

A Note: Zero-cost PR

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About 20 years ago, I co-authored an article that concluded office space in PR was no longer a fixed expense. The PR industry had long assumed that to perform PR tasks one needed an office for which one would pay rent whether there was business to be done or not. Of course, we have learned since that one can operate from anywhere, and many professionals do. With Blackberries, cell phones, laptops and ubiquitous WiFi connections, a place to work is wherever practitioners are. This might be at home, an airport lounge, a car, a hotel, a library or, even an office. Mobility has reduced real estate costs to the cost of equipment needed to work. Road warriors carry offices with them. A PR practitioner today needs an e-mail address, a phone number and perhaps a post office box. The practitioner could also have a LinkedIn page, Twitter account, web site or Facebook entry without a fixed location for business activity.

Public relations has always been a low-overhead business, and it is getting lower, if not quite to zero. The positive aspect of this is that practitioners can get started more easily than in the past. The negative is that anyone can go into the business because it is inexpensive to enter. All one needs is a client.

Requirements for machines and personnel are barebones. A question practitioners should ask is what is the least cost to practice PR. Reducing overhead increases margins. Increased margins provide one with a cushion to keep operating in a variable business, especially if like many PR practitioners, one takes project work. With projects, high returns for a month or two are followed by weeks of inactivity. The more money spent on fixed costs, the less one has to live through fallow periods. While it is not possible to practice PR without any expense, it takes little time to pay back the price of entry.

Let's go over what one needs:

- Computer
- Software
- Printer
- Phone
- Internet connection

It is possible to condense this list. For example, the internet and the phone are the same tool with VOIP – voice over internet packets and broadband availability on cells. That is, one can use the internet on a cell phone or a phone on a desktop or laptop computer. Mobility and ease of use are issues, however. Using the internet on a small cell phone is not as easy as on a larger computer

screen, and to incorporate a phone into a desktop or laptop computer requires a stable internet connection that lends to a fixed place of operating. As a result, most practitioners today use both a cell phone and a computer that duplicate functions.

Computer

The cost of computers has plummeted and if one were to purchase something as simple as a netbook, the price of entry is as low as \$300. With this machine, however, one depends on a stable and fast internet connection because information storage is limited and large files, such as photos, swamp the machine's capacity quickly. Still the inconvenience of low storage is far outweighed by price. Netbooks assume one will use the internet more for filing, and there are services available today that do just that – Google, for example. It is what “Cloud Computing” is about – providing nearly unlimited storage and processing in a central location with fast downloads. With Cloud Computing one could work nearly anywhere in the world and still provide clients instant access to documents, even if your internet connection is funky. Security is an issue with Cloud Computing, but not as much as one might think, especially if the practitioner uses commonsense practices, such as long alphanumeric passwords and encryption, if necessary.

Software

The cost of software, other than the operating system that comes with a computer, has dropped to zero. One can get open office software directly from the web and those who use it say it is acceptable. The idea of spending hundreds of dollars to buy Microsoft's Office Suite is passé. Look for Google's suite of applications, Open Office.org or Zoho writer. For a database, look to MySQL under a General Public License. These will provide one with the functionality one needs. And, as a bonus, most open office software allows one to store files in multiple formats, including rich text files and proprietary extensions like Microsoft's .doc, .ppt and .xls. This eliminates the hassle of passing documents back and forth to clients. There is as well collaborative computing software in the “Cloud” that allows one to store documents centrally and have clients and others work with them. Google Docs has this capability among others. And, of course, there are online and low-cost providers of backup for information on your computer. (The idea that one needs a DVD burner and disks to do backup is dated.) For e-mail, one can use Gmail, Hotmail or another free service. Ditto for instant messaging. There isn't a software that one can think of that doesn't have a free package available somewhere on the internet, including digital image processing, drawing, designing, etc. And, even if one decides to pay for using software, there is only a need to pay for it per use, which can be billed back to a client as a project expense. Practitioners who insist on purchasing applications software frequently pay a third or more of the cost of their computers to get it. There is no reason to do that any longer.

Printer

Multifunction printers have taken over the home and small office market. These are printers that serve as ink jets, copiers, scanners and fax machines. The slightly more expensive ones use WiFi so one doesn't have to be cabled to them. A printer-copier-scanner can be purchased without fax for as low as \$80. For small- to mid-volume purposes, an \$80 printer is good enough. The key, however, is to find one backed by good service. I can relate a horror story of spending hundreds of dollars on both laser and ink jet printers that failed to work after awhile and were difficult to fix. One was a brand new printer that failed to operate from the moment it was taken from the box. It sits forlornly on the floor of my home office, waiting for the day I kick it into the trash or find someone to fix it. Because printers are mechanical, they have the highest risk of getting out of adjustment. If there is one piece of equipment that should have a service contract, the printer would be it.

It is possible to get along without a printer, but it is inconvenient. Job shops like Fedex Office have printers for hire. However, it isn't long before one pays for a printer in service charges. It is best to reserve job shops for special printing tasks like making bound presentations, especially if one doesn't assemble many of these throughout a year. On the other hand, should one's work entail a high volume of formatted and designed work, a better printer might be in order. If a printer is being shared among several persons, a WiFi-enabled or network printer might be better. These cost in the range of \$300 to \$400, but on a per capita basis, they aren't much more expensive than a low-cost machine.

Phone

The issue of phones is more complicated than it first appears because phones are multifunction tools. Few would purchase a phone today that doesn't have internet access but that duplicates internet access on the computer. Texting by phone and e-mail also duplicates what can be done on the computer. So too, a calendar, an address book and a calculator. Photography, GPS navigation and teleconferencing by phone are impractical with a computer. On the other hand, typing a press release on mini-keyboards or dial pads is out of the question for serious practitioners. So too, using a spreadsheet, a presentation program or a database. So while a phone provides mobility, it is not a perfect substitute for a computer. The question is what phone one should get and how much one should pay for it. Phone contracts can be as low as \$50. Monthly phone pricing plans can start as low \$100 for all-in service and much lower than that for strictly voice and e-mail. Phone plans are complex, but there are bargains to be had with careful shopping. The one issue about phones that is no longer in question is whether one should have a phone line. The answer to that is obvious, and the continued decline of wireline connections among phone companies demonstrates how effectively customers have cut themselves free from wire.

Duplication of services between the phone and computer is unavoidable, but one serves as backup for the other in a pinch.

Internet connection

If one goes to where the internet is available, like a coffee shop, connection is low cost (a cup of coffee) and even free. If one prefers an internet connection where one lives, the cost of a DSL, cable or fiber connection varies widely from \$30 a month to more than \$100 for an all-in service that includes TV, phone and internet connection (The Triple Play). Assuming the lowest cost, we will go with free for the internet connection, but that is done at a personal inconvenience to the practitioner, which might not be worth the effort for long. Internet connections are the closest one gets to a fixed cost in the PR business and they can mount depending on how one uses them. For example, if one has an office with multiple computers sharing the internet, investment in a connection is essential. This might also require a WiFi router so machines can access the internet without cables. The cost of a router is as low as \$30 to \$40, but here again, make sure that it is backed by good service. Setting up a WiFi router can be tricky based on the layout of an office and configuration of devices connected to it. I've spent hours on the phone with technicians to get a home router operational because the "one-button" solution from the company failed to work. Someone who is allergic to machine setup might not have the patience for this. However, once in place, routers tend to run themselves without need for maintenance, and the freedom WiFi provides is substantial. Two computers in my home are WiFi-enabled, and they are used all over the house.

A total cost

So where does that leave one? It is possible to get started as a PR practitioner for less than \$600 and to have all the functionality of an executive in a midtown Manhattan skyscraper. But what about amenities such as news monitoring, media lists, a secretary, business cards, promotional material? Basic news monitoring can be done using a search engine, such as Google, which provides news alerts. Media lists are a charge-back item to clients. One passes through the cost. Ultimately, with several clients, one will want to subscribe to a list service. Paper-based directories can cost more than \$1300. An online directory that is frequently updated can cost several hundred dollars a month. Either way, the practitioner should not be absorbing the cost of a list service. There is no need for a secretary unless one is extremely busy. The days of a secretary per practitioner are long gone and with the tools available now, one can perform all the tasks needed on one's own, including booking travel, maintaining time sheets, invoicing clients, etc.

There is little need to make hundreds of business cards. One can get them online at a low cost or print them locally. There is no need for letterhead and printed promotional materials. Two stories illustrate how paper has passed from

the scene. One is from a PR practitioner who a few years ago spent \$1,000 on the design and production of business cards only to change her e-mail a few months later. She still has the business cards. A second one deals with a PR agency that apparently got a good deal more than 10 years ago on embossed letterhead. The office manager at the time ordered about 30 boxes. Most of it is still sitting on the shelf and some day will be thrown away. So too with paper-based promotional materials. They are made up as needed now using a color printer and a publishing program. Spending thousands of dollars for a printed four-color brochure makes little sense.

Will the cost of practicing PR drop even further? There is a good chance it might since the functionality of machines and software continues to grow. Actual cost will depend on the services PR practitioners render. For example, if one provides a design and publishing service with moderate to high volume, purchasing an application might be better than using free software. If one binds books frequently, purchasing a spiral bookbinding machine might make sense. These are items that come in time. For most PR activities, what has been discussed here is enough.

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