

Wearing the prized hat of credibility

By Kevin Gallagher

Building and maintaining credibility is a fundamental requirement for investors, customers, and ultimately, success. But it isn't a designation that comes overnight.



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Credibility means a lot of things. Sure, having a reputation that makes people feel comfortable enough to buy your product or invest in your company is part of it. In the PR world however, there are numerous qualities that enable credibility — and a lot that can erase it.

Technical credibility. Will you exist in two years? Three years? Your technical approach or product must be better than both incumbent and competitive offerings, and not just because you say so. Reputable people other than your current employees and investors — media, industry and financial analysts, and most importantly, customers and prospects — must believe in your story.

Management credibility. Your C-level team must have a track record of building and running technology companies, and you should have at least one technical star with experience in the specific area you're planning to enter.

Manufacturing credibility. Prospects won't buy unless they believe you can supply quality products in volume. You can enhance your manufacturing credibility by publicizing supply or production deals with large, established firms.

Market credibility, aka Total Addressable Market (TAM). If you want to be "up and to the right," prospective investors, financial analysts, industry analysts and the media must all be convinced that there's a real market and large revenue opportunity for your product.

Financial credibility. Can you execute? Can you cross the chasm? Have you read at least one of Geoffrey Moore's books? In 2013, this still remains very relevant.

Tactics that build credibility

There are a number of tactics you can use to deliver credibility-enhancing messages to the right audiences.

Thought leadership bylined articles. Contributed articles, bylined by an execu-

tive, are one of the best ways to show that you understand an important industry problem and that you have an interesting vision about how to solve it. Several media that cover your industry will publish bylined articles. When properly written, these articles are educational in nature and may even foster doubt about competitive products. While you can never publish an out-and-out advertisement for your product, a well-written explanation of your technical approach certainly builds credibility while denting the credibility of competitors.

Exposure. Obtain speaking slots in key industry events. Put your executive team on the speaking circuit by submitting to major conferences and trade shows. At many of these shows your executives will speak directly to the analysts, prospects, customer decision-makers, and media you need to reach with you message.

Build positive industry analyst "champions." Next to customers, positive industry analyst references are the ultimate source of third-party validation. Most analysts will accept an initial briefing or two with you at no cost, and that's your chance to explain your technical wonders, market potential and other points of value. If the analyst likes your story, get his or her cooperation as a reference. With a few such references, you will have a ready source of quotes that lend validation to your story in press releases, web site testimonials and even videos. And you'll know the analysts will be on your side when the media calls them for their opinion.

Build executive relationships with key media. In the old days this was called the "Rolodex" strategy. Most companies overlook this tactic, but it can be a powerful one. If you have a truly remarkable technology or you're approaching an interesting market, introduce your top executives and build relationships with key media and influencers. If your execs have insights worth sharing, they'll become important resources for the media as they prepare stories. Imagine having media call you in advance of breaking news.

Always publicize positive events. When things happen that add to your image, publicize them. This includes technology breakthroughs, production milestones, certifications, key partnerships, new senior executive talent, new funding, and of course, customer wins.

Tactics that erase credibility

PR is the business of control. What PR gives, bad PR can take away. Bad things happen to lots of companies, but some technology companies just seem gifted when it comes to squandering any credibility they may have amassed. Here are some common mistakes that will damage your credibility.

Pre-announcements. A common tactic of pre-announcing a product is taboo. The Ciscos of the world can get away with announcing products that won't actually ship for months — usually to create fear, uncertainty and doubt among a competing start-up's prospects. But small companies cannot because nobody will believe the announcement until the product can be proven to work (i.e. a customer says it does).

Invalidated announcements. You must validate everything you say, whether it's a technical milestone, a customer win, or a performance peak. If your announcements contain no customer or analyst quotes, or third-party validation, the media and its readers will not believe you.

Meaningless announcements. Some companies think that issuing a weekly flood of press releases is the key to maintaining a public profile, but it's not. Before you announce something, consider whether anyone outside of your own company is likely to care about it. If the answer is no, consider aggregating two or three bits of news into one bigger announcement; or convert to a company blog.

Last-minute cancellations. Spokespeople who can't be reached aren't spokespeople at all. If you've worked hard to set up a media or analyst briefing meeting with an analyst or media don't cancel if you can avoid it. Last-minute cancellations are far worse for speaking engagements, especially if the event is sponsored by a major publication in your market — you'll not only miss the chance to give a valuable presentation, but you'll also seriously damage your chances of ever being asked to speak again at the same event.

Many companies build strong credibility only to see it ebb away through missed product releases, financial losses, management defections, customer unhappiness, or other events. As your company grows, reinforce your credibility with constant media and analyst outreach, ongoing speaking and bylined thought-leadership article programs, and a policy of immediately and aggressively publicizing your successes. ●