

TACTIC: Research  
Barr Engineering  
Submitted by Piper & Gold Public Relations

### **Research/background:**

Research provides a meaningful contribution to any organization's public relations program, and it should serve as the foundation of efforts moving forward. But we all know it can be a challenge to convince non-PR people to invest the time and money into truly understanding the whole picture before diving into communications planning.

Which is why we were thrilled when Barr Engineering Co., an employee-owned engineering and environmental services consulting firm, asked for just that – to start with research that would serve as the foundation for the launch of a public relations plan and program. Confident that truly understanding how people think and feel would impact the success of its broader efforts, we dove into exploring a series of key topics for Barr, allowing us to ensure the communication plan, key messages and strategies were likely to resonate, build trust and help Barr succeed in its goals to increase awareness of its Michigan efforts and recruit top talent to its teams in Michigan.

### **Planning/content:**

**Budget:** With a total project cost of \$8,000 to develop a communications strategy and key messages for Barr's Michigan operations, we wanted to reserve the majority of the budget for the plan and message developing (including focus groups), and thus set aside a budget of \$1,350 for the research. To be mindful of the budget, we focused on leveraging secondary data such as research studies, academic journals and credible reports to explore key topics important to Barr in developing a PR program.

**Target audience:** The initial identified target audiences for Barr's communications were potential clients in Michigan – primarily those in manufacturing, energy, fuels, mining, municipal government, construction, and land and water use – as well as potential engineering talent. With low unemployment rates and population loss of young professionals across the state, the workforce is tight in Michigan. Barr's relatively "low-profile" approach to business has left it competing for talent with more widely known and recognized organizations ranging from GM to Google. Key strategies for elevating its presence and understanding what talent wants was critical as a result of this research.

**Goals:** For the research specifically, we focused on understanding two key areas to Barr:

- **FOCUS ONE:** Building trust with the public and communicating authentically. Often, Barr can be pulled in to help organizations address complicated and at times controversial environmental or engineering challenges. Its core values include "**committing to an exceptional client experience** by putting ourselves in our clients' shoes to help identify and solve their problems and being responsible for the solutions," and "**consulting collaboratively** and recognizing that we can accomplish more when we work together, sharing knowledge and skills in an inclusive and diverse environment." With these values in mind, we set out to explore how to build trust amidst controversy, with Barr often viewing itself as the "good guys and gals" helping solve complex problems with responsible and sustainable positive impacts. We also built a research foundation to support public relations and outreach strategies that convey authenticity and help to share the deeply held core values and pride of the Barr team.
- **FOCUS TWO:** With recruiting top talent as another critical focal area for Barr, we explored trends in STEM talent nationally and within the state to shape future strategies, as well as attitudes toward community relations. Another Barr core value is "**acting as employee owners** who view ownership as a privilege and a responsibility and are proud of what we do and who we are." This unique employment aspect has put Barr at the forefront of community service and engagement, and we wanted to understand if this community relations element was important to potential employee-owners (and found it also important to potential clients).

### **Execution:**

In ensuring the research could clearly impact Barr's messaging and communications planning, we not only aggregated secondary data, but analyzed the impacts and opportunities of what we learned. While the overall approach was straightforward – mining of information from journals, academic databases, news articles, trade industry groups and publications for credible, relevant and verifiable content – the results were powerful. We were able to weed through and set aside for future use data that wasn't directly relevant to these specific goals to maintain our research direction. Once compiled and analyzed, the final **Key Insights** served as the foundation for employee focus groups to further explore the internal perspectives on these topics. They also shaped the 2020 Communications Plan goals, strategies and tactics to maximize what we learned, and the research insights served as the foundation for building authentic, evidence-based key messages to resonate with Barr's current employees and customers (bonus audiences we added into the plan based on the research), potential clients and talent throughout Michigan. Though we can't share the final Communications Plan due to client confidentiality, we are incredibly proud of the result and the role the research was able to play throughout it. It's not every day we PR teams get to work with a dream client who loves research as much as we do, so when it happens, the power even secondary research can have is positive, lasting effects on the success of our efforts, and for that, we're both grateful and excited as we dive into 2020 implementation with the Barr Engineering team.