

---

# HOW TO MANAGE PR IN THE BENELUX

WHITEPAPER

## HOW TO MANAGE PR IN THE BENELUX

Let's say you work at an American brand and it's your job to do PR in the Benelux, Europe. Our message to you: you are up for a challenge. You will face challenges when it comes to culture, language and a messy media landscape. But hey, good news! In this whitepaper you will read all you need to know about how to manage PR in the Benelux. In here, we will set out our experiences with managing PR in the Benelux. It is specially written for PR managers who lead agencies and campaigns in this region but who are not familiar (enough) with the culture of the countries within, and even more important: the differences between them.

Two years ago we expanded our Dutch agency to Belgium and with that, transformed it into a Benelux agency, with offices in both Rotterdam and Antwerp. Therefore, it is now a good time to look back and reflect on how we feel about managing PR in the entire Benelux region. For us, the expansion from the Netherlands to Belgium felt like a logical step. But by doing this, we also noticed the many differences there are between us.

## 5 ESSENTIALS TO HELP YOU MANAGE PR IN THE BENELUX

The Benelux is a contraction of the words Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg, and thus represents all those countries together. Luxembourg, however, is media-wise so small that it's usually managed from within Belgium (you will often see the title "PR Manager BeLux"). Between 1815 and 1830, Belgium was part of the Netherlands. This might set the expectation that the countries share a lot culture-wise. Well, think again. Here are some "good to knows" to help you manage your PR.



## 1. Language

In the Netherlands we speak Dutch. In Belgium, only the upper side of the country, Flanders, does. Both have their own expressions and even words, so from time to time the Flemish and Dutchies do not understand each other immediately. This has led to some really funny situations at the office over the past year! For example: in Dutch a microwave is called 'magnetron', Belgians say 'microgolf'. When it comes to making an appointment, it is pretty difficult if Belgians speak about 'voormiddag'. Do you mean early in the afternoon, like 1 PM, or do you mean in the morning? These are rather innocent examples and are not even that funny. But, what about the word 'Poepen'. In Dutch this means doing a number two at the toilet, in Belgian it means... having sex. Okay, let's move on: French is spoken in the southern part of Belgium and in the capital Brussels. So, here it is of great importance that you show that you understand the differences within this small region. Use a local copywriter, even for Dutch and Flemish (even though they look quite the same). Oh, and before we forget: there is also a small German-speaking region in Belgium (as if it's not complicated enough already). Most people here speak English quite well, definitely on a business level.

## 2. Attitude

This is probably the most well-known difference between Belgian and Dutch people. Dutchies are direct, Belgians are more reserved. Belgians think Dutch people are rude and sometimes too straightforward (and thus impolite and loud). For the Dutch, Belgians are wasting time on sugar coating what they actually want to say (and thus wasting their precious time). Needless to say, within Belgium there is also a difference in the level of directness between Flemish and Walloon, as the latter tend to be even more leaning towards a French-style of doing business. Marianne Kemps, Benelux PR manager Domino's Pizza, really notices a difference in the 'style' of the journalist: "In The Netherlands journalists are definitely more direct, sometimes even blunt. In general Belgian journalists are more polite and they really take time to listen to counter arguments. This doesn't mean a Belgian journalist isn't critical, the approach is just different."

### **3. Rules**

When crossing the border, don't forget to adapt to local habits. If you set up an interview, know that in the Netherlands a local spokesperson will probably do the trick. In Belgium the CEO of the company will be much more appreciated. And there are also differences when it comes to business meetings: in the Netherlands, don't be surprised if the intern comes along and tells everyone the idea is crap. As long as you can defend your opinion, everyone can share it, even with the CEO. In Belgium, the intern can assist a meeting too but usually is there only to take notes. The boss is still the boss, and hierarchy is more important. And don't forget: a meeting in the Netherlands that starts at 9 am, starts at 9 am. In Belgium, well, let's say it's ok to run a little late (especially in the French speaking part).

### **4. Media landscape**

While there are thousands of big and small local media companies, media wise Flanders and the Netherlands are intertwined. The Belgian "Mediahuis" owns Belgian news media like De Standaard and Het Nieuwsblad, but also owns the Dutch high quality platform NRC. Sanoma is Finnish by origin, but its - mostly lifestyle - media platforms are merged in Belgium and the Netherlands, representing almost twenty platforms. In 2017, the Dutch Talpa bought SBS from them, to strengthen their position. The recently founded DPG Media, previously known as De Persgroep, is Belgian but owns Het Parool, Trouw, Algemeen Dagblad and de Volkskrant, which are amongst The Netherlands' biggest news media. Result: all big Dutch newspapers - except the financial paper Het Financieele Dagblad - are in Belgian hands. This means you can read the exact same article of the same journalist in both a Dutch and a Flemish newspaper. In Wallonia there is a big influence and spillover from France, with many Walloons consuming French media.

Valentijn Bouman, senior manager Brand Communications adidas: "The media landscape and media consumption continues to develop both in the Netherlands and Belgium, but not necessarily at the same pace - or in some cases even in a different direction. The differences between the two markets may have become larger rather than smaller. This is reflected in, among other things, digital development in the market and the difference in popularity of social media channels. Logically this has an impact on how we approach PR in both markets. 'One size does not fit all' certainly applies to us."

## 5. Culture and politics

Within the Netherlands entrepreneurship is a real thing. Every year, the amount of hubs, start-ups and student entrepreneurs is rising. Coffee bars are flooding the country, hosting latte sipping twenty-something people behind a laptop. In Belgium the will for taking risks and implementing new ideas is lower and there are many more rules, agreements, certificates and so on. The political climate is different in both countries. For the Dutch, government rules are there for the necessary things, but not to control every little thing in life. For example, when the law was set against smoking in bars and pubs, a lot of bar owners just created a tipping box for smokers, used to pay the fine - should they get one. In Belgium, and its complex federal state, politics is a more sensitive topic. You have to be aware of the tensions between Flemish and French political parties. When you have a story to pitch to media that stresses or points out differences between the Flemish and Walloon, it could get a completely different, more political context. Conclusion: you might need a stronger bond with your PA-advisor in Belgium than in the Netherlands.



## THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

The differences within the Benelux make it complicated for an outsider to do PR and marketing in this region. Hell, it's even difficult for those that have been living there their entire lives. Local expertise, people that speak the language and that have a sense of feeling of what's going on on a cultural, political and historical level is crucial. Over the last few years we noticed an increase in demand for Benelux PR firms. A lot of potential new clients reached out to us with that specific question. An important condition, however, is local PR people handling the account. Marianne Kemps (Domino's Pizza) says: "It is crucial to have local PR specialists that understand the market, speak the language and have local contacts. In my case, as a Dutch PR manager responsible for the entire Benelux market, I need some extra eyes and ears in each market to advise me. For example I don't read that many Belgian newspapers or don't watch tv in Belgium. You need someone that really understands the market. There are simply too many differences between our countries. Luckily I do notice that Belgian press reaches out to me although I can imagine a Belgian spokesperson is better approachable for them."

According to Valentijn Bouman (adidas brand marketing Benelux), maintaining media relationships requires a more personal touch in Belgium than in the Netherlands. "Influencer management has developed differently in both countries, which clearly requires a specific approach per country (and even per 'influencer'). PR resources and activations which are popular in one country are old news in the other or have little interest in them. To make things a little bit more complicated, we see that all these differences manifest themselves not only between the two markets, but even per product category within one specific market. To continue to make the desired local impact as a brand, we must constantly be able to maintain a local feeling with the media landscape and network. Local representation, for example in the form of PR agencies, is and will remain a crucial extension of this."

So again, local people do the trick. Why go for a Benelux solution then? EMEA PR or Marketing Managers need to tackle and control so many different regions. Combining those that speak the same language makes sense. It offers a lot of cost-technical and organizational advantages: back-office, invoicing, graphic design and handling can be centralized. PR strategies can be created for the entire region and (slightly) adapted locally. This leads to more efficiency and saves hours of work, strategy and creation. In an era where borders are fading - also in media - and where we consume news via social media, global news sites, international blogs and

influentials, multinationals chose for one global approach. Local PR experts should make the difference by flagging if and when something isn't appropriate, appealing or relevant. These local sensitivities and the understanding of culture and habits are crucial for multinationals to win the hearts of their (Benelux) consumers.

With local experts working under one umbrella, you get the best of both worlds. Simplification and efficiency, with the necessary local touch. It's been two years since we started operating on a Benelux level, and we are still very much experiencing the pros and cons. For us it is enriching to create strategies and plans on a Benelux level, as it is efficient and at the same time gives new, fresh insights. Implementing them locally afterwards has never been an issue or caused big changes in our original approach. So far, it felt like the right step in offering the best possible service to and solutions for global brands.

Coopr is a team of 30 specialists that live and breath PR and content marketing. With clients like Netflix, LinkedIn, Fossil watches and Coca-Cola, a lot of branches are represented within the company. Coopr is based in Rotterdam and Antwerp.

If we can help you find solutions for your brand in the Benelux region, please contact **Dorien Cox** or **Jody Koehler** at [dorien@coopr.be](mailto:dorien@coopr.be) or [jody@coopr.nl](mailto:jody@coopr.nl)