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Credible PR, Other Tips on Selling into Tech Market

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First it was all “revenge of the nerds.” The media was filled with stories of the geeky guys and gals you knew in high school who couldn’t get a date and later went on to become instant millionaires. Followed shortly thereafter by stories of high burn rates, paper millions evaporating overnight and high-flying geeks going back and getting regular jobs like the rest of us.

Yes, the pendulum did swing wildly for a few years. But now it’s stabilized, and technology companies are once again on the rise. Only this time, they’re rising up the old-fashioned way, with business models based on profitability instead of the technology’s “coolness” factor and a skeptical eye toward anything that smacks of the old dot-comism.

While much of the approach is now the same as with any other business, there are still a few nuances specific to selling the tech community. Keep these in mind and you will find, as the saying goes, that the rising tide of technology will raise your boat along with the others.

Know the language. Like many types of societies, there is a language specific to the tech community. Failure to use it, or using the terms improperly, will immediately brand you as an ignorant outsider and subject to being shunned by those “in the know.” If you want your message to be heard, make sure you’re saying it in the way your audience understands it.

Focus on benefits. Technology creators tend to fall in love with the features of their products. That’s understandable. When you put your heart and soul into something and it comes out the way you meant it to, you tend to be proud of the outcome. But you’re not trying to sell yourself. Tech customers don’t care what it took to build the train. They just want to get to the destination. Focus on the benefits to the customer and you’ll be a lot more successful in marketing to them.

Avoid the hype. This is the other side of point #2. You have to be real. There was more than enough hype to go around back in the bubble. Today’s IT personnel are looking for facts, specifications, and other hard information. They want to know what your product or service does, and more importantly how they will benefit from it. The more concrete you can make your promised results, the better chance you have to capture the interest of the people you need to sell. In other words, don’t just promise “less downtime.” It’s better if you can say it will reduce downtime to less than an hour a month. Better still if you’re willing to guarantee it in writing.

Use PR to build credibility. The old saw about the implied third party endorsement still applies. Most tech people, even the somewhat adventurous ones, want to know someone else has tried a particular product or service first, and has achieved good results. That’s where public relations comes in. Getting your story told by the media, positioning your experts as thought leaders in your space, and having your products reviewed by well-respected publications are all ways to create credibility and increase a prospect’s comfort in trying your products.

Add reference clauses into your contracts. You may need to provide high visibility customers with a discount, but it's worth it. Whether you want to use the customer as a direct reference for other prospects or include them in your public relations effort, it's important to do all you can to secure that permission up-front. Many companies in the tech market have regretted leaving out this step since it's often a lot tougher to get the reference once everything is up and running. Make it an obligation, if you can, and it will pay dividends far beyond your investment in the discount.

Keep your Web site up to date. When they're looking for a new technology solution to a problem, it's almost a given that IT people will begin their search on the Web. Which means sooner or later (although probably sooner) they will land on your Web site. If your site looks like it was put up three years ago and hasn't been touched since, the impression you'll be giving is that not much is happening with your product/service. On the other hand if you have fresh information up there—new press releases, press clippings, data sheets, blog entries, white papers, industry news, etc.—you'll give a much better impression of being at the forefront of the industry.

It may not be the wild and woolly days of the tech bubble, but the market for technology products is once again very viable. After all, no one is looking to pull out all their PCs and go back to paper, pencils and typewriters. By recognizing the realities of today's audience and selling them intelligently, you too can take advantage of the resurgence and capture your unfair share of sales.

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PR as a means to accelerate sales

Ask most companies why they're conducting a public relations campaign and they'll respond "to get coverage" or "to get our name out." That's a valid answer. But if they're thinking only in terms of the day an article runs they're not getting the full value from their PR program.

Two other areas where PR can have a substantial impact on the sales process are online search and direct marketing. Well-crafted press releases placed on BusinessWire or another wire service will often be picked up automatically on a variety of major news portals such as CNBC Money, Yahoo! News, and the Wall Street Journal.com. These placements can help drive up your Google ranking, making your Web page more visible when prospects conduct a search on your keywords.

On the other side, placements such as thought leadership articles, favorable product reviews, or even punchy quotations in a news article can be used proactively in a "push" campaign to customers and prospects. It's one thing for you to send an e-mail saying how great your product or company is. It's another for you to send an e-mail showing how great one of the top tech or business publications thinks it is. A great article can be merchandised in a number of ways, giving it value (and life) far beyond the day it appears.

Coverage is nice. But coverage that also helps move the sales needle or solves a sales problem is a much better value for the money.

—Mike Nikolich