

Repair Tech Inc. a Tech Startup:
Creating a Public Relations Branding Strategy to Build Client Base through the use of Media

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ABSTRACT

The following research describes the process of using customer development and outreach to develop a public relations marketing strategy through increasing brand awareness and media exposure. The campaign focuses on working closely with Repair Tech Inc., a tech startup company, and incorporating tactics that are especially geared towards new businesses working to expand their client base, strengthen their relationships with customers, and gain publicity. Using findings from scholarly literature as a resource, this campaign attempts to provide a public relations awareness marketing and customer outreach plan for Repair Tech Inc. This study incorporate the uses and gratification theory of public relations to explain the reasoning for including marketing recommendations and tactics. In addition, common public relations issues facing startups, and more specifically technology startups, is addresses.

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Chapter 1

Statement of the Problem

Countless new startup companies are founded each year with the goal of creating a successful and profitable business. As a result of rapid advancements, an area with an increasing amount of startups is the technology industry. The technology field changes extremely fast, with new or improved products frequently being released to consumers. Once a tech startup takes an idea and generates it into a product of value, the company must figure out a way to attract consumers who will purchase it.

It is not uncommon for tech startups to initially overlook marketing as a component of their business plan when they are focused on developing the product. Investing some effort into positioning and promotion can expose influencers to the benefits the product offers. It can also provide an incentive for early adopters to try the product out. (Soat, 2012, p. 21). A startup must investigate what types of consumer interactions will allow it to connect best with its audience. Once a target market has been established, a startup can begin working on formulating a brand identity, marketing awareness of the brand, and implementing public relations to reach out to the media as well as customers.

Background of the Problem

RepairTech Solutions is a tech startup, recently founded by a team of San Luis Obispo entrepreneurs. The company invents tools to empower people in their interactions with technology. They aim to make the process of repairing computers more accurate and efficient.

RepairTech's first product available for purchase is the TechUSB. This product

automates the computer repair process, streamlining the traditionally long and tedious process of diagnosing computer hardware issues and discovering viruses into one simple step. Since the TechUSB is still very new, at the moment it is intended for experienced computer repair technicians only, not the general public.

Computer repair technicians comprise a niche market in the technology industry. RepairTech's current interactions with computer repair shops have mostly included business to business commerce transactions, with RepairTech researching and directly contacting potential customers. While this has worked to an extent thus far, a public relations campaign that generates customer interest in RepairTech through brand awareness could help the company be more efficient by developing a clear message highlighting the benefits of the product and building a larger client base.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine a public relations strategy that will increase RepairTech's client base and coverage in the media. This includes studying media outreach tactics and finding opportunities that will provide RepairTech with media exposure which will likely be consumed by their target market demographic of computer repair technicians. It will also include surveying repair technicians to learn about their experiences in computer repair. The survey data will provide information that will be utilized in creating a public relations plan.

Setting for the Study

This study will be completed as a California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo Senior Project. It will consist of working with the startup company RepairTech solutions to research and implement brand marketing strategy, as well as media and customer outreach tactics. A survey will be conducted among computer repair shops to determine their opinions on RepairTech's products and to inform them on the value that using these products may have for them.

In addition, a specialized public relations plan will be made, focusing on drip marketing and the customer life cycle. This plan will be used to increase RepairTech's client base by analyzing the survey data and combining it scenarios of customer interaction. The plan will help identify where and how RepairTech should focus their efforts, based on customer trends. It will also narrow down the process of gaining and retaining customers by zeroing in on the marketing areas that receive most customer traffic and figuring out what further tactics could be applied to further increase customer satisfaction and marketing success rates.

Research Questions

The research questions listed below were formulated to develop a brand awareness campaign for a startup, incorporating the uses and gratification theory. The questions were created to determine the most effective strategies for raising awareness, reaching out to niche media markets, and utilizing public relations maintain active publics.

- 1) How does one develop a public relations brand strategy for startups?
- 2) How does one reach out to a targeted media outlet?

- 3) How does one reach out to small media markets?
- 4) How is media used for customer development?
- 5) What PR strategies are used to maintain active publics?

Definition of Terms

Customer Development: the process in a startup of testing the entrepreneur's hypothesis about the customer problem, and testing the product concept and minimum feature set designed to solve that problem in order to determine if it constitutes a product/market fit (Blank, 2005).

Customer Life Cycle: the steps a customer goes through when considering, purchasing, using, and maintaining loyalty to a product or service. The process consists of five steps: reach, acquisition, conversion, retention, and loyalty (Blank, 2005).

Drip Marketing: a way of selling products or services by contacting possible customers by phone, letter, email, or other means repeatedly over a period of time (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2013).

Startup: a company in an early stage of the business life cycle where the entrepreneur moves from the idea stage to securing financing and laying down the basic structure of the business (Business Dictionary, 2013).

Organization of Study

Chapter 1 includes the background, purpose, and setting of the study, as well as research questions and definition of terms. Chapter 2 reviews scholarly literature in order to determine common trends. This literature will provide a basis on which to develop branding strategies in

an effort to increase awareness and customer interest in a startup company. Chapter 3 highlights the methodology of the study, and Chapter 4 analyzes the data collected. Chapter 4 also explains the public relations plan created for the study. Chapter 5 summarizes the end results, as well as includes recommendations for the future.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Developing Public Relations Brand Strategy for Startups

The skills and tactics PR brings to the table are increasingly more important for brand marketing and crafting messages. The core message of branding is “communicating to customers who you are, what you do and how you do it.” (Ankeny, 2010, p. 50). Generally the internet or a website is the most direct way to do this. However while technology is important, its reach can only extend so far. Farrell (2000), explains that “The key to success is building a brand that meets customer needs better than anybody else.” Avoiding a sole focus on technology means highlighting the benefits of a product to specific markets (Solis, 2004, p. 3). A brand market strategy should be determined for each potential market that explains how the offering of a startup company can enhance the lives of the people in each target market.

The use of public relations allows a startup company to grow, and eventually develop into a thriving business, through the opportunity to develop lasting relationships with customers, as well as media outlets. Tech startups often focus on their product and the customers’ experience with the product rather than on building a brand. “Marketing usually isn’t in the initial budget for a tech startup...In the technology field, you find out where your audience is and you go to them rather than make them come to you” (Soat, 2012, p. 21). Thus while making a useful and functional product is the goal of a tech startup, creating a brand image and marketing strategy can allow tech startup to be more effective in determining the exact audience it wants to target.

“The right PR, carried out by the right team, can raise a company's credibility immediately with the media while it cultivates both mindshare and market share in its targeted markets.” (Solis, 2004, p. 2).

Reaching out to targeted media outlets

The uses and gratification theory states that people are active users of media and select the ways in which they will use it (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2012). This means that while not everyone will see the poor reviews of a product, it can not be assumed that they will hear the positive news about it either. According to Lattimore, et al. (2012), “Just because a message is available in some medium does not mean that people attend to it and remember it.” Successful media relations will cleverly differentiate a business and make a compelling value proposition, resulting in the media, as well as customers, discovering it. Media coverage is essential and an affordable marketing activity (Kahtan, 2012).

When developing a strategy to reach out to targeted media outlets, public relations practitioners must decide what type of techniques to employ. Media outreach tactics include both direct and indirect methods. A direct approach includes more traditional communications, such as press releases, whereas an indirect approach consists of viewing the media as your customer. “This involves looking at a broader media landscape, understanding what is being covered, and then figuring out how you fit into that bigger context” (Kahtan, 2012). Fitting into the “bigger context” often means developing relationships with reporters and figuring out ways in which a client can fit into the area or story they are covering. Social media is a useful avenue to “build relationships with media outlets and have an ongoing relationship with reporters. The

simplest way is to follow individual journalists and pay attention to their interests and their requests” (Goudreau, 2012).

Communicating and engaging with customers

Once a startup has established its target markets, the next step is to determine the best methods to use in order to gain customers. Soat (2012, p. 22) writes that “successful startups speak clearly to their target customer.” The advent of new forms of media, including social media sites such as Facebook, has not only made it easier than ever to reach out and engage with potential customers, but it has also made business to customer relations much more direct. Technology brands especially are becoming more transparent to customers through social media (“Insight: Public Relations,” 2012). Changes in how businesses interact with customers, as well as an increase in brand transparency have altered how public relations practitioners connect with consumers. “Communicating directly with consumers means that the PR focus has swung away from crafted messages” (“Insight: Public Relations,” 2012). In startup companies, public relations has become much more interactive. PR can also aid in customer development by finding customers who may even be able to help improve an early stage product. Involving consumers in the development process “engages them with your brand, instills a feeling of ownership over the final product, and taps into their collective wisdom to create a better result” (Goudreau, 2012). Activities to encourage participation may be as simple as asking questions (Goudreau, 2012).

Public Relations Strategies for maintaining active publics

Once a startup has begun acquiring customers, the next challenge is retaining active publics and establishing relationships with them. In order to do so, Soat (2012, p. 21) advises that “startups should map out a PR plan for their digital communications.” This not only means taking advantage of the platforms and communication methods most commonly used by customers, but also having a clear idea of how to apply these in a way that will generate further customer interest, response, and feedback. In addition, it is important that targeting efforts reach all current customers (Romaniuk, 2012, p. 288), and not excluded those who may be in the minority. The internet can play a vital role in reaching a wide range of customers and building customer loyalty. It can help a company form a lasting relationship with its customers by enabling two-way communication (Neelotpaul, 2010, p. 13).

In the technology industry, thought leaders can have an enormous impact on attracting customers, as well as promoting brands. An effective strategy for maintaining active publics may involve engaging more directly with individuals who influence the decisions customers make. A thought leader may be anyone from a celebrity to an industry expert with a reasonably sized following (“Insight: Public Relations,” 2012). Startups should consult with their current customers and go through a market development cycle before attempting to grow their customer base and reach out to latent publics. “The idea is that the more you talk to [current] customers, and the more product and market problems you solve, the more productive your sales staff will be [later on]” (Gumpert, 2006). This approach provides a company with valuable information pertaining to current customer use and satisfaction of a product, while at the same time giving them an opportunity to connect with active publics.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter will describe the methods of data collection, as well as limitations and delimitations of the study.

Data Sources

For this study computer repair technicians will be surveyed to determine the likelihood of their computer repair shop utilizing RepairTech's products, such as the TechUSB drive software. In addition, to help effectively answer the research questions that this study is based on, participants will be asked about what marketing strategies appeal to them and how they gather information about new products in the computer repair industry. This will establish what marketing techniques and tactics would be most successful for RepairTech in raising awareness and attracting customers.

Participants

The participants for this survey will include members of RepairTech's target audience. This is comprised of computer repair shop owners and technicians working at small to midsize computer repair shops with two to six employees. RepairTech has reached out nationally and currently has customers throughout California, as well as in a number of other states. Shops throughout the country will be contacted in order to gain the largest possible data sampling and find the greatest amount of potential clients.

Survey Design

This survey was designed by a RepairTech employee who is a computer repair industry expert. The survey questions were designed to gain a better understanding of the current computer repair practices and tools used by RepairTech's target market. The survey questions were also designed to determine common communication channels in order to create a plan for how RepairTech should most effectively focus their marketing and customer development efforts to reach their audience. Both quantitative and qualitative questions were asked, such as the size and number of employees working in the shop, as well as what types of tools technicians favor, what repair methods are utilized by each particular shop, and how technicians receive information about new developments in the industry.

Data Collection

Data was collected for this study by calling the participants on the phone and recording their answers to questions. The purpose of the survey was to gain information regarding personal opinions and industry trends. It was designed to generate accurate feedback on the most effective marketing strategies concerning computer repair technicians that RepairTech should pursue to expand their business.

Data Presentation

The data collected from the survey will be entered into a chart to clearly see the responses to the questions. A drip marketing plan focusing on the customer life cycle will be created based on these results.

Limitations

The limitations of this study included the amount of time available to complete this project, and types of questions survey participants felt comfortable providing answers for. The journalism department at the California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo requires that senior projects be completed within one ten week long quarter. This deadline limits the amount of research that that can be conducted for the study.

Another limitation in this study was finding computer repair technicians who were willing to answer questions about their shops and the tools and processes they use to diagnose computer problems. Some repair shops felt that their repair methods were private industry information, and thus did not feel it was appropriate to disclose the information. In addition, some shops declined to answer questions altogether or did not answer their phones. These factors placed constraints on the number of survey participants and questions that could be effectively answered.

Delimitations

Also due to time constraints, the delimitation of deciding on the number of computer repair shops to call and survey was placed on this study. A list of computer repair shops was provided by a RepairTech employee. However, some of the shops on the list were not able to be contacted due to a limited amount of time.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

This chapter will explain the strategy that will be used in the drip marketing plan for the startup company RepairTech Inc. It will also include an in depth summary of the data collected during the surveying process, which will provide the basis for the public relations plan. Analysis of the survey results will determine which marketing strategies most likely to be effective with RepairTech's target market, and should thus be integrated into the public relations marketing plan.

Tactics and Tools

The public relations plan for Repair Tech will include drip marketing strategies based on the survey data, which will be used to help provide a better understanding of customer interaction. The purpose of the plan will be to help Repair Tech gain and retain customers throughout the customer life cycle.

In the customer development process, the customer life cycle consists of four stages: acquisition, activation, retention, and referral. If a company's customers successfully complete the cycle, the optimal result of revenue will likely be achieved (Blank, 2005). Public relations is most likely to be focused on the the acquisition stage of the cycle, since this is when most outreach is accomplished in an attempt to gain the interest of the target audience in the product. Thus the initial actions of the public relations plan for Repair Tech will focus on drip marketing tactics that attempt to catch the attention of potential consumers. During acquisition, the goal is to narrow down the various channels users come from in order to find the channels with the

largest volume, lowest cost, and the best performing channel overall. Once these three channels have been determined, they can be taken advantage of in further marketing efforts.

Since Repair Tech is working in a very specific market, and have a very clear idea of the computer repair technician customers they want to target, drip marketing techniques will allow them to consistently reach out to their potential customers and let those who are interested in their products come to them. A plan will be developed for Repair Tech to establish contact on a regular basis with computer repair technicians and computer repair shop owners who have expressed interest in optimizing their shops. These are members of Repair Tech's target market who, based on survey results, are open to communicating about their personal computer repair experiences and habits, and are possibly willing to try out the new technology offered by Repair Tech.

Currently, Repair Tech utilizes email, forums, social media, and their website as customer communication channels. In order to encourage more customer interaction, Repair Tech could also provide phone support, as well as instant chat through Skype for customer assistance.

Additionally, a blog highlighting announcements from Repair Tech and relevant news from the tech community could help establish a greater internet presence for the company. Creating an online based outreach plan that is frequently and consistently updated can also help the startup reach a wide range of customers and encourage lasting relationships to be formed.

The survey requested answers about where computer repair technicians received the majority of their industry information, such as new products that have recently been released, or updates to existing tools. One hundred percent of the respondents found information about new

tools online, so increasing Repair Tech's online presence through a blog could greatly help increase awareness of the company.

Communication with Publics

For this public relations campaign, communications with publics focused on communicating with computer repair technicians to determine their habits, such as what repair tools they currently use and how they gain information about new developments in the computer repair industry, to gather data that could be integrated into the marketing plan. The purpose of surveying was to determine trends among Repair Tech's target audiences that would help the company advance by implementing communications that appeal to their current customers, as well as new ones. The survey was used to help answer the research questions listed in chapter 1 and restated in the chapter 2 literature review. See Table 1 at the end of chapter 4 for survey results.

The main purpose for conducting the survey was to consult with potential customers and learn about what deficiencies they may have regarding repair tools and what some major areas of difficulty are in the industry that can be improved. This will help Repair Tech determine how to map out a public relations plan for digital communications with their customers, as suggested by Soat (2012, p. 21) in the literature review section. The goal of this plan will be to increase more direct communications with consumers and encourage customer feedback.

The marketing plan will focus on providing Repair Tech with a condensed marketing strategy based on the survey responses of their target market. While only a fraction of computer repair technicians from the list of potential customers provided by Repair Tech were able to be

successfully interviewed, the answers from group still represent a significant consensus of opinion in their answers to the questions. The marketing plan will concentrate on reaching out to customers through further development of the Repair Tech brand. It will also encourage the use of communication and marketing tactics that are most likely to be effective according to the uses and gratification of public relations.

Table 1: *Survey Results*

Question	Results	Numbers
Size of Shop	Small	9
	Medium	4
	Large	0
Number of techs working	1-2	1
	3-4	9
	5+	1
Tech or Shop Owner	Tech	9
	Owner	1
	Both	1
Average number of computers repaired per month	No answer/unsure	2
	15-20	1
	20-25	1
	25-30+	7
Do you interact with any online communities about computer repair?	Yes	2
	No	7
Do you belong to any trade organizations?	Yes	0
	No	11
On average, how long does each individual repair take for you to complete?	<6 hours	1
	12-24 hours	7
	1+ days	3
Do you use any content management system for organizing workflow?	Yes	2
	No	9
Where do you find information about new tools?	Online news sources	1
	Online forums	2
	Online (General)	9
	Friends/Co-workers	2

Chapter 5

Discussions and Recommendations

Summary

Repair Tech Inc. was founded by former Cal Poly students who saw a need to improve the computer repair process. They created the Tech USB drive, which automates the processes, making it easier and more efficient. As a newly formed startup company, a major focus for Repair Tech has been on increasing awareness of their business and products, as well as building their client base. The purpose of this study and campaign was to develop a marketing strategy for Repair Tech through customer development so that they could best target their outreach efforts towards potential clients and grow their brand. Research on startup company marketing strategies, branding, and communications with publics was conducted. In order to determine precisely which tactics recommended by the literature to include in the suggested marketing plan, a phone survey was administered among computer repair technicians, Repair Tech's target audience. A public relations plan was developed according to survey responses suggest methods for Repair Tech to implement to aid them in communicating more with both current and potential customers.

Findings

Survey results indicated that some computer repair shops are interested in optimizing their current repair process, and that they fit the ideal profile of a potential Repair Tech customer. Therefore, Repair Tech should continue to reach out to small to mid-size computer repair shops

through online channels, since it was found that 100% of respondents found information about new products somewhere on the internet.

As mentioned before, an issue and limitation that may impact the survey results is that there was a fixed amount of time to make calls. Because of this, many shops who may have been interested in learning more about Repair Tech, or been able to contribute significant data were not able to be contacted for this particular poll. Another limitation was that not all survey respondents felt comfortable generate responses for some more detailed questions. These findings indicate that while Repair Tech has a very clear idea of the exact audience that their target audience is comprised of, it may be slightly more challenging to learn about these customers' habits. Tailoring marketing and media strategies towards them may also require additional research, since their sources of industry information and media consumption are unknown.

Conclusion & Recommendations

As the technology industry continues to grow, tech startups are becoming more and more abundant. Technology offers solutions to problems that could not have been solved otherwise. This includes new technology that can enhance existing technology, as in the case of Repair Tech and their product, the Tech USB drive, which diagnoses computer software and hardware issues. It is important for a startup to begin developing relationships with its public early, and to maintain these relationships, because they will benefit the company's growth.

As stated earlier, according to the uses and gratification theory, people are active users of media and select the ways in which they will use it (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2012).

This means that while having a media presence can have a positive impact on the success of a company, it is not enough to reach a broad range of publics, even if that range is concentrated in a niche area, some people may not get the message. Therefore, Repair Tech should focus on their customer interaction to make sure that the public has an accurate understanding of the use and function of their product. Having a presence on a wide variety of platforms, and then narrowing down their presence to the ones that prove most successful in diverting traffic to their website and thus inciting public interest, can allow Repair Tech to experiment and learn more about their customers.

Once Repair Tech has established ongoing client communication, they should increase their media outreach by building similar relationships with targeted media outlets as they did with the general public. Coverage from select technology oriented media outlets can further raise awareness of Repair Tech's existence. It will be vital for Repair Tech to have public relations materials to interact with the media, so a recommendation for the future is to continue to build a portfolio for media purposes, and too use online customer relations tactics as an opportunity to also catch media attention.

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Repair Tech Public Relations Plan

Introduction & Mission Statement:

Repair Tech Inc. is a tech startup founded by former Cal Poly students in San Luis Obispo. The company's vision is to empower people in their interactions with technology.

Situation Analysis:

Repair Tech currently offers two products, D7 and the Tech USB. Both are designed to aid computer repair technicians in diagnosing computer problems, such as viruses and hardware failure. The products are sold on a monthly payment plan, which ranges from \$49-\$149 a month, depending on the number of users. The monthly plan is a reoccurring revenue model that ensures financial stability and eliminates there from being any one time deals.

At the moment, Repair Tech has approximately 30 paying customers. All customers consist of computer repair shops. They have also recently acquired about 30 more customers who have signed up for a free two month trial, so they would like to develop the most effective marketing and communications methods in order to retain these customers and convert them to paying clients.

During Repair Tech's initial launch after beta testing, 97 customers signed up. However, for various reasons, more than half of these people canceled after only a month or two. According to Repair Tech, some canceled simply because they were not clear on exactly clear on the function and purpose of the Tech USB. Others wanted more features, did not like paying a subscription fee, or felt that the product was not worth the price. Therefore, to continue building a larger client base and increasing customer satisfaction, Repair Tech should focus more on customer outreach and education.

As far as communication with customers goes, Repair Tech utilizes social media, including Facebook and Twitter, as well as email and phone outreach. Although Repair Tech has communications methods in place, they would like to increase customer engagement, interaction, and feedback. Presently, there is somewhat of a disconnect between Repair Tech and their customers. After the initial sign up and purchase process is complete, two way conversations with customers generally decline. Repair Tech would like to improve on keeping up conversations with customers, and take advantage of opportunities to market their products, in addition to informing and raising awareness of their brand among current and potential customers, as well as the media. In order to accomplish this, Repair Tech would like to implement a schedule to follow, based on a customer development research survey, for updating customers on new product features or company developments.

SWOT Analysis:

- *Strengths:* Repair Tech's strengths are that they have few direct competitors on the market and their products are unique. They also have a group of dedicated customers.
- *Weaknesses:* Repair Tech's major weakness is that they are a small startup company with limited resources. While the company has received some exposure, many computer repair technicians are still unaware that it exists, due to a lack of marketing.
- *Opportunities:* Since Repair Tech is still in the startup stage, the company is continuing to experience rapid growth and change. While at times this may seem overwhelming and hectic, as long as the business is improving and expanding, they have the chance to reach out to new customers and receive input from current customers. New features and developments are also opportunities for media coverage to raise brand awareness.
- *Threats:* Threats facing Repair Tech include larger companies and other diagnostic products used in the computer repair industry.

Target Audiences:

The primary target market consists of computer repair technicians.

Goals:

- Communicate more with customers through online channels, such as social media.
- Make it possible for current customers to easily and frequently receive updates through email.
- Find a balance as to how often to contact customers to best enhance customer interest.
- Show customers how using Repair Tech's products could benefit them.

Strategy:

Develop a calendar with a schedule for updating communication channels and communicating with customers based on survey results listed in Table 1.

Tactics:

Starting April 1st, Repair Tech should incorporate a communications schedule to establish direct and ongoing contact with their client base. This will include the following:

- Posting social media updates at least three times a week. Social media posts should be constructed to be interactive by asking questions, conducting polls, etc.
- Repair Tech should respond to any comments submitted through social media or forums no more than two days after the comments are posted in order to be timely.
- Sending emails to clients whenever a new feature is released, as well as choosing a fixed day of the week to regularly email customers with interesting news pertaining to the company or computer repair industry. If a blog is started, email blasts, with the purpose of directing customers to Repair Tech's website and blog, can be decreased to once a month.
- Emails that do not result in sign ups should be re-sent no more than once. If a response is not generated after the second email is sent, a follow up call should be conducted to confirm customer interest or disinterest in receiving further information.

- In order to elicit an honest response, the most effective way to contact former customers who have canceled is probably by phone.

