

## Bringing It Into Focus: Marketing Communications for the Leasing Industry

*While leasing is a global industry that generates revenues reaching nearly \$500 billion annually, none of the major media has a news beat organized to cover it, and parent companies often bury its leasing capability under accounting or sales. Leasing executives need to address some core issues if they are to be heard, understood and remembered over time.*

BY SUSAN CAROL

**W**hy aren't deals or new hires announced more often in the equipment leasing and finance industry? Why are leasing executives sometimes hard to find on their own Web sites? Why doesn't leasing get the full respect it deserves by the general business press or broadcast media?

This article will explore these questions and cover the interplay of public relations, marketing communications and advertising in the leasing industry overall and within specific organizations in this market.

While leasing is a global industry that generates revenues reaching nearly \$500 billion annually, none of the major media has a news beat organized to cover it. Leasing coverage often falls under broader economic categories, such as manufacturing, the stock market, or finance and investment. The same absence of information is sometimes true at the organization level, where a parent company buries its leasing capability under accounting or sales.

Clearly, leasing executives need to address some core issues if they are to be heard, understood and remembered over time.

### Marketing Communications Integration

Lessors need to create a communications plan that integrates public relations, marketing and advertising with core messages and activities designed around themes and for specifically targeted audiences important to their organization. Such planning goes a long way toward ensuring there will later be consistency in message, image and related activity.

### Market-Driven Communications

Too often, information from leasing companies is issued without the benefit of advance research and no means of capturing outside perspectives or measuring results. While a professional communications program does add to upfront costs and most lessors believe they know their audience well enough, the smallest nuances often make the difference between an effective communication program and one that is simply too much like every thing else in the marketplace.

### Creative Messaging

The leasing industry tends to be somewhat insulated from the rest of the financial services industry. Therefore, people in the leasing industry are often comfortable with leasing terminology and assume everyone else is, too. But they need to understand that their industry often needs definition and translation for the larger audience — and then some “pumping up.” Messages must be fresh and clearly explained rather than borrowed, overused, complex or too detailed. End-users are often overwhelmed and not likely to take the time to read anything long or complex.

### Brand/Reputation Integrity

Usually, one person is not designated as the guardian of a company's reputation. Instead, a committee is often responsible. Unfortunately, the members of a committee comprise a variety of views and competing priorities. Therefore, their actions may not be synchronized, and their messages will often compete with each other — creating confusion or even misunderstanding.

### Company Spokesperson

The CEO may not enjoy the limelight or may not feel prepared to speak out on behalf of the company. Sometimes there may be concerns about what competitors will gain from a company's public statements. Someone with a breadth of knowledge, experience and insight who is comfortable as a public speaker needs to be designated as the chief storyteller — if not officially then at least unofficially.

### Experts Speak About Communicating Leasing

“The industry is notably timid about announcing achievements or sharing success stories with its peer groups,” says Holly Winzler, a former communications director for Tokai Financial Services' (now DeLage Landen) middle-market vendor financing division and a PR/marketing consultant to leasing companies such as Advanta and UPS Capital for more than a decade.

“Often, they fear their competitors will steal their ideas. They are concerned about encroachment on their talent pool, their origination channels and their program structures. (Leasing) is a creative industry except when it comes to promotion.”

"The reality is that when you look at various vertical industry trade publications — be they manufacturing or technology — there is very little on their editorial schedules about business credit. But in my experience, editors have been surprisingly receptive to ideas for stories on leasing," Winzler says.

"There are many layers to leasing that represent important benefit stories for end users, such as preserving your bottom line, expanding sales, and managing equipment. Leasing companies that originate transactions primarily through the dealer channel often dismiss communication opportunities in end-user publications as a waste of time. This is unfortunate as not every industry has a dedicated channel publication. Coverage gleaned in end-user publications actually supports dealer lease marketing efforts. You can pass along reprints as a sales tool or feature a dealer contact in your article. Now, that's a terrific relationship-builder."

"I believe they're only scratching the surface in terms of what they can do with PR and marketing. Too often, marketing is an afterthought rather than a function integrated into sales and business development planning."

Amy J. Holmes, CAE, Equipment Leasing Association vice president of communications, agrees: "You won't see leasing on Good Morning America, but the trade journals run a lot of stories about our industry. And the ELA's resource page online, [www.chooseleasing.org](http://www.chooseleasing.org), gets 3,500 visitors every month."

In working with leasing companies that have manufacturing parents, there is sometimes too much distance between the parent and their leasing arm in decision-making regarding marketing communications. With more concerted activity, they could better illustrate the full value of their joint offerings to their customers.

Furthermore, says Winzler, "Companies will front-load the time and talent of their marketing team to support the challenge of the chase; that is, winning new business with fancy presentations which assumes priority over implementing an integrated marketing communications program over the long haul. As a result, the benefits of leasing fail to materialize, the manufacturer partner loses interest, and lease volume never achieves the desired critical mass."

### Five Rules for Successful Communication About Leasing

1. Keep key messaging consistent through all communications.
2. Make sure all employees know the "story."
3. Tailor your message to your audience—customers, press, and investors.
4. Keep compelling information coming to the market without putting your competitive position at risk.
5. Always revisit your message and strategy based on market feedback.

On the other hand, small- to medium-sized companies do seem to find willing dealers to do cooperative marketing programs, including issuing jointly newsletters or posting educational websites. Still, they could be more aggressive about marketing all the benefits of leasing, such as the full asset-management benefit lessees gain by turning over the burdens associated with managing, servicing and upgrading assets.

### Making PR & Marketing Work Together

In the leasing industry as well as in other industries, the terms "public relations (PR)" and "marketing communications" are often used interchangeably. However, they are two independent functions with distinct objectives and strategies. PR is primarily aimed at defining and main-

taining corporate reputation or image, while marketing communications' focus is on supporting sales efforts. The two can go hand in hand in an integrated marketing environment, in the authors' opinion. PR value is only realized over time if it has successfully forged relationships that will keep on giving for years to come.

Executives are frequently more eager to disseminate information than forge relationships. They need to deliver a sales message and may be inclined to do so in one big chunk. However, if the message can be broken into smaller, more understandable pieces, they will have more success in reaching their intended audience.

### Stepping Back for a Clearer Picture

And they may react too quickly to perceived communication opportunities without a full analysis of how it will impact their brand and whom, precisely, they are targeting. In the scramble to meet deadlines, all of the key product descriptions or corporate points are made in a single document without regard to the true audience and its time, perception or absorption limitations. It is quite common for organizations to become myopic because their communicators get caught in the vacuum of their organizations and fail to take into account outside perspectives when developing message strategies. While it takes some time and financial investment, the best communication results come when advance research is used to gain a keen understanding of what customers, competitors and others think of a company—both in terms of competitive advantages and weaknesses. This information is critically valuable for determining the company's positioning for various audiences.

Companies within the equipment leasing industry need to simplify, layer and carefully select messages and outlets for delivering their business message. And there is a need to turn these messages into relevant stories. Truly interesting stories sometimes get buried within corporate propaganda. Leasing has interesting people who need to be introduced. A simple photo and well-written biographical note on the company website can create a more welcoming image of leasing organizations than pictures of equipment or flashing animation or yet another graphical variation on a globe.

Much of the messaging created in the equipment leasing industry is done internally by people with very little or no design, marketing or public relations expertise. Instead, people who are actually too close to the subject often create such messaging. Their sense of what will work is usually what they have seen already. That is why we see so many close variations on popular names and advertisements within the leasing industry — their creators take comfort in the familiar.

### Take Charge of Your Message

To distinguish your brand, choose clear and plain language, not jargon. Use nothing more complex than what your great aunt could understand. If these simplified messages are repeated at every touch point and with a consistent look and feel, your brand will come into focus.

"Message consistency is critical when trying to establish a clear position in a crowded market," says Joe St. Henry, who previously managed public relations for well-known former industry leaders Heller Financial, Inc. and Dana Commercial Credit. "Failing to deliver a consistent brand message simply confuses customers and muddles their thinking. All of a company's marketing disciplines must work together to build the brand."

"This starts by leveraging the reach and credibility of media exposure and other third-party endorsements through a strong public relations strategy and then supporting this effort through the controlled messaging of advertising and direct and other marketing vehicles," he continues.

In large organizations, the sales and marketing departments must coordinate efforts closely with the investor relations and public relations

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departments and outside agencies. The CEO or other designated executive needs to step up to the role of telling customer success stories and offering personal accounts and providing examples from outside of the industry to support his or her company's position. This capability will go a long way in establishing rapport and credibility.

The stories need to bring forth the company's distinct value proposition, says St. Henry. "The best CEO spokesmen are candid and say what has to be said, good or bad, sometimes sticking their necks outside of their comfort zones to drive a point home or best position their organizations," explains St. Henry.

"The lease finance marketplace is very fragmented, with banks of all shapes and sizes, plus non-bank lenders, all competing for business. The last thing you want is to be considered just another option—a commodity product. A lessor must distinguish itself from the pack through a very pointed value proposition that can't be copied by anybody else — whether that value proposition is the product mix or unique service support it offers or the type of customer it targets."

"Virtually every lessor has taken marketing efforts to the Internet, but are they creating brochureware or will this be an interactive reception area to be frequently updated where you can also capture information for your company? Here too whatever you are saying must align with all of your printed pieces and all of your marketing activities."

### **Integrating PR**

Public relations is a management function and should therefore be closely aligned with other management functions within the organization, such as human resources, marketing, sales, legal, strategic planning and other decision-making areas. Because PR is indeed all about guarding

your organization's reputation, what could be more important? Further, PR is about illuminating and sharing your unique values in the marketplace and finding creative ways to establish relationships that can grow over time and create understanding, acceptance and, ultimately, trust. These will open channels for business and enhance your bottom line.

Reputation management, however, must cascade throughout the entire organization. Everyone has a role to play in optimizing and maintaining their company's position in the marketplace.

The strategic plan should be designed to encourage as much two-way communication as possible. The communication goal is not just one of issuing messages but of opening up to outside information coming in.

The leasing industry is a competitive marketplace, and at the same time it is a small community. Lessors don't always want to announce their good news for fear that competitors will want a piece of it, but with due consideration given to timing, message and delivery, it is important to make announcements periodically that keep your company recognized, understood and valued. At the same time, look at your brochures, website, magazine advertisements and press releases all at once. Ask yourself whether these messages all appear to be coming from the same company. Are they believable? Do they say what makes your organization unique? **m**

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