
THE ART OF COLUMN DROP

*I hear it through the day,
Airwaves getting filled,
With gossip broadcast to and fro,
It's the Devil's Radio.*

-- "Devil's Radio", Cloud Nine, George Harrison, 1996.

You don't need Barbra Streisand to remind you that "people who need people" love to read about other people.

Just like sex --- "gossip" sells. Over the years, gossip has grown as a publicity target.

Properly placed, a column can prove extraordinarily helpful in creating a desired "buzz."

- A Delhi Times / Bombay Times "Page Three" list of celebrities expected at a club opening can boost the crowd
- A strategic mention in Vir Sanghvi's "Counter Point" column (Hindustan Times) can bring to the fore an unknown issue
- A positive food review by Sabina Sahgal Saikia of Delhi Times or Rashmi Uday Singh of Bombay Times or Maryam Reshi / Sourish Bhattacharya of HT City, can greatly help a new restaurant be successful
- The NRI lobby in the US targets Chidanand Rajaghatta's column "Desideratta" (The Economic Times) to mention their issues in his column

So the art of the "column drop" - literally, "dropping" the name of a celebrity, a restaurant, a theme park or politician or special event into a well-read column - is a coveted public relations skill.

And just like any other PR tool, column droppers must know the "territory" before engaging in this craft. Pitching news to magazine and newspaper columnists takes a lot of work, but the payoffs can be great. Columns have faithful readerships and are usually prominently displayed, giving you a lot more bang for your pitching buck. If they are syndicated, they may have national or international reach, therefore they are very much worth courting. You can be a source over time and with great reach, and if they take a liking to your cause, it can be quite amazing.

But managing a relationship with a columnist is quite a bit different from managing a relationship with a beat reporter, say media relations pros. Columnists don't have to cover breaking news, so they can pick and choose what they want to write about. And coverage may be a long time in coming, for the same reason, so they're not the people to go to if one wants a quick hit.

Good columnists have enormous reach, so be patient and pitch the big picture

The following half dozen tips should be considered in approaching columnists for publicity.

Rule #1 - Read the column

This is key -- always. The cardinal sin of PR people, according to journalists, is that "they pitch me without knowing what I write." Different columns specialize in different things - art, technology, travel, celebrities, politicians, business and even TV programmes (Poonam Saxena's "Small Talk"). Columnists can write

about topics as diverse as cricket to the impact of the Atal Behari Vajpayee's tax cut proposal on low-income Indians. So the first thing a PR professional must do is research the specific column and columnist to determine what, in particular, makes sense to pitch (most newspaper websites have a columnist section and a good archive of past columns that can be very helpful in figuring out what people write about). Part of working with columnists, means finding out what views and opinions they have on the issue you're pitching. It's very interactive—one has to get acquainted with their thoughts and one cannot do that overnight.

Rule #2 - Create a snowball

The best reason to attempt to place names, issues in columns is to create a "snowball effect" for the product or issue or reputation. Stated another way, a strategic column drop can create a "buzz" about a person or place that acts as a catalyst to generate interest.

For example, restaurateurs or nightclub owners can benefit greatly from a mention of who is expected to attend a grand opening. The all-important paparazzi - celebrity photographers - comb the gossip columns for future photo opportunities. So a well-placed restaurant mention triggers paparazzi attendance and can propel a new restaurant to the top of the popular list in short order.

Rule #3 - Place the call

Columnists get lots of material over the skylight, and much of it gets buried. Therefore, it is always best to call and explain the relevance of the item you seek to place. Some columnists have others who draft material for them. So establishing personal contact with these unseen and unheralded but pivotally important associates can be critical in making the column.

When pitching a columnist, your objectives are different. With the beat reporter, in general you're going for immediate effect—the changing of behavior, through the dispensation of hard news. With the columnist, you are trying to influence long-term thinking—policy, procedure or perspective—by contributing thought-provoking insights that border on the philosophical.

With that in mind, you can't approach a columnist and expect to see coverage in a day or two. And you usually can't expect a columnist to write about your company or CEO until you're a known quantity to the writer.

You can go to beat writers even if you don't have a relationship. If you have breaking news that fits into their beat, they need to cover it. But you don't call TN Ninan [Business Standard Editor and columnist], and ask him if he can write about something for tomorrow.

Rule #4 - Write Pithy Prose

Good news writing is succinct to begin with. And columns are the least long-winded of any news section. So column submissions must be sharp, brief and to the point. They should be written as the columnist him or herself would write them. The best drops are those that quite literally can be "dropped" right into the column without any editing whatsoever.

A point to make note of is that since many columnists cover a wide scope of subjects, it's tougher to get their attention. Since they have so much to choose from on any given day, your pitch needs to be particularly strong.

Rule #5 - Tip 'Em Off Even When Not Selling

The columnist "beast" needs to be fed constantly. Most columns appear daily, so that columnists have a never-ending need to fill space. Therefore, columnists appreciate tips from PR people, even those that concern other organisations. The best way to establish a relationship with a columnist is to become a trusted "source," good for pointing the columnist in the right direction, even when you, yourself, have no vested interest in the story.

As you get to know columnists, they in turn should get to know your company in a gradual way. Columnists want to see progress and innovation, you don't want the columnist to just talk about your product—you want him or her to talk about your company's thinking. You want them to pay attention to you long term, and you want them to wonder what you'll come up with next.

A PR Manager sent a pitch letter on behalf of his company, a marketing research firm, to a leading columnist. The columnist replied that he had received the pitch, and asked to be kept informed about the company's future dealings. As far as the PR Manager was concerned, the acknowledgement was a success, since getting on a columnist's radar is half the battle.

If you're getting into a columnist's head, he / she may start using your thinking, and you'll see it in his / her writing.

Rule #6 - Establish Trust

Just as in any other function of public relations work, becoming effective in getting a person, company or issue mentioned in columns demands building a "relationship" with strategic columnists. And that means establishing "trust" between columnist and PR person. A PR source who becomes a "go to person" for the columnist can wield tremendous leverage. Stated another way, your own "credibility" as a public relations professional can be aided greatly by the number of trusting relationships you have established with particular reporters. This is especially true in cementing lasting relationships with columnists.

Mike Leonard, a well-known columnist for a leading American newspaper, says the scope of coverage for columnist's means they'll occasionally be caught in a bind. "We're obligated to fill that space on our prescribed days," Leonard says. "There are days when we don't know what we're going to write about, and we're struggling." Those are the times that columnists turn to their trusted PR sources—the ones who've kept the writer apprised of all the industry buzz and gossip. Above all, Leonard says, columnists need to be edgy, opinionated and on the cusp of breaking news, so any PR person who helps them meet these

challenges will stand out. "One of our mandates is to be ahead of the game," Leonard explains. "We want to move things forward."

As our society becomes more and more personality-driven, with the cult of celebrity reigning supreme, the proliferation of columnists should continue. As such, the value and power of PR people knowledgeable about and friendly with such columnists should likewise increase.

MESSAGE FROM CHICAGO COLUMNISTS: IF YOU DON'T READ US...DON'T CALL US

(The Publicity Club of Chicago had a meeting in September 2002, which featured a panel of Chicago's top print columnists. Their message was very clear: "Read my column or don't call me.")

Rob Feder

"Your job is to generate positive PR for your company / clients. My job is to cover my beat and write a thorough column. Very often, PR people's intentions and my intentions just don't coincide," admitted Rob Feder, television and radio columnist for the Chicago Sun-Times since 1980. He admonished PR people "not to succumb to the pressures imposed by your clients to get coverage. If it's not right for me, don't pitch it. Know to whom you are pitching and the types of columns I write."

Feder also asked that PR people respect his time pressures and that pitches be as efficient as possible, giving the maximum information in the shortest span of time. That means not wasting time with formalities. "Just get to the point."

Eric Zorn

Eric Zorn, Tribune columnist, also has been writing for his newspaper since 1980. He advised PR people to do their homework. "I appreciate personal pitches that demonstrate that you've read my column and know what kind of stories I write about," he said. Zorn likes exclusives and rarely uses press releases as the basis for his column. "Don't send a press release with a big story. If everyone has the story, I'm probably not going to be that interested."

Zorn prefers to be contacted via telephone or email. If you send email, don't send attachments. Imbed the information within the document. He also recognizes that PR people can't pitch an exclusive story and wait forever to see if a columnist will use it. He prefers to be given a news story idea accompanied by copy such as: "This is yours first until noon tomorrow. If I don't hear back from you by then, I'll assume you aren't interested." Zorn hates teasers ("I've got a story you'll like, so call me right back."). Just tell him the story in as few words as possible. He also noted that you don't have to have a long-standing relationship with him to become a good source. "Relationships are often built on one good tip."

David Zivan

Chicago magazine's David Zivan, a senior editor since 1998, drew laughter from the crowd when he said: "I love exclusives, as long as I can have them for about two months." Zivan said that since he can't compete with dailies on the timeliness of his stories, he prefers to find a niche within a bigger story, so that he can bring a fresh perspective to the story that other reporters won't have. While he reported that the transition from being independent to being part of the Tribune conglomerate has been positive, he predicted that changes will be coming, especially within restaurant and food coverage, where Chicago magazine has

staked out a long-held niche. "Look for things to happen within the next two-to-three months."

Stella Foster

Stella Foster, a contributing columnist to the Sun-Times "Kup's Column" (which is the longest running daily newspaper column in the U.S., having started in 1943) made it clear that the column is looking for exclusives. "Our column is based on exclusivity. Don't double pitch an item. If you tell me it's an exclusive, it had better be an exclusive." She advised PR people to clearly mark an item sent via email as "EXCLUSIVE" and include a time frame for the item's exclusivity (ie. "You can have it exclusively until Wednesday."). Stella noted that Kup's column is using fewer celebrity birthday items because most of them are for celebrities long out of the limelight. So she is setting out to have the column reach younger readers and is including news about rock stars and rappers. "Let's face it, why should we honor the birthdays of celebrities? They don't buy our paper!"

Andy Warhol -- the person credited for the statement that everyone can be famous for 15 minutes -- was correct. However, a creative PR professional should have the capacity to repackage their subject so that fame lasts just a little bit longer.

(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit's workshop, held in Delhi on March 23, 2004)