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THE NEW RULES OF PR

How to create a press release strategy for reaching buyers directly

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you believe would benefit from reading it. THANK YOU.

The new rules of PR in a Web 2.0 World

How to create a press release strategy for reaching buyers directly

The Web has changed the rules for press releases. The thing is, most old-line PR professionals just don't know it yet.

Because the rules for relating to the public have changed so slowly over the past ten years (*since the Web has allowed people to read press releases directly*), practitioners who learned based on the old rules have been equally slow to change. In fact, most old-school experts have refused to change altogether. It is time to step it up and consider the promise Web 2.0 public relations holds.

- **Do you want to reach your buyers directly?**
- **Do you want to drive traffic to your Web site?**
- **Do you want to achieve high rankings on the search engines?**
- **Do you want to attract buyers who are looking for what you have to offer?**
- **Do you want to move people into and through the sales process?**
- **Do you want to compete more effectively?**

THEN READ ON.

But be prepared to alter the way you think about press releases.

The old rules of press releases

In the old days, a press release was – shockingly – actually a release to the press.

Before the Web, everybody knew that the only reason you issued a press release was to get the media to write about you.

Ye Olde Press Release Rules

- Nobody saw the actual press release except a handful of reporters and editors.
- You had to have significant news before you were allowed to write a press release.
- A release had to include quotes from third parties, such as customers, analysts and experts.
- The only way your buyers would learn about the press release's content was if the media wrote a story about it.
- The only way to measure the effectiveness of press releases was through “clip books,” which collected every time the media deigned to pick up your release.

NO MORE.

The Web has transformed the rules and you must transform your releases to make the most of the Web-enabled marketplace of ideas.

Why you need to learn the new rules

Today, savvy marketing professionals use press releases to reach buyers directly.

While many marketing and PR people understand that press releases sent over the wires appear in near real-time on services like Google News, very few understand the implications for how they must dramatically alter their press release strategy in order to maximize the effectiveness of the press release as a direct consumer-communication channel.

The media has been disintermediated. The Web has changed the rules. Buyers read your press releases directly and you need to be talking their language.

This is not to suggest that media relations are no longer important; mainstream media and the trade press must be part of an overall communications strategy. In some businesses, mainstream media and the trade press remain critically important and, of course, the media still derives some of its content from press releases.

But your primary audience is no longer just a handful of journalists. Your audience is millions of people with Internet connections and access to search engines and RSS readers.

The new rules of press releases

- Don't just send press releases when “big news” is happening; find good reasons to send them all the time.
- Instead of just targeting a handful of journalists, create press releases that appeal directly to your buyers.
- Write releases replete with keyword-rich copy.
- Create links in releases to deliver potential customers to landing pages on your Web site.
- Optimize press release delivery for searching and browsing.
- Drive people into the sales process with press releases.

OK

, now that you know the new rules, you need to change the fundamental way that you use press releases. Throughout the rest of this e-book, I'll share with you some specific strategies for leveraging the once lowly press release into one of the most important direct marketing tools at your disposal and, in the process, teach you how to drive buyers straight to your company's products and services.

Let the world know about your expertise

Every organization possesses particular expertise that has value in the new e-marketplace of ideas. The Web has made it easy for organizations to publish that expertise in various forms, including press releases, which allows companies, institutions, and non-profits to function much like traditional publishers. Organizations gain credibility and loyalty with customers, employees, investors, and suppliers through content and smart Web marketers now think and act like publishers in order to create and deliver content targeted directly at their audience.

As organizations of all types begin to behave like publishers, many are adapting to the rigors of the publishing business and learning the editorial process. At the same time, new rules are emerging as online publishing continues to mature.

In an increasingly competitive marketplace, all organizations are searching for the elusive key to success. Well, look no further: Content, even in the form of a “*mere*” press release, will unlock success in almost any product category, even in highly competitive industries where smaller players are beset upon by larger, better-funded competitors.



Let me tell you a story

I speak regularly at conferences and seminars. In the Fall of 2005, I was preparing a keynote speech called “*Shorten your sales cycle: Marketing programs that deliver more revenue faster*” for the [Software Marketing Perspectives Conference & Expo](#). To be honest, I was kind of procrastinating. Facing a blank PowerPoint file, I decided to hit on Google in search of inspiration.

I entered the phrase “*accelerate sales cycle*” to see if there was anything interesting I could use in my presentation. The highest ranked listings for this phrase on Google were from WebEx™, a company that provides online collaboration services. What was most interesting was that the links pointed to press releases on the [WebEx](#) site. One of the press releases was about a new product:

WebEx Launches WebEx Sales Center: Leader Expands Suite of Real-Time Collaborative Applications Enhance Team Selling Process, Engage Prospects Throughout Sales Cycle, and Enable Managers to Monitor and Measure Web Sales Operations

SAN JOSE, Calif., September 20, 2004 — WebEx Communications, Inc. (Nasdaq: WEBX), the leading provider of on-demand collaborative applications, today launched WebEx Sales Center, a new service that helps companies accelerate sales cycles, increase win rates, and close more deals by leveraging online sales calls.

Then I went over to [Google News](#) and checked out the same phrase – “accelerate sales cycle” – and sure enough, WebEx also had the number one listing with a very recent press release dated September 28, 2005: “*Application Integration Industry Leader Optimizes Marketing and Sales Processes with WebEx Application Suite.*” The press release, about a WebEx customer, had been sent through [PRNewswire](#) and had a direct Web link to the WebEx site to provide additional information.

There’s more. WebEx also provided links in some press releases directly to free trial offers of their services. *How cool is that?*

WebEx provided me with a great example of a company that had optimized the content of press releases to include relevant terms such as the one I entered “*accelerate sales cycle.*” The company’s press release body copy included additional terms such as “*sales process*” and “*marketing business process*” along with other excellent examples of keyword usage.

After reading the WebEx press releases, I decided to incorporate some of the information I learned into my keynote speech for the Software Marketing Perspectives Conference & Expo. Now I frequently use WebEx as an example in [other presentations I give](#) (*not to mention here in this e-book*).

Imagine the number of times this press release content has benefited WebEx just from one person that the company reached – me. I’ll present this WebEx case study before thousands of people on the speaking circuit in 2006. And if the [last e-book I published](#) (*a free preview of my book Cashing in with Content: How innovative marketers use digital information to turn browsers into buyers*) is any guide, more than ten thousand people will read about this WebEx example in these pages in the coming months. But I am just one person – imagine how many other people entered similar words and phrases as I did and saw WebEx press releases.

**THIS IS A TERRIFIC – AND REAL – EXAMPLE OF THE NEW RULES
OF PRESS RELEASES IN ACTION.**

Reach your buyers directly

Under the old rules, the only way to get “*published*” was to have your press release “*picked up*” by the media.

We’ve come a long way. The Web has turned all kinds of companies, non-profits, and even rock bands and political campaigners into just-in-time and just-right publishers. Organizations – the new publishers – create press releases that deliver useful information directly onto the screens of their buyers.

Until recently, nobody ever thought of companies as publishers; newspapers and magazines published the news. But that’s all changing. Self-publishing Web-style has moved into the mainstream and organizations large and small are doing the publishing... *via press releases*.

As you are making this fundamental shift, what should you write press releases about? Big news is great, but don’t wait. Write about just about anything that your organization is doing:

CEO speaking at a conference?

Write a release.

Win an award?

Write a release.

Have a new take on an old problem?

Write a release.

Add a product feature?

Write a release.

Win a new customer?

Write a release.

Publish a white paper?

Write a release.

Get out of bed this morning?

*Okay, maybe not...
but you are thinking the right way now!*

To bypass the media, think like they do

In order to implement a successful press release strategy, think like a publisher. Marketers at the most enlightened organizations recognize the fact that they are now purveyors of information and they manage content as a valuable asset with the care a publishing company does.

One of the most important things that publishers do is start with a content strategy and then focus on the mechanics and design of delivering that content. Publishers carefully identify and define target audiences and consider what content is required in order to meet their needs. Publishers consider questions like: *Who are my readers? How do I reach them? What are their motivations? What are the problems I can help them solve? How can I entertain them and inform them at the same time? What content will compel them to purchase what I have to offer?*

Publish your press releases through a distribution service

Publishers also recognize that simply creating compelling content is not enough; it has to reach interested readers. The best way to publish press releases is to simultaneously post a release to your own Web site and send it to one of the press release wires.

There are a number of options for wire distribution of press releases. The benefit of using a press release distribution service is that your release will be sent to the online news services such as Yahoo!, Google, Lycos, and many others. Many press release distribution services reach trade and industry Web sites as well. In fact, you can reach hundreds of Web sites with a single press release. Take a look at the various services and compare them yourself.

A Selection of the Larger Press Release Distribution Services

BusinessWire www.businesswire.com

PRWeb www.prweb.com

PRNewswire www.prnewswire.com

Market Wire www.marketwire.com

In order to get your press releases to appear on the online news services, you just have to get your release onto a basic press release “circuit” offered by a press release distribution service. The services also have many value-added options for you to consider. Compare options and in making your choice, remember that when your goal of sending press releases is search engine marketing. Thus, the newsroom and geographical reach offered by a service is less important than ensuring that your releases are included on major online news sites.

RSS feeds from online news sites display your press release content

Many press release distribution services also offer [RSS](#) (*Really Simple Syndication*) feeds of their press releases, which they make available to other sites, blogs and individuals. What this means is that each time you publish a press release with them, the press release is seen by thousands of people who have subscribed to the RSS content feeds. And online news services such as [Google News](#) have RSS feed capability too, allowing people to receive feeds based on keywords and phrases. So each time your release includes a word or phrase of importance, people will receive your press releases directly and in near real-time.

Simultaneously, publish your press releases to your Web site

Post your press releases to an appropriate and readily findable section of your Web site. Many organizations have a media room or press section of the Web site, which is ideal. The press release should be kept live for as long as the content is appropriate, perhaps for years. For many organizations, the press release section of the Web site is one of the most frequently visited parts of the site. Check out your Web site statistics. You may be amazed at how many visitors are already reading your press releases.

When the press release is posted on your site, search engine crawlers will find the content, index it, and rank it based on words and phrases and other factors. To achieve high rankings, pay attention not only to the words and phrases, but also to other search engine optimization factors such as the URL used, the words in the headline and first paragraph of the release, the title tag, and [metatags](#). Don't use image files for text, as the words cannot be read by search engine crawlers. You should also create your own RSS feeds of your news stories on your site. Use a standard off-the-shelf RSS feed generator so that interested visitors will be able to subscribe to your press release feed directly.

[For much more detailed information on the specifics of search engine marketing techniques, check out [Search Engine Watch](#).]

Optimize your press releases for searching and for browsing

At the broadest level, there are two ways to use and deploy content on the Web and smart organizations understand both angles and optimize press releases accordingly. The first way that people use content is to answer questions (*through search engines*), thus organizations must optimize content to be found by searchers. This will attract people who are looking for what your organization has to offer. The second way that people use content is that they want to be told something that they do not already know. This is why browseability is so important; it allows users to “*stumble*” across useful information they didn’t know they were looking for. While many Web savvy marketers understand the importance of search-engine optimization, they often forget that sites must be designed for browsing too. You should deploy site navigational design in a way that provides valuable information visitors might not have thought to ask for in addition to answering any questions they may have.

To illustrate this concept, consider one of the Web’s best known sites, [Google](#), which in its purest form exists only to answer questions. With a site or content product organized only around answering questions, users must already know what they want before proceeding. But people also look to sites to tell them something. Contrast Google with another famous site, [Drudge Report](#). Drudge Report doesn’t exist to answer questions; rather, it tells visitors stuff they didn’t think to ask. While it does provide search functionality (*far down the home page*), Drudge Report provides content that’s meant to be browsed and, when you are creating content for your site, *you should too*.

Press release pages are among the most popular parts of many Web sites based on visitor counts because many people browse these pages as they research topics. Consider organizing your press release section using multiple ways to browse. Maybe create links to releases based on buyer profile (*maybe by vertical market or some other factor appropriate to your organization*), by product, by geography, and the like, in addition to providing a prominent homepage link to a media center or newsroom. You might also divide releases by different “*solutions*” or market-target landing pages to help users drill to areas of interest.

People who are searching for your release will still find them by searching with keywords and phrases, but people who do their own research and consider a decision over a period of time often browse releases to learn about an organization. They may also need to print them out to present research to others in their organization, so consider providing easy ways to print releases (*in PDF format as well as HTML*).

The importance of links in your press releases

Particularly because your releases may be delivered by feeds or on news services and various sites other than your own, creating links from your press releases to content on your Web site is very important. These links, which might point to a specific offer or to a landing page with more information, allow your buyers to link from the press release content into specific Web site content on your site that will then drive them into the sales process.

However, there is another enormous added benefit to including links in press releases. Each time your press release is posted on another site, such as an online news site, the inbound link from the online news site to your Web site helps to increase the ranking of your site. This is because the search engines use inbound links as one of the important criteria for the page ranking algorithms. So when your press release has a link to your site, you actually increase the ranking of the pages that you link to – *yours*.

Focus on the keywords and phrases that your buyers use

One thing successful publishers do, which Web marketers should emulate, is understanding the audience first and then set about to satisfy their informational needs. A great way to start thinking like a publisher and to create press releases that drive action is to focus on your customer's problems and then create and deliver content accordingly. Use the words and phrases that your buyers do. Think about how the people you want to reach are searching and develop press release content that include those words and phrases.

Too often, press release content simply describes what an organization or a product does. While simple information about your organization and products might be valuable to a subset of your buyers, what many really want from your site is content that first describes the issues and problems they face and then provides details on how to solve the problems. Particularly when your buyers search, they use the words and phrases important to them. Once you've built an online relationship, you can sell into the needs and potential solutions that have been defined, but you need to help them find you first.

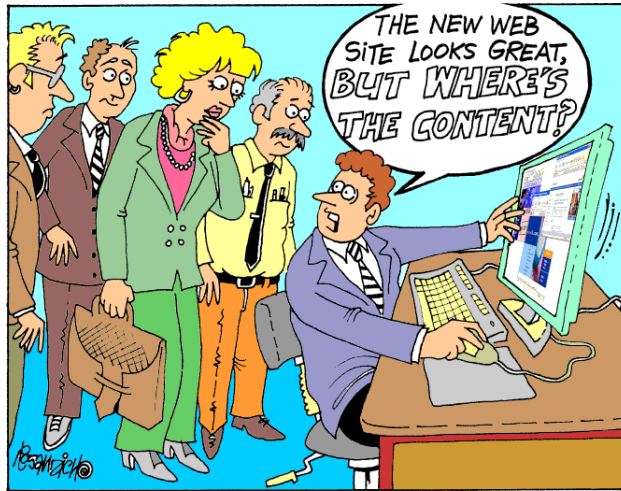
First, determine who your target audience is and figure out how they should be sliced into distinct buying segments. Once this exercise is complete, identify the situations in which each target audience may find themselves. *What are their problems? What keeps them awake at night? What do they want to know? What words and phrases do they use to describe these problems?* The answers, by the way, may be very different from the way you would label them. Don't get trapped by your own jargon; think, speak, and write like your customers do.

Your Buyers Don't Want Gobbledygook

Though you may have a well-developed lexicon for your products and services, they don't necessarily mean much to your potential customers. As you write press releases, focus on the words and phrases that your buyers use. As a search engine marketing tool, press releases are only as valuable as the keywords and phrases that are contained in them.

Avoid words like *flexible*, *scalable*, *groundbreaking*, *industry standard*, or *cutting-edge*, and other forms of what I call *gobbledygook*. The worst gobbledygook offenders seem to be B2B technology companies. For some reason, technology marketing people have a particularly tough time explaining how products solve customer problems. Because they are a bit fuzzy, they cover by explaining myriad nuances of how the product works (*peppered with industry jargon that sounds vaguely impressive*). What ends up in press releases is a bunch of “*industry-leading*” solutions that purport to help companies “*streamline business process*,” “*achieve business objectives*,” or “*conserve organizational resources*.” Huh?

Your buyers (*and the media that covers your company*) want to know which specific problems your product solves and proof that it works as advertised – in plain language. Your marketing and PR is meant to be the beginning of a relationship with buyers and to drive action (*such as generating sales leads*), which requires a focus on buyer problems. Your buyers want to hear this in their own words. Every time you write, yes, even in press releases, you have an opportunity to communicate. At each stage of the sales process, well-written materials combined with effective marketing programs will lead your buyers to understand how you (*specifically*) help them.



Content Drives Action

An effective press release strategy, artfully executed, drives action. Companies that understand the new rules of press releases have a clearly defined goal – *to sell products, generate leads, secure contributions, or get people to join* – and deliver content that directly contributes to reaching that goal. At successful organizations, press releases draw visitors into the sales-consideration cycle, then funnels them towards the place where action occurs. The action mechanism is not hidden nor is the organization's goal a secret. When content effectively drives action, the end of the sales process – an e-commerce company's "buy" button, the B2B corporation's "please contact us" form, or non-profit's "donate" link – are found in logical places, based on content that leads people there.

For many companies, Web content also has a powerful, less tangible effect. On the best sites, content does more than just sell product – it directly contributes to an organization's positive reputation by showing thought-leadership in the marketplace of ideas.

Many people view a well executed series of press releases as highly influential, with regards to a company that they are considering doing business with. Press releases mean your company is "busy" and a lack of press releases can indicate that you are not moving forward. In the new world of marketing, consistent quality press release content brands a company or a non-profit as an expert and as a trusted resource to turn to again and again. Press releases are often considered as an important buying criteria, especially in a complex B2B sales process.

Drive people into the sales process with press releases.

Savvy marketing professionals understand that sales and marketing must work together to move prospects into the sales pipeline. This is especially important in a complex B2B sale that has long decision making cycles and multiple buyers that need to be influenced.

The good news is that press release content drives people into and shortens the sales cycle for any product or service, especially ones that have many steps and take months or years to complete. Here's how you can make this happen:

Understand your sales process in detail.

All sales processes are *definable, repeatable and understandable* and effective marketers use the Web to move people into and through the process. You need to get together with salespeople, sales management and product managers to understand exactly what happens in the sales cycle. You should answer questions such as: How do people initially find your company or product? What words and phrases do they use? Understanding the process in detail allows you to understand how in the process press releases can be used.

Segment your prospects.

Consider press releases based on the buyer persona, perhaps by job title or by industry. A prospect is much more likely to enter the sales cycle by clicking a press release that talks about solving her problems.

Create thought leadership content to sit at the top of the sales funnel.

People in the early stages of the sales cycle need basic information on the product category, especially "*thought leadership*" pieces. Don't just write press releases about your company and your products; be thought leaders and write about the industry and higher-level strategic issues surrounding your product or service. When doing initial research, people don't want to hear about you and your company; they want information about them and their problems.

Provide content that is compelling enough to get people to "raise their hand."

In your press releases, deliver something of value that you can trade for a registration form. A link from your press release to an informative white paper, online event (*such as a Webinar*), or online demo will help move your prospect further down the sales process – and, in exchange for the right content, she will happily "raise her hand" to express interest by filling out a form. Remember, you're still not ready to sell a product or service (*yet*); you are still relationship-building. (*By the way, these links will also help raise the search engine ranking of the pages you point to.*)

Measure and Improve.

Measure what content is being used and how. Understand through Web metrics what's working and constantly tweak the content to make it better. Meet regularly with salespeople to gain insights into the sales cycle and how your press release content helps, and can better assist, the process. The Web is iterative – you can and should make adjustments on the fly.

The New News Cycle

The news cycle has changed, and with it, so must many of the rules of the game. With Web-based access to information, consumers have real choices for how they learn about the world around them – alternatives to the filter of mainstream media. Not too long ago, the only way for corporations to influence news was for their PR people to issue a press release (*intended for media only*) and then hit the phones to talk up journalists. Editors and reporters were in a power position as the filter between organizations and the public. With the old news cycle, all PR people knew the rules: *The ultimate goal was to get some magazine or newspaper to write a positive story that would appear weeks or months later. Then the happy corporate flack would put the media hit into a clip book to prove their value to the organization.*

No more. Information control is decentralized. The best PR and marketing pros know that Web-based communication delivered directly to their constituents is highly effective. Now, press releases circumvent the media and appear in real time on millions of desktops. Bloggers almost instantly comment on product announcements, and smart communications pros treat these “new journalists” with respect. Of course, magazines and newspapers are still vitally important, but in the new news cycle, the value of the media has shifted to adding context to the news and identifying trends. Marketers are beginning to understand what the new news cycle means to their communications efforts and are harnessing the power for their organizations' benefit.



If the media does write about your organization, GREAT!

Throughout this e-book, I have focused on how press releases are an effective way to communicate directly to your buyers. However, journalists still read and rely on press releases as they write stories. While you must work to craft releases targeted at your market target, your press releases should also make it into the hands of media professionals. The good news is that your efforts to communicate in a language potential buyers will find useful will not be lost on the media either; clearer more effective press releases will make sense to them too.

And hey, if your releases generate a story about your organization, wonderful! Don't forget to link to it from your site and to purchase the online and print reprint rights for the article so you can promote it to your buyers, who may not have seen the story directly themselves.

Just don't wait for the media to talk. If you craft and deliver your press releases effectively, in today's Web context, you will reach your constituents directly.

Prepare to be a maverick

If you're read this far, thank you.

But now I must warn you: Many people who adhere to the old rules of press releases will fight you on executing this strategy. If you are a marketing professional who wants to reach your buyers directly through press releases, you will likely encounter resistance from corporate communications people. They will tell you the old rules are still in play. They will say that you can only send press releases when you have “big news.” They will say that you need quotes in your press releases from respected third-parties such as analysts and customers.

But the old rules are old news. Press releases are being read by millions of people who are not journalists and billions of dollars of successful sales result.

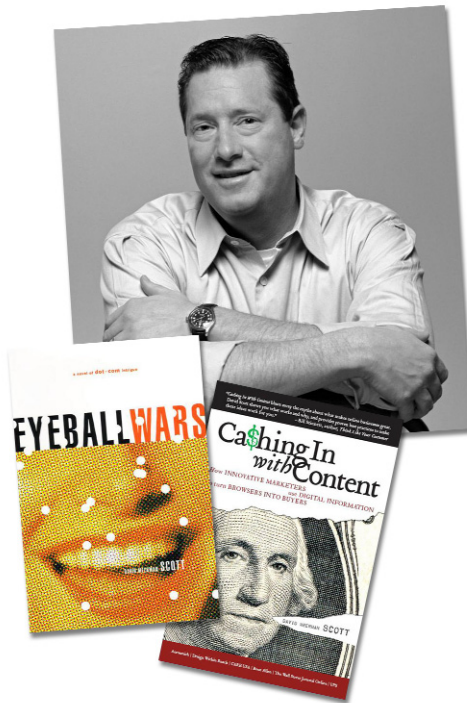
If you face a stubborn old-line PR person in your organization, you may need to prepare a case for why your organization needs to adopt the new rules of PR.

You will need to be a maverick.

DON'T GIVE UP.

THERE'S NO DOUBT THAT IN THE WEB ECONOMY, PRESS RELEASES DRIVE ACTION AND MAKE THOSE WHO CREATE THEM SUCCESSFUL.

About the author



David Meerman Scott is a writer, consultant, conference speaker and seminar leader specializing in using online content to market and sell products and services to demanding customers worldwide.

His latest book *Cashing In With Content: How Innovative Marketers Use Digital Information to Turn Browsers Into Buyers* is a riff on using Web content to drive revenue and other action from Web site visitors. He is also the author of *EyeBall Wars: a novel of dot-com intrigue* and is a contributing editor at *EContent* magazine and a contributing writer at *Product Marketing Magazine*.

His writing has also appeared in such diverse publications as *CMOMagazine.com*, *BusinessWeek*, *Competitive Intelligence Magazine*, *North American Review*, *MarketingProfs.com*, *RainToday.com*, *Marketing Times*, and many others.

David has lived and worked in New York, Tokyo, Boston, and Hong Kong and has presented at industry conferences and events in over twenty countries on four continents. Early in his career, he was a clerk on a Wall Street bond trading desk and acted in Japanese television commercials.

He is also an instructor for Pragmatic Marketing's *Effective Marketing Programs™* seminar, a two-day course that teaches a repeatable process that companies of all sizes can use to design, execute, and measure high-ROI marketing programs. For more information on Effective Marketing Programs, please visit www.pragmaticmarketing.com/content

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