at a premises, loss of customer data) you can create a specific plan for the most likely and/or damaging. Create guidelines about when and how to 'call a crisis' and who will do what when. Your plan should include up-to-date contact details for everyone you think you might need to communicate with and in what order.
- **Create a crisis response team.** Usually led by the CEO supported by PR and legal advisers, everyone in the crisis team should know in advance what's expected of them. And what isn't...employees that 'go rogue' in a crisis often cause more problems than the crisis itself. Provide appropriate training for key roles especially spokespeople; there should only be one voice in a crisis (the CEO's usually) so make sure the rest of your employees are aware of the sensitivity of the situation. Ideally your team should be as diverse as your audience in order to ensure the most rounded response.
- **Make use of pre-emptive technology** to identify a brewing crisis before it bubbles over. Social listening software such as TweetDeck, Buffer, Talkwater Alerts and Sprout Social can be a great way to alert you to a sudden change in sentiment towards your organisations.

Effective planning for a crisis can be the difference between your organisation's survival - or not - and it can also ensure a much shorter recovery time, getting you back to business as usual as quickly as possible.

The benefit of hindsight

Once the storm has passed it's good to remember that there will be another crisis one day and the more you can learn from this one, the better prepared you'll be for the next. Start by evaluating the damage, what worked well to repair it (and what didn't?), assess whether the crisis team functioned as you expected and plug any gaps.



About FIG

We create and deliver communications strategies for our clients that transcend business teams and silos and bring together internal and external comms. Many of them are niche B2B businesses with complex, specialist products and solutions in the packaging, transport, automation and manufacturing sectors. It's especially important for businesses like these to cut through the technical detail of what they do to engage with their audience.

We generate PR for our Marketing Partners and owner managed B2B businesses that generally have no, or very little, in-house marketing resources as part of an overall strategic plan to meet their business objectives. We become an extension of their team.

Our approach

Our PR team works to become experts in what our clients do, and then to communicate this in plain English to the media that matter. Our approach clearly works, as editors in some of the most technically exacting titles approach us to request that we write articles for them, attributable to our clients. They trust that what we write will be clear, concise and interesting to their specific readership.

FIG's PR expertise includes:

- **Media relations**
- **Crisis management**
- **Training and mentoring**
- **Award entries**
- **Social media management**
- **Content generation including blogs, case studies, LinkedIn articles etc..**



Promoting Investment & Innovation Case Study: Glossop Cartons

Communicating the success of a product innovation is a powerful tool in strengthening your industry profile.

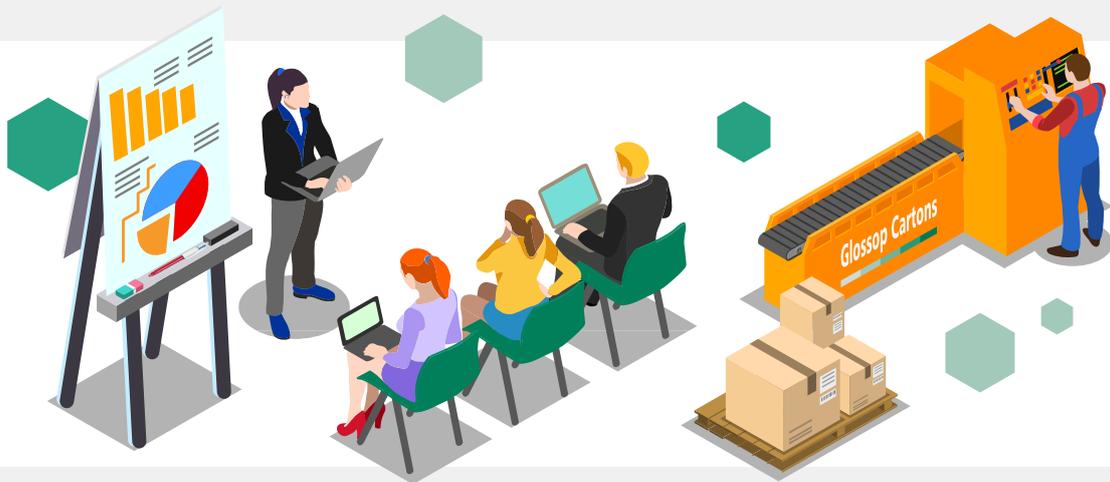
As a FIG Marketing Partner, packaging specialist Glossop Cartons benefits from a continuous, clear and consistent communications strategy designed to keep them at the forefront of industry media, comment and analysis.

Our campaign to promote the business's significant capital investment programme (that enables it to deliver energy efficient products to the highest pharmaceutical industry standards) has reaped significant rewards.

Results

- Take up of key innovation, environmental sustainability and business success messages in coverage
- Articles in leading industry publications. Total audience: in excess of 1,300,000
- Multi-media coverage (print and digital) in regional and local business media
- New leads and contracts won as a direct result of coverage achieved

Glossop Cartons



For many of our B2B and manufacturing clients it is PR that has been instrumental in their growth journeys, positioning them as experts in their field and helping to extend their markets in the US and Europe.

To find out more, get in touch with FIG's expert PR team.

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