

Top 10 PR, Marketing, Biz Dev and Branding Insights for 2021

Professional service firms experienced enormous shifts in the way they do business in 2020 due to COVID-19, and the impact is expected to extend well into 2021 and beyond. To weather the crisis, firm management scrutinized every aspect of their operations to determine what had to change temporarily and what must change permanently. From the outset, we saw that the B2B firms with flexibility to adapt to change experienced the least disruption.

Firms made navigating the uncharted waters of the pandemic a team effort, one that relied in part on marketing and public relations. Taking lessons learned from 2020 and applying them to new opportunities in 2021 will help develop positive news stories and enhanced brand recognition for your firm and professionals.

This post provides 10 insights that can help you enhance your PR, marketing, business development and branding efforts in the new year.

1. Administration Changes

Every four or eight years, professional service firms have a unique opportunity to advise, comment on, analyze and write about new laws, rules and regulations that occur due to the turnover within our government agencies.

Which practice or industry that your firm serves will be most affected by the incoming Biden administration, and does your firm have a plan to position certain professionals as thought leaders to select audiences?

2. Content, Content, Content

In 2020, sources – firms, agencies, individuals and more – produced volumes of content about the impact of COVID-19 for every imaginable corporate and consumer audience. Navigating the deluge of information required the ability to determine whether a source was trustworthy, particularly in light of a world where fake news, rumors and fraud abound. This emphasizes the importance of distinguishing your firm's professionals as trusted advisors and consistently reinforcing their reputations in various platforms, including social media, news media, websites, blogs, alerts, videos, webinars, etc.

As we embark on 2021, take inventory of your content assets and ask yourself if you have a robust [content strategy](#) – one that can position your professionals as trusted advisors, market your firm successfully and inform your audiences.



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3. Integrated PR and Marketing

The most-effective and -efficient strategies for professional services marketing should include a **complementary suite of activities** that aren't siloed or separated from one another but work together to support the end goal of developing, retaining and growing business.

To gauge your level of integration, ask yourself these questions: Is your firm using data analytics to help guide and inform PR, marketing and business development strategies? Is all firm messaging on brand – from website content to ads to social media? Do search engine results of your firm reflect the firm's reputation – desired or not?

4. Storytelling

The demand for good news remains at an all-time high. Consider the firms that were quick to give attention and resources in 2020 to communities in need. Think about those firms that rose to the challenge of directly addressing issues of race, diversity, inclusion and social inequity. Not only did they stand up for what is right, but they also had stories to tell – **stories** that were of interest to news media and resulted in positive press. In 2021, ask yourself what your firm and professionals are doing that might generate a goodwill news story.

Another storytelling opportunity – one that is often overlooked – is professional bio pages. Bio pages are said to be the largest drivers of traffic to professional service firm websites and are generally the most-viewed. Contextualizing a professional as an authentic person, not just a bullet list of accomplishments, resonates with audiences on an emotional level. Find ways to express each firm member's values and personality traits to showcase who they are and help them stand out. Remember that people hire people they like and want to work with.

5. Crisis Management

Did anyone plan for a pandemic in early 2020, one that shuttered their clients' doors; disrupted income from one week to the next; caused layoffs and office closures; and required procedures to plan for illness, cleanliness and even deaths? Of course not. Not every scenario can be prepared for, but there are basic rules and lines of communication that must be on the ready for whatever type of expected situation can happen. Apparently, this now means even a global virus.

To minimize the impact of any crisis on the reputation of the firm, ensure the least amount of disruption and restore goodwill as soon as possible, a strategic **crisis communications plan** is necessary. Now is the time, as it should be at the beginning of every year, to blow the dust off your crisis management plan, especially if it has been more than a year since it was last reviewed by firm management. With a structure in place, the details of a particular situation can be addressed with confidence that your crisis response team is ready to tackle even the most-daunting crises, including one as overwhelming as a worldwide pandemic.

Did your office operations change in 2020, particularly with regard to communications, physical locations and pandemic-related needs? Have key internal contacts changed? Has the media policy been updated? Look through your crisis management plan to ensure all recent changes are accounted for.

6. Culture/Brand

The key to a healthy bottom line is a healthy culture and a trusted, relevant brand.

In 2020, we learned that putting people first over bonuses and profits leads to more trust, loyalty and secured relationships, ultimately improving morale and increasing productivity. It is clear that your culture attracts and retains quality talent. It's time to empower it. [Build your corporate culture](#), and they will come. Ignore it, and you will likely see higher rates of attrition in both clients and staff.

Branding, or the idea of it, has been repeatedly challenged by non-marketers for years. Sadly, that short-sighted thinking has stunted the growth of so many professional service firms. Branding's purpose is not solely to differentiate or create awareness and recognition, but also to build relationships and loyalty with people who believe in the brand. Remember, though: You can't appeal to everyone (and shouldn't try to). 2020 reminded us of this as we saw a nation divided along multiple lines. Instead, build a brand that speaks to whom you want to serve.

7. Social Media

The TikTok phenomenon, enough said.

In 2020, we witnessed the unthinkable power of this social media platform evolve from the hands of 12-year-old kids to become a significantly influential advertising and relationship-building channel. We arguably have never experienced a more-infectious and -persuasive social or advertising tool to date. Its success is a huge indicator that new and exciting social media opportunities will keep coming and that we need to continue to grow within this arena.

In 2021, remember to give social media the love and respect it deserves. For professional service firms, a LinkedIn presence is the priority, but may not be enough to remain competitive. Strategically and creatively embracing other channels like Instagram and TikTok, or leveraging the recently added [ephemeral content features on LinkedIn](#), will help extend your brand's reach – as long as your audience is there.

8. Business Development/Relationship Development

In 2020, conferences, lunches and in-person meetings were replaced with Zoom calls, [webinars](#) and videos. For much of the workforce, these methods of relationship-building were a significant shift from the norm. Now, virtual meetings have become the status quo and are probably here to stay as more companies anticipate accommodating remote workers.

We also learned in 2020 that prioritizing the sale is not the key to business development. In fact, centering selling has been a hindrance to many B2B service providers for some time. Ultimately, we are all just people looking to connect with others, and it is this connection that should be your foremost business development goal.

In 2021, stop focusing on the sale and simply [build relationships](#). Doing so will create more opportunities and growth than any sales program could deliver.

9. Advertising

It's back! Ok, not exactly, because advertising never really went away – it just took new forms, especially in the professional services world. For the most part, we moved ad strategy budget dollars to other marketing tactics and tools, or simply cut them out of the budget. In some ways, your website home page is your biggest full-page ad, along with your blogs, newsletters, social media feeds and other content channels. However, in too many cases, these are still siloed and lack the kind of creativity and strategy that are commonplace in advertising. That may be changing in 2021.

We have seen businesses capitalize more than ever on the power of storytelling, which is simply another form of advertising. Firms and service professionals readily shared their stories of business challenges, personal struggles, inequity and discrimination, and other narratives that demonstrated humanity in action. In the new year, firms should continue to use storytelling as an element of advertising strategy and a vehicle for effective, empathetic multichannel marketing and PR.

10. The Website

A website can say a lot about your business. Poor user experience may reflect a lack of consideration for the website visitor. An absence of creativity may reflect a dearth of innovative thinking. Operating a website with outdated technology and poor user interface reflects a firm that is not on the cutting edge.

Remember that your website is often where most research and inquiries begin. It is often someone's first introduction to your firm's capabilities and people. Ask yourself what your website says about you, and then consider everything in this article. Your website is the hub of all your marketing, PR and advertising efforts. It acts as an interactive advertisement, it is your content repository, it raises professional profiles, it tells stories, it attracts new talent and it develops new business. If you only do one thing new in 2021 to improve your marketing, start with your website, and design it for relationship-building – put people first!

We all look forward to a year that reverses the uncertainty and disruption experienced in 2020. If you're looking to have some stability in the new year, consider some or all of the practices mentioned in this post. You'll continue to elevate your brand and reputation in the marketplace while resonating with your target audiences.