Strategic Comms *for* Modern Commerce:

The Ultimate Guide

By Aster Agency, formerly Ketner Group Communications

ASTER AGENCY

A NOTE ON OUR NAME

You may know us as Ketner Group, now we're Aster Agency, a Hawke Media company.
We're the same team you've trusted for decades, simply evolved to reflect our new chapter.



The Future of Commerce

"Everything is going to change!"

If you're like us and you've been part of the retail technology ecosystem for years, you have certainly heard someone shout this opinion from the rooftops.

The difference this time? We think the proclamation is true.

The way AI has taken over commerce is, frankly, insane.

AI has been part of the retail industry for years. But the rise of LLMs, genAI and agentic are rapidly transforming every moment in the buying journey, from point of production to point of purchase.

TRANSFORMING SHOPPER BEHAVIOR

The 2025 holiday season saw traffic to retail sites from generative AI tools increase 693.4% compared to 2024, according to research by Adobe.

Maybe more impactful: shoppers were primed to purchase. Adobe found they converted 31% more than other traffic sources.

TRANSFORMING RETAILER BEHAVIOR

NVIDIA's 2026 State of AI in Retail & CPG survey found the share of retailers actively deploying AI jumped from 42% to 58% in a single year, with 89% saying AI is increasing revenue and 95% saying it's cutting costs.

Technologies that power the modern commerce experience are ready for their moment. The question is, how do you capture a retailer's attention and keep it?

That's where strategic communications comes in.

94% of business buyers used AI in their most recent purchase, according to Forrester. And AI leans on earned media to answer them: Muck Rack found PR makes up 84% of the sources AI tools cite.

This guide will share how you can build a communications program that, to put it simply, grows your business.

PART ONE:

Preparing to Launch a Strategic Communications Program

Laying the Groundwork

Strategic communications is a multiplier for everything you're doing. It's gasoline on a fire.

When your executive is cited in an article, that's content your sales team can share with prospects. When you win an industry award, that's validation for your marketing team's collateral.

PR is an ongoing top-of-funnel strategy that feeds your entire growth engine, helping you build awareness, credibility and thought leadership.

Whether you're kicking off a new communications strategy or jump-starting an existing process, you should begin by answering a few key questions.

What are your goals?

What do you want from PR? More media coverage, executive thought leadership opportunities or lead generation support? PR can play a role in all of these. Before you get started, clearly outline your goals.

Are you prepared to make an ongoing investment?

The benefits of PR accrue over time. Enhancing your company's reputation doesn't happen overnight. While you can expect some initial quick wins when you launch a program, quality PR is a long-distance race, not a quick one-and-done sprint.

Do you have the right marketing resources in place?

Mature tech companies usually have a well-rounded marketing team with unique resources for media relations, content, demand gen and more. Smaller, high-growth startups may lean on a head of marketing to lead PR. Either way, you must identify who manages your communications strategy and campaigns internally.

Is your internal team ready to commit?

A successful communications program requires buy-in from the executive level on down. Make sure expectations are clear, and identify how each team member will be involved. Which spokesperson will manage a top-tier media request? Are they trained and prepped on talking points? PR is a team effort.



Choosing a Partner

When identifying key players, you'll ask the question, should we hire an agency to help with communications program? And if we do, what kind of agency?

Many companies decide to engage a specialist agency to help execute their program, and for good reason. A specialist agency knows your industry inside and out and requires very little ramp-up time.

RELATIONSHIPS BUILD OVER TIME

Time In the latest Muck Rack State of PR report, 71% of communications professionals cited low response rates from journalists as a top challenge, and 61% pointed to shrinking media lists in their beats. Only 2% said earned media hasn't gotten harder to secure. The solution is relationships built over decades.

ASTER AGENCY'S COMMERCE EXPERTISE

Aster Agency focuses exclusively on the modern commerce ecosystem, from backend to basket.

Whether you're building AI-powered personalization platforms, optimizing supply chains, revolutionizing payment technology, or creating composable commerce solutions, we speak your language from day one.

No lengthy onboarding. No educating your agency about enterprise technology and the retail ecosystem. Just expert partnership from people who've spent decades in this space.



PART TWO:

Building Your Communications Strategy

Developing Your Roadmap

Now that you've built your foundation and selected a partner, you're ready to hit the ground running, right?

Not so fast—only if you've identified your objectives, defined your strategy and created a plan to serve as your roadmap.

1. IDENTIFY YOUR OBJECTIVES

When working with clients, we typically identify three to four key objectives that inform our strategy. These range from increasing awareness to generating leads.

You'll need to be realistic about your objectives, too. Can you show how your solution delivers real business value for retailers? Does your company have access to original data? Do you have executives willing to speak to the media? If so, you have many of the prerequisites you'll need for success.

2. DEFINE YOUR STRATEGY

As you develop a strategy alongside your communications agency, be sure to analyze and develop a game plan that includes your:

- Company messaging and brand identity
- Target audiences and customer personas
- Competitive differentiators
- Unique solution set
- Overall marketing plan
- Key thought leaders

3. CREATE A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

The last step is to create a communications plan that puts your objectives and strategy into action.

Your communications plan will reflect monthly support for initiatives that are planned well in advance like trade shows, awards, product launches, research projects and key retail seasons.

Then, you'll expand on this plan as each quarter nears. You'll want to incorporate new storylines, retail trends and company developments into proactive pitches, content, briefings and more.



Remember: it's all about the mix. You need a consistent drumbeat of proactive pitching and byline articles, plus bursts for bigger campaigns like press releases, long-form content, and original research.

PART THREE:

Finding Inspiration From Real Tech Companies

Looking for inspiration?

Here's how three Aster Agency clients have turned strategic communications into measurable business results.

NIQ: FROM DATA LEADER TO MEDIA AUTHORITY

NIQ (NielsenIQ) is the world's leading consumer intelligence company. When we first spoke in 2024, the brand was globally recognized for its data but needed a North American communications program to turn that data into consistent, measurable coverage across six verticals.

We built the full infrastructure — media relations, a byline program, press releases, event coordination, and a media newsletter. In our first year, we secured:

- **200+ media mentions** in 2025
- A **20% increase in share of voice** against key competitors
- **750+ media relationships** built across the U.S. and Canada
- Inbound requests from *Bloomberg, The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Today,* and *CNBC* — as many as 20 per week
- A media newsletter grown from scratch to an 85%+ open rate

"From the beginning, Aster Agency has been an impressive, strategic and thoughtful partner. We have a massively complex business that relies heavily on content and thought leadership to break through. They helped us craft and execute a strategy that translated our thought-leadership investments into meaningful gains in both the quantity and quality of our media coverage."

- **Kenny Juskowiak**, Global Head of Product Marketing at NielsenIQ (NIQ)



GK SOFTWARE: BUILDING THE NO. 1 NEW POS PROVIDER IN THE WORLD

GK Software had built a world-class, cloud-based retail technology suite and a strong track record in Europe. But in North America, it was unknown, with no regional marketing function, no media relationships, and minimal awareness.

We stepped in as GK's outsourced North American marketing team, building its communications strategy from the ground up. After roughly a decade, we achieved:

- GK is the **No. 1 new POS provider globally**
- **27.8% revenue growth** — the fastest among major POS vendors
- Roughly **200 pieces of coverage** in recent years, plus 12+ bylines annually
- **20+ analyst briefings per year**, contributing to leadership recognition from Datos Insights, IHL Group, IDC and Forrester

GK is now a wholly owned subsidiary of Fujitsu, which valued the GK brand so highly it preserved the name.

"When we entered the U.S. market, we knew that technology would only get us so far. American retailers hadn't heard of GK. Aster Agency helped us change that. They didn't just get us coverage — they helped us earn the credibility to have real conversations with real retailers about real problems. That's made a real difference in how we've grown regionally."

- **Bill Miller**, President, GK Software US



inspectorio

INSPECTRIO: BECOMING THE INDUSTRY VOICE IN SUPPLY CHAIN

Inspectorio is an AI-powered supply chain platform helping global brands and retailers digitize production, compliance and quality.
When the company came to us in late 2023 — fresh off a $50 million Series B — it had world-class technology but inconsistent coverage, lagging share of voice and no way to tie PR to business results.

We built a strategic program from the ground up: media relations, thought leadership, analyst relations, awards, and customer announcements. The results over two years include:

- **116 pieces of coverage** with a 1.1 billion total reach
- As high as **79% share of voice** against three top competitors
- A **158% year-over-year increase** in media pickup
- **13 articles from a single customer announcement** (Mango), with 46M+ UVPM
- Top-tier coverage including a New York Times interview on tariffs



"Aster Agency understands the complexity of global supply chains, and they know how to position us as go-to resources for media covering the biggest stories today, like AI and tariffs. They're not just another vendor — they are a true part of our team."

- **Mark Burstein**, SVP Americas at Inspectorio

PART FOUR:

Generating Business Results With Communications Tactics

Now that you've put in the hard work to develop a solid communications plan alongside your agency partner, it's time to execute your campaigns across channels.

Media Relations

Storytelling is at the heart of media relations. After all, you must tell a strong story if you're going to convince an editor to write about your solutions. And ultimately, these pickups influence prospective buyers.

Media relations lets you demonstrate market acceptance, boost your profile through a larger share of voice, support fundraising and exit strategy, and influence sales.

Stories must be understood, believable and persuasive. We always recommend retail tech companies evaluate their messaging and value proposition before engaging in media relations.

Once they do, they can enjoy the following benefits:



PART FOUR: GENERATING BUSINESS RESULTS WITH COMMUNICATIONS TACTICS

DEMONSTRATE MARKET ACCEPTANCE

Media relations is a critical way to validate your technology and expertise. It gives you a chance to describe your vision for the industry, the challenges your solution addresses and how customers use your products. Because these stories are told by outside media, they gain credibility.

BOOST YOUR MARKET PROFILE

By “owning the conversation” through a larger share of voice (or earned media coverage compared to competitors), you can increase your market presence and punch above your weight class.

SUPPORT YOUR FUNDRAISING AND EXIT STRATEGY

Media relations can attract investor interest and provide an important source of validation. Articles and press releases about customers are particularly important, as they provide external proof that goes beyond your investor deck.

INFLUENCE LEAD GENERATION AND SALES

While lead generation isn’t the whole purpose of media relations, it influences sales as part of your overall marketing mix. Retailers want to know what technology industry leaders are adopting, and coverage can influence their purchase decisions.

WHAT YOU SHOULD DO AFTER EARNING A MEDIA MENTION:

- Share on company social media channels
- Add to your website’s media coverage page
- Feature in upcoming marketing campaigns, such as a blog post or newsletter
- Send to:
  - **ALL EMPLOYEES** encouraging them to share on their personal social channels
  - **YOUR SALES TEAM** encouraging them to share with prospects
  - **YOUR CUSTOMER SUCCESS TEAM** encouraging them to share with customers, particularly those up for renewal



Content

When it comes to storytelling, no one can deny that content development is an essential part of a communications strategy.

To get your company “on the map” in the competitive retail industry, you need a memorable voice that ensures your story rises above the noise.

Content has always played a key role in supporting the sales funnel: increasing overall awareness, generating prospects and nurturing leads through close.

Communications content includes:

PRESS RELEASES
Distribute company news to generate coverage.

INDEPENDENT RESEARCH
Identify your company as an expert in your category.

BYLINE ARTICLES
Establish execs as thought leaders

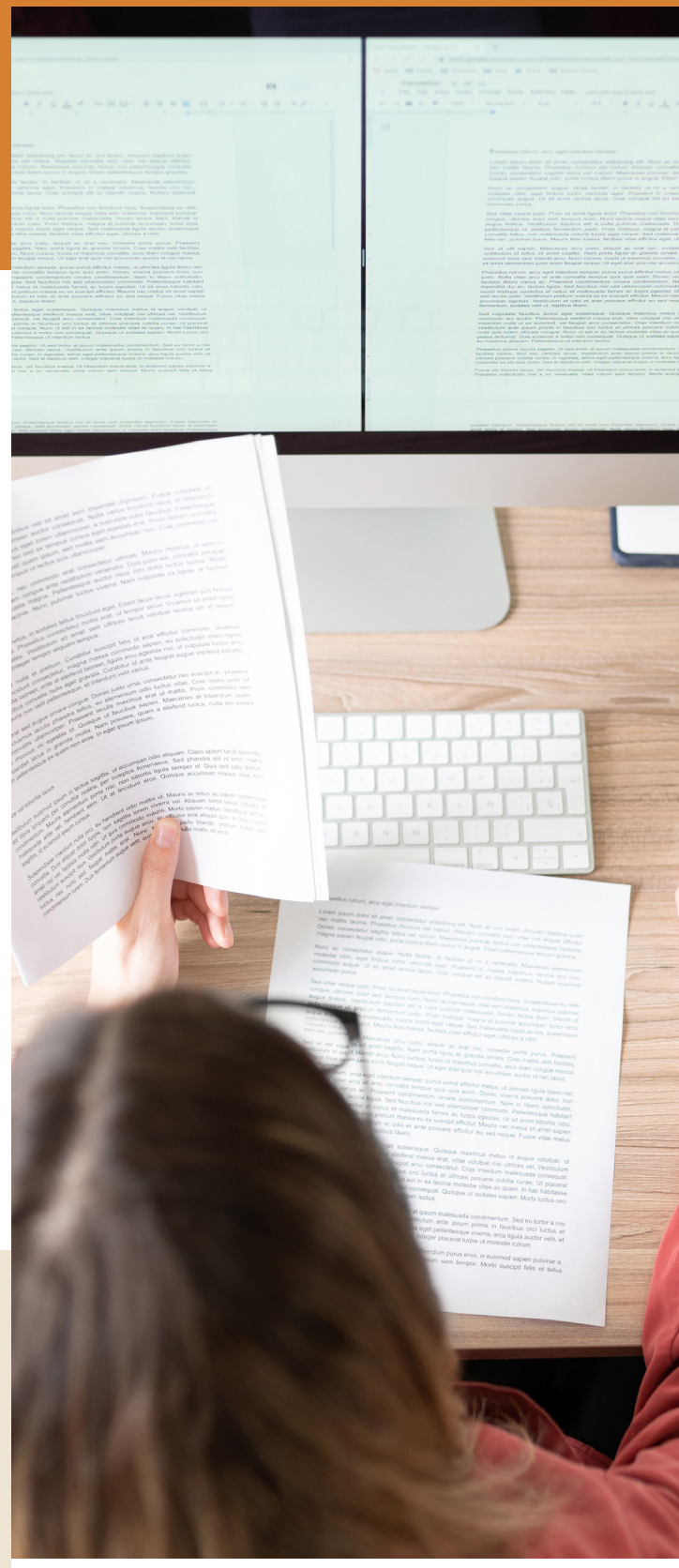
BLOG POSTS
Tell your company and product stories.

LONG-FORM CONTENT (EBOOKS, WHITEPAPERS)
Generate leads via download, and repurpose into bylines and blogs.

INFOGRAPHICS
Increase your reach through sharable content.

WHY BYLINE ARTICLES MAKE AN IMPACT

Through vendor-neutral bylines, you get the benefit of having an external source (usually a trade publication) validate your leadership by providing you a platform in the first place. And you get 500 or more words to establish your expertise on a timely topic.



Analyst Relations

Large retailers and brands frequently turn to analysts for advice when evaluating technology vendors. It's an analyst's job to understand the industry, challenges and solutions, and then share their findings in reports.

By completing regular analyst briefings, you can ensure you're well-positioned in analysts' minds.

Once you've established a relationship through an initial briefing, you're ready to nurture that relationship through recurring annual or biannual briefings. Often, we recommend scheduling briefings around a significant company announcement, such as a: product launch or update, rebrand or executive transition.

ANALYSTS WILL BE ABLE TO PROVIDE PERSPECTIVE THAT IMPACTS STRATEGIES INCLUDING:

- Company go-to-market plan
- Marketing plan
- Product positioning and roadmap
- Sales strategy
- Investor pitch deck

Analyst firms worth briefing in the modern commerce ecosystem include Gartner, Forrester, IDC, RSR, IHL Group, Coresight Research, and Datos Insights.

Custom Research

Original research has become one of the most powerful tools, particularly with the rise in buyers using LLMs to research technology providers.

Proprietary surveys, benchmarks, and consumer studies position you as the definitive expert in your category. Plus, they can inspire additional content and campaigns, such as press releases, analyst briefings, social content, blog series or sales enablement.



QUICK TIP: If you're not investing in a paid, ongoing relationship with an analyst firm, you can schedule free, one-off briefings with analyst firms via an analyst firm's website. original research.

Awards and Speaking

Industry awards and speaking engagements allow you to earn instant credibility with customers, prospects, investors and future employees. They're also a reliable way to improve link-building and search visibility for your brand. Plus, they are ranked highly in AI-generated answers.

Awards to consider include: Inc. 5000, Inbound Logistics 2026 Top 100 Logistics & Supply Chain Technology Providers, Data Leadership Awards by CGT, MarCom Awards.

Trade Shows and Events

Don't overlook media opportunities at trade shows. Industry events are perfect for in-person media and analyst meetings, product showcases and customer connections.

If you're attending, ask the event coordinators for a show media list so you connect with the right registered press.

Events worth watching include: NRF, Shoptalk, Groceryshop, NACS, FMI Midwinter and Retail Club.

AEO, GEO, SEO

Earned media, thought leadership and original research aren't just good for PR. They're how you get named by the machines your buyers use to make business decisions.

The tactics that build AI visibility are the ones communications teams own.

As a result, we recommend considering a rise in your AEO, GEO and SEO to be a natural extension of consistently delivering high-value comms content.

A WORD ON HOW WE USE AI WITHIN THE ASTER AGENCY.

We're people first, AI-partnered. AI helps us research more quickly and evaluate opportunities, but it never writes for our clients or replaces human relationships. AI can't pick up the phone and call a journalist it's known for a decade. We can.



PART FIVE:

Measuring Business Impact

Reporting is how you evaluate what worked, refine what didn't and put tangible numbers behind your program for leadership.

It matters more than ever: 69% of communications pros say producing measurable results is the single best way to prove PR's value to leadership or clients (Muck Rack, State of PR 2026).

Here's how we recommend measuring success.

Monthly Media Measurement

The simplest way to evaluate your communications strategy is through monthly media measurement, which you can complete with tools such as Cision or Meltwater.

These tools will help you easily track your monthly pickups across publications. You can dig into reach, readership, social impact, related keywords and more.

You can also track competitive pickup and identify your competitive share of voice (SOV). We recommend tracking four to five key competitors, which allows you to truly measure your reach over time.

Measurement not only allows you to evaluate campaigns, it also provides great inspiration for refining your strategy.

When reviewing reports, ask yourself questions like, what is resonating with the media? What are competitors talking about, and how can we join that conversation? Which key media relationships should we prioritize?



Quarterly KPIs Tied to Business Outcomes

Every company has different criteria for measuring success. We recommend crafting quarterly KPIs that align with your business goals.

For example, if your goal is to drive media pickup to increase your competitive SOV, then you'll want to track pickups as well as SOV. Or, if you serve multiple retail verticals, you may want to evaluate pickup further by tracking the number of mentions per vertical.

We recommend setting quarterly, as opposed to monthly, KPIs because they more accurately reflect the success of a communications campaign.

The nature of PR is that it has peaks and valleys. Some months are news-heavy, others are quieter. A quarterly goal allows you to average out the spikes.

EXAMPLES OF KPIs WE TRACK:

- Overall number of mentions
- Byline articles written and published
- Press releases written and their pickups
- Data-focused mentions tied to research
- Awards submitted and won
- Competitive share of voice

When you begin working with an agency, you'll want to establish KPIs by running an audit. This baseline report can help you identify ideal yet realistic goals to work towards.

Once you get going, you will see results. Our client Birdzi shared that a single press release generated a half-dozen qualified, inbound leads.

Another client's VP of Marketing shared that after ramping up PR, page views grew from less than 6,000 per month to nearly 18,000. Inbound leads reached 400 per month. In three years, more than a third of qualified leads tracked back to PR.



REAP THE REWARDS

Strategic Communications Drives Business Outcomes

Visibility drives valuation. Credibility shortens sales cycles. Market positioning attracts partnerships. Strategic communications delivers all three.

You've reviewed the basics for developing a strategic communications plan and you're ready to impact the bottom line.

BUILD VISIBILITY
Media relations, analyst relations and thought leadership that put your company and executives on the map.

ESTABLISH CREDIBILITY
Awards, speaking and third-party validation that give prospects confidence.

STRENGTHEN RETENTION
Customer storytelling and ongoing visibility that reinforce why clients chose you.

ATTRACT TALENT
Recognition and thought leadership that make top candidates want to work for you.

ACCELERATE SALES
Coverage and content that shorten deal cycles and increase deal size — prospects say "we've been seeing your name everywhere" before you even pitch.

Investing in communications allows you to generate both short-term wins and long-term successes.

When properly integrated into your overall marketing strategy, comms can help turn an unknown company into a huge success. It can influence how the market considers an organization.

Above all, the key to a successful communications program is finding the right team to help tell your unique story.

An established and specialized agency partner brings unique talents and fresh voices to the table, making immediate impact with optimum results.



How Aster Agency Helps You Grow Your Business

The Aster Agency is the only communications agency with 30 years of expertise in technology that powers the buying experience. We work as part of your team, building real relationships, smart strategy and sustainable growth through what is undoubtedly the biggest technological shift of our time.

Our clients describe us as strategic partners, not vendors. Many of our client relationships span more than a decade. In fact, client contacts often bring us to their next company. That longevity reflects consistent delivery, genuine relationships and the kind of trust that only builds over time.

Whether you're breaking into the U.S. market, preparing for a funding round or building ongoing visibility, we'd love to hear about your goals.



Let's Talk

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