

The Digital PR Campaign Playbook: From Idea to Earned Coverage

A working method for a digital PR campaign: test the angle, decide where original data comes from, build a media list, pitch, handle timing, qualify the links, and measure what the coverage did.

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01

Does the idea pass a newsworthiness test

Most failed campaigns fail before anyone writes a pitch. The idea was interesting to the people who work at the company and to nobody else. A useful test is to write the headline you hope to see without naming your brand in it. If the headline needs your company name to make sense, an editor will read it as promotion and the pitch will be filed with the others. If it works as a statement about the audience the publication serves, you have an angle.

Run the idea past a short set of questions before spending any budget on it. Is it new, meaning something a reader has not already seen this quarter? Is it relevant to a specific publication's readers, not to "the industry" in general? Does it have a tension, a surprise or a consequence that a reporter can build a paragraph around? Does it have a source, either a person who can speak credibly or a dataset that can be checked? These are judgement calls rather than measurements, so write the answers down and have someone who did not come up with the idea score them. A campaign that scores weakly on two of four is worth reshaping or dropping rather than rescuing with a bigger media list.

Be honest about who the story serves. A trade publication will take a narrower, more technical angle than a national outlet, and a local business can often get more from local and regional titles than from a national push that has no local hook. Decide the target tier at the angle stage, because it changes what evidence you need and how many people you can reasonably expect to reply.

- Headline test: does it make sense without your brand name?
- Audience test: can you name the publication and the reader it serves?
- Tension test: what is surprising, contested or consequential about it?
- Source test: who can be quoted, or what data can be checked?
- Timing test: is there a reason this runs this month rather than any month?

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02

Where original data comes from, and what each option can honestly claim

Journalists use data because it gives them something to report that does not exist anywhere else. The cost is that data invites scrutiny. A reporter or a reader may ask how many people responded, who they were, how they were chosen and what the question wording was. If you cannot answer, the story weakens and your credibility with that reporter goes with it. Pick the data source based on what you can defend, and state the method plainly in the release.

The options differ in cost, speed and the kind of claim they support. A survey of customers or an audience you already have supports claims about that group and nothing wider. A survey of a purchased panel can support wider claims only if the panel is described and the sample size and question wording are published. Analysis of public datasets, such as government statistics or publicly available filings, is cheaper and easier to defend, but you need to show the work and avoid reading causes into correlations. Your own anonymised operational data can be the most distinctive source of all, provided you have the right to use it, you have removed anything that identifies a customer, and you describe it as your own data rather than the market.

Whatever you choose, decide before collecting what the findings would need to look like for the campaign to proceed. If the data comes back flat, the honest outcome is a smaller story or no story. Starting from a headline and then searching the numbers for something that supports it is how weak methodology gets published, and journalists who check tend to notice.

Data source	What it can support	Main risk
Your own customer or audience survey	Claims about that specific group	Self-selected sample; the headline overgeneralises to "consumers" or "the industry"
Third-party panel survey	Wider population claims, if the panel and sample are described	Cost, plus leading question wording; panel quality varies
Public datasets (government, regulatory, open data)	Trends, comparisons and rankings others can verify	Reading causes into correlations; stale or revised figures
Your own anonymised operational data	Observations from your own book of work	Privacy and permission; small samples; presenting it as the whole market
Expert commentary with no dataset	Opinion and context on a news event	Easily replaced by any other expert; low novelty

03

Building a media list a reporter would recognise as researched

A media list is a set of people who have recently written about the thing you are pitching. Start from the angle and work outward. Search for the topic, note who bylined the recent pieces and read two or three of each person's articles. Record what they covered, what format they favour, and whether they use outside data or only cover announcements. The reading is the work. A name with no note beside it is a guess.

Keep the list short and tiered. A first tier of a dozen or so people whose recent work is a close match deserves an individual email that refers to something specific they wrote. A second tier can receive a lighter, still personalised version. Mass sends to hundreds of addresses pulled from a directory produce

unsubscribes, spam complaints and a reputation for sending irrelevant mail, and a reporter who has marked you as spam will not see your better pitch next quarter. Also check how each publication wants to be contacted. Some run submission forms or named tip lines, and ignoring that signals you did not look.

Record each contact's preferences and every interaction in a single place, so nobody on your side pitches the same person twice in a month or follows up after a clear no. The worksheet that accompanies this playbook has the columns for this.

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04

Pitch structure, embargoes and timing

A pitch is a short email that answers four questions in the first few lines: what is the story, why does it matter to this reporter's readers, what is the evidence, and who is available to talk. Put the finding in the subject line or first sentence. State the method in one line, link to the full data or a methodology note, and say what you can supply, such as a chart, an interview or a regional cut of the figures. Leave out adjectives about how exciting it is. The reporter will decide that.

Follow up once, a few days later, with something new if you have it. A further follow-up after that is more likely to annoy than to help. If a reporter declines, thank them and move on. If they reply with a question, answer it quickly and exactly, because speed and accuracy in the first reply are what make a reporter willing to come back to you.

Embargoes are an agreement, not a unilateral instruction. Sending a release marked "embargoed until" does not bind anyone who has not agreed to it. If you want an embargo, ask first and get a yes before you send the materials. Offer it sparingly, usually only when the reporter needs time to read a large dataset, and keep the window short. Timing otherwise depends on the news cycle for the beat. Avoid dates that are crowded with other announcements you can see coming, and note that regional and trade titles follow their own weekly or monthly calendars.

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05

Qualifying the links, and why none of them can be bought

Digital PR sits close to link building, which is where most of the risk is. Google's spam policies list buying or selling links that pass ranking credit, excessive link exchanges, and large-scale campaigns that place articles with keyword-rich anchor text on other sites as link spam. The distinction that matters in practice is between a link a publication chose to include because your data was useful, and a link someone was paid or promised something to include. The first is earned coverage. The second is a violation, even if the transaction is described as sponsorship or a partnership.

You do not control the attributes on a link someone else publishes. Google's guidance on qualifying outbound links says to use `rel="sponsored"` for paid or advertising links, `rel="ugc"` for user-generated content and `rel="nofollow"` for links you do not want to vouch for or associate with. It says links marked with these values will generally not be followed, though they can still be found through other sources. A legitimate editorial link may arrive with no attribute, and a publication may add nofollow as a house policy. Neither is a failure of the campaign. What you should not do is pay for placement and ask for the attributes to be left off. If a publication offers paid placement, it is advertising, it should be labelled and attributed as such, and it belongs in the paid media budget rather than the earned authority results.

After coverage appears, check each link: does it point at the page you intended, is the anchor text natural, is the page indexed, and is the destination page ready for visitors? Ask for a correction only when something is factually wrong or the link is broken, and never ask a reporter to change the anchor to a keyword. A tidy, useful destination page, such as the methodology and full dataset, tends to earn more links over time because later writers can cite it directly.

- No money, free product beyond a normal review sample, or favours exchanged for a link that passes ranking credit
- Paid or sponsored placement: labelled as such and attributed `rel="sponsored"`, and reported separately from earned coverage
- Do not request exact-match keyword anchors; accept the anchor the writer chose
- Keep a record of how each piece of coverage came about, in case the question is ever asked

06

Campaign checklist, from brief to review

The sequence below treats each stage as a gate. Nothing moves forward until the previous output exists and has been looked at by someone other than its author.

Step	Owner	Gate to pass before moving on
Write the angle as a headline with no brand name in it	Campaign lead	A second person scores it on the newsworthiness questions and agrees it stands without the brand
Choose the data source and write the methodology note	Analyst	Sample, dates, question wording and any exclusions are written down before the data is collected
Analyse the data and write down what it does and does not show	Analyst	Every headline claim traces to a number in the dataset; limits are stated in the release
Build and tier the media list	PR specialist	Each tier-one contact has a recent article noted and a stated reason for the pitch
Prepare the destination page with data, methodology and assets	Content owner	Page is live or staged, loads on mobile, and shows the method and date
Send tier-one pitches, then tier two after any replies	PR specialist	One follow-up logged per contact; declines recorded with no further contact
Qualify each link and record the attributes	PR specialist	Each piece logged with URL, link target, attribute and how it was obtained
Review at 30 and 90 days against the original question	Campaign lead	Review written up with results, misses and what the next campaign changes

07

Measuring what the campaign did

Count the coverage first, then weigh it. A single piece in a publication that your buyers read can matter more than ten pieces in titles nobody in your market opens. Record the publication, the date, the reporter, whether your data was cited, whether the link points at the intended page and whether the piece actually names your business. These are facts. Quality judgements such as audience fit are yours to make and should be marked as judgement in the log.

Then look at what happened downstream. Referral traffic from the coverage, branded search interest, enquiries that mention reading the piece and assisted conversions in your analytics all tell part of the story, and none of them proves the campaign caused the result on its own. Ask new enquiries how they heard of you, and record what they say without leading them. Link-based ranking effects are hard to isolate from everything else that changes on a site in the same period. If you report ranking movement, say what else changed and avoid promising it as an outcome of a campaign. Campaigns that produce no coverage are still informative: if the angle was rejected by the whole of tier one, the conclusion is about the angle, and it should shape the next brief.

Key Takeaways

- A campaign starts with an angle a journalist could use without your brand in the headline. If the story only works as an advertisement, it is not a story.
- Original data is the most reliable way to give a reporter something they cannot get elsewhere, but only if the method is documented and the finding is something the data actually supports.
- A media list is a research task, not a database export. Each name needs a recent piece that shows why you are writing to that person.
- Links earned from coverage are not all equal and you do not control their attributes. Paying for placement that passes ranking credit is a link spam violation under Google policy.
- Measure the campaign against the question it was meant to answer: coverage quality, referral traffic, assisted conversions and, only with caveats, ranking movement.

Sources

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2. Qualify your outbound links to Google — <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/crawling-indexing/qualify-outbound-links>
3. Creating helpful, reliable, people-first content — <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/fundamentals/creating-helpful-content>
4. Link best practices for Google — <https://developers.google.com/search/docs/crawling-indexing/links-crawlable>