Guerrilla marketing part two

Getting good press coverage

Tom Chance

Following on from my general introduction to guerilla marketing in the first issue of this magazine, I will now discuss some specifics of getting good press coverage. This much-neglected area of marketing is actually a relatively important issue, especially if your project is genuinely interesting, and can reap huge rewards.

Press coverage (a much-neglected area of marketing) is actually a relatively important issue, especially if your project is genuinely interesting and can reap huge rewards

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Why would you want press coverage? This seemingly obvious question is worth considering before you embark into the media world. Do you want to raise awareness of your project to gain more users? Maybe you want to recruit more programmers, artists, documentation writers or other kinds of volunteers. You may want to improve the image of your project, or of the kind of work you're doing, for example, responding to criticisms or promoting free software in the mainstream media. You may also want to bring your project to the attention of commercial sponsors and software distributors. I may have my reservations about the media, this magazine excepted of course, but for the reasons above and more besides the media is a tool that you can use to your advantage.

Fig. 1: A good media strategy will get you regular coverage

Planning an effective strategy

Assuming you have followed the marketing strategy checklist I described in the first part of this series, you should have a good idea of what you want to say about your product and who you are targeting. You may also have assigned press roles to volunteers in your project. You now need to convert this very general strategy into one specific for the media, which will involve the following considerations:

Coming up with an effective strategy isn't an exact science. In working through the above questions, you should come to better understand how you are going to approach the practical tasks of media work, including writing press releases, following them up, taking part in or conducting interviews

Textbox 1: Media strategy considerations

Why do you want media coverage?
Who are the target audience?
What type of coverage does the project need to receive?
Which media are you targeting?
How do you get them interested?
What are my key messages?

and even writing your own articles. The process is perhaps best illustrated with an example.

> You should come to better understand how you are going to approach the practical tasks of media work, including writing press releases, following them up, taking part in or conducting interviews and even writing your own articles

I am the press officer for the Gneb project, a GNOME web development application. I want press coverage because the project could do with a few more volunteers, and because I want to raise awareness of our upcoming release. I'm therefore trying to reach all of our existing and potential users - so anyone interested in web development - and in particular those with the skills and inclination to volunteer. I want to receive lots of media coverage that emphasises the benefits and advantages of our application over similar free software web development applications, and that suggests people should become involved in the project. To achieve all of this, I will target the usual free software-friendly media, and trade magazines that discuss web development. I'll get them interested by emphasising the great features of our application that set it apart from the rest, and by showing the mainstream press the value of free software. My key messages are that the application makes managing complex web frameworks easier, that it integrates perfectly with the GNOME desktop, and that we're keen to attract new volunteers.

Obviously the above example is a little contrived and light on detail, but you get the idea; if you don't do this, you're far less likely to attract the attention of journalists, and even less likely to get really good coverage. Preparation can mean the difference between no coverage, a small mention and a full feature article. Ask yourself why a journalist would really want to write about *yet another* web development application. Perhaps the best way to learn how to use the media is to read, listen to and watch the media more critically. Next time you read a feature article or an interesting piece of news, reflect on why the journalist chose to cover it.

Announcements and press releases

Announcements and press releases are the most basic way to promote an application. Announcements can grab the attention of users, showing them why a new release is worth installing, or why they should get involved in your project, or they can show them what your aims are. They can be reasonably long, and discuss all the messages you want to promote in detail. A really good announcement will tear me away from my game of Freeciv and make me spend a few minutes reading through it.

Press releases catch the attention of editors and journalists, they make them research and write an article or do a piece in a show about your application. Editors and journalists can receive hundreds or even thousands a day, so they'll most likely look over a press release extremely quickly, and discard it if it doesn't interest them. You can either use a press release as the basis for an article, giving the journalist an easy job and ensuring positive coverage, or you can use it as a way of getting them to contact you for a fuller story. You can also use them to point towards the (more verbose) announcement, allowing your press release to be short whilst giving them lots of information.

Let's start with a brief look at the process involved, before going into each stage. You should write the announcement first, then the press release that accompanies it; next, you send the press release to all relevant contacts, following this up a few days later where appropriate; finally, you record any useful contacts and make a note of interesting leads.

Writing the announcement and press release

Announcements are fairly easy to write. You should start with a paragraph of no more than a few sentences summarising your key messages. You then flesh out each of

Fig. 2: Follow this process for announcements press re-
leases

Write your announcement & press
release, then post it to your web site

Email and fax the press releaase
to editors and friendly journalists

Follow it up with a phonecall to contacts
likely to cover your announcement

Record any useful contacts
you have gained

these messages, for example by providing a bullet point list
of your most important and interesting new features, or by
describing the kinds of tasks volunteers might get involved
with. You can optionally finish it off with some boasts,
telling the reader where your application is being used or
how much more efficient it is than competitor's. Don't
sound *too* smug, otherwise you'll put people off, but *do* give
the reader the impression that there is something special or
different about your project and product.

Fig. 3: An example press release

The Gneb Project
http://www.gneb-project.org

New Gneb release gives great web performance

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE / EMBARGO: 27th January 2005

The Gneb project is to announce the release of Gneb version 1.0, the indispensable tool for all web
developers, featuring advanced project management and full integration with GNOME. The Gneb
project is seeking new volunteers to help develop on this stable platform in the future.

Gneb is the result of two years of development by a team of over twenty volunteers. This release
makes the application complete, putting ahead of the competition in terms of features, stability and
integration with the desktop. Based upon the free software platforms GNU/Linux, GNOME and Gecko,
Gneb provides powerful tools for handling multiple library and include files, synchronising the work of
a team of developers and writing cheese with ease. Gneb also provides syntax highlighting, code
folding and other features common to modern web development applications.

The Gneb project is run by volunteers, and so the more participation we receive the better the product
can become. We are keen to recruit new volunteers, in particular from companies, to work on the code
and documentation. Those interested should contact Tom Chance [2].

Tom Chance, Gneb's Project Coordinator, commented that:

    "Gneb is now being used in hundreds of companies around the world, and with our
    competitive pricing model for custom feature requests, you can get your ideal platform
    at a fraction of the cost of competing products"

ENDS

Notes for editors

1. For the full announcement of this release, and more information on Gneb, visit: http://www.gneb-project.org

2. For more information, contact Tom Chance
        Email: tom@fakedomain.com
        Phone: +44 (0)1234 567890

Press releases are much harder. Whereas an announcement
just needs to be reasonably well written and cover the key
messages, according to your media strategy, the press re-
lease needs to do it with *precision* and *concision*, so that at
a brief glance the key messages grab your attention. Here's
an example press release that I'll work through:

The press release needs to start with a snappy title. Now I'll
admit I'm not great at this, so don't worry if you can't think
of anything clever; so long as it is reasonably interesting it
should avoid being deleted from the journalist's inbox im-
mediately. The second line should state the release date or,
if appropriate, an embargo that tells the journalists not to use
the information in the release until the date specified. Em-
bargoes aren't binding, and may irritate the journalist or put
them off, so don't use this unless you have a good reason.

The first paragraphs are as important as the title. All your
key messages should be here to hook the reader, summaris-
ing the rest of the story. You can then use your announce-
ment to concisely expand upon these messages in the next
few paragraphs. It's important that these don't give the jour-
nalist too much or too little information, and that it is ac-
curate. Leave grand or vague claims for the quote, which
comes next. Stories with quotes look much more interesting
than prose from the journalist, so make up a nice soundbite
that the journalist can't misrepresent.

Finally, you should provide any further information in notes.
These can include links to the full announcement, links or
more information on any points you made concisely in the
text but that can be expanded upon, background information
(e.g. about your project). Most importantly, you should
include contact details; if you put in a phone number, make
sure you are always available on it, because a journalist is
unlikely to chase your answer phone.

Making contact and following up

By now you should have a reasonable announcement and
press release written and posted on your web site. Now you
need to get the media to pay attention. Start by putting to-
gether a list of people you can send the release to. Look
for editors' addresses in magazines and on web sites; find
press contacts; hunt around for journalists that have covered
your application or ones like it in the past; find all the web
sites with news submission forms; phone the switchboard

for newspapers, radio & TV stations and any other media outlets and ask for the newsdesk.

After some groundwork, you should have a decent contact list to start with. It's also worth looking into deadlines, to make sure you get the news to them in time. If a weekly paper goes to print on Friday you'll want to get the release to them by Wednesday midday at the latest so they have time to write the article.

Preparation can mean the difference between no coverage, a small mention and a full feature article. Ask yourself why a journalist would really want to write about yet another *web development application*

Now email the press release out. Either email it to each contact individually (scripting comes in handy here) or send it to yourself and put their addresses in the BCC (Blind Carbon Copy) field to avoid annoying them all. If you are able, send it out by fax too on nice headed paper as in my example release above. When sending to individual journalists, you are more likely to win their attention with a personal email than with one that has obviously been bulk-mailed out to a contact list.

If all goes well you should now have journalists browsing your web site to find out more, or even reaching for their phone to call you. But to make sure you can follow the press release up a short while later to check that they have received it and to see if they have any questions. Calling media folk in this way may make you feel like a door to door toothbrush salesman, but there is no alternative. Media organisations are chaotic, and things get lost. When the newsdesk says "never seen it before", they may even be telling the truth. So send it again.

Lather, rinse, repeat

Congratulations, by now you have made your first brave steps into the media jungle. You've got coverage in all of your target publications, and users and volunteers are flooding in. But the work's not over yet. You're likely to have other announcements in the future, so spend a little time gathering together contacts and materials from this round.

Record the contact details of all the journalists that did cover you in your contact book, marking those whose articles you liked as "sympathetic reporters", with a reference to where the article they wrote is. Keep clippings too, both for your personal use and for promotion (e.g. to show off on stalls at trade shows).

With a growing contact book, a well organised archive of announcements and press releases, a readily available press contact and an interesting project, you can't go wrong

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With a growing contact book, a well organised archive of announcements and press releases, a readily available press contact and an interesting project, you can't go wrong. You're not guaranteed to hit the front page of national newspapers, but as you learn to target quiet spots in the media cycle (e.g. public holidays, late summer) and as your press releases become more journalist-friendly, your profile will grow and grow.

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About the author

Tom Chance is a philosophy student, free software advocate and writer. He has worked on promotion with the KDE Project, acting as press officer at their annual conference, aKademy, in 2004. You can contact him via his web site (http://www.tomchance.org.uk)