
UNDERSTANDING THE MEDIA – BUILDING BRIDGES

Two sides of the story

- *Why does the press always sensationalise things?*
- *Journalists never get things right*
- *I didn't say that!*
- *They take things out of context ...or twist things to fit their story*
- *That organisation never tells the truth!*
- *We don't get to talk with the person who has the real story and real news*
- *You get the feeling that they're trying to hide something*

When many people consider the function of public relations, their first thought is "Those are the folks who deal with the media." Gene Grabowski, director of media relations for the American Council of Life Insurance, says, "You cannot wage a successful campaign without media relations....It is the one essential element in any serious public relations programme."

From the Diary of Gersh Kuntzman - Feature/Entertainment Reporter, New York Post

Most reporters do not like public relations pros, do not like taking calls from them and don't even like reading the pitch letters that come spewing forth from our fax machines like lemmings into the nearest trash basket.

But that doesn't mean you can't get what you want. You see, when the sober light of reality strikes, most reporters especially feature writers understand that a great deal of their story leads come from

itches from public relations people.

Sure, none of them will ever admit it, but if you follow this reporter's guidelines, you may be more successful.

Forget About Editors

Do not pitch stories to an editor unless you have some pre-established personal relationship. Pitching to editors is a complete waste of time because most editors don't assign stories and don't have the time to even try.

The key is to read the papers and magazines so closely that you start to see which reporters do which type of stories. This will help you avoid pitching a story about a new type of gardening equipment to the movie reviewer (yes, I've seen it happen, folks).

Also, being fluent in all the major reporters styles and interests is a great ice-breaker when cold calling. Reporters don't generally get praise from their editors, so it never hurts to tell a reporter how much you loved his three-part series on the history of Macedonian film before you make your pitch.

No Puff Or Gush, Please

Keep in mind that not every reporter is going to write a puff piece just to gain access to your clients (there are some of us with scruples left, you know).

We know that you pick reporters who you think will give your client an easy ride, but you can only do so much. If your client's product, whether a book or a new dessert topping, is an unmitigated piece of garbage, don't pitch it as if it is inarguably the best thing you've ever read or tasted. Credibility is, after all, the only thing reporters admire. Gushing about how great your client is will backfire because we know damn well you're being paid to gush. Gushing is what you do and you're great at it. Problem is, we're paid to ignore superfluous emotion. If your client is really as great as you say, we'll recognize that. After all, you're already dumping the story in our lap.

Fax Facts

Don't ever send a fax without first interesting the reporter in the contents of the said fax. Unsolicited faxes are sometimes read, but never with the same vigor as when the reporter is tipped off to the contents. At the same time, don't pitch a story and then not be ready to immediately fax over a press release highlighting what you've just said. This may sound inefficient, but reporters need everything in writing if only to better glean what the story is really about. You might think the story is about your client, the owner of a new Middle Eastern nightclub with great food. We might think the story is about the lost art of belly-dancing.

When To Stop The Spin Cycle

If the reporter has actually done the story you suggested, that's where your role in trying to spin the story ends. That means you should only be on hand to answer questions or chase down photos. Sorry, but reporters will take it from there. **And never, ever** call reporters asking when the story is going to run. We know your client is curious, and you're desperate to show your client you're indispensable, but most reporters don't even know when their editors will deign to run their stories, and couldn't care less anyway.

Nearly every organisation today recognises the power of the media for good and ill. Whether you are making things, selling services, campaigning for a message, fund-raising, educating, or curing the sick, you can benefit from using the media. You also have to recognise that the media may come to you whether you like it or not. If you or your industry were to be involved in something controversial, then you'll find that it matters whether you can keep some control of what goes on.

If a corporate communications practitioner is to work efficiently with the media, he or she must understand how the media function and how reporters work. Insights into journalists' views of corporate communications and its practitioners are also essential.

Why bother with the media?

- Advertising costs a lot of money; editorial coverage is free
- Greater credibility for your product or service or message
- More control of your message
- Friendly, informed journalists are less likely to make mistakes about you and can help in a crisis – *insurance against disaster*
- Media coverage is popular with employees – *a boost to internal morale*
- Keeping up with your competitors

Knowing the media – knowing how to work with each medium, produce content for each, meet the deadlines of each, adhere to specific style requirements, and appeal to each medium's audience – is a major part of many practitioners' jobs. The relationship, although mutually beneficial, remains an adversarial one at its core, because journalists and practitioners are not in the same business and often do not have the same communication goals.

To be effective in the go-between and mediating roles, practitioners must have the confidence of both their organisation and the media. This is not an easy job. CEOs and other line managers are naturally suspicious of the media, just as journalists are by nature questioning and somewhat untrusting of those they put in the spotlight.

The adversarial – even hostile – feelings that exist between practitioners and journalists often spill over into public debate. Herbert Schmertz, Mobil Corporation vice president of public affairs during the 1980s criticised journalists and media performance by providing what he called "constructive, responsible criticism." He saved his harshest criticism for television news....

...the questionable values that afflict TV journalism – the slavery to ratings...the pandering to the lowest common denominator...the emotional presentation to entice a larger audience...the subversion of news values to entertainment values...the ruthless compression of facts to fit preordained timetables.

The acrimony is not one-sided. One editorial page editor of the Washington Post issued a memo barring practitioners from editorial offices. *"We don't want any of that damned crowd around here."* Subsequently, Post editor extended the ban on talking to public relations sources to reporters, a directive quickly ignored because of reporters' dependence on public relations sources. Closer to home, the New Delhi edition of The Economic Times too followed this policy for a while.

Guidelines for Good Media Relations

The sound approach for organisations and practitioners is to view media relations as an investment. Accuracy and fairness in press coverage does not result from reporters' work alone. Ultimately, however, the relationship between practitioners and journalists has an impact on the quality of news coverage about organisations. These relationships can best be achieved when practitioners follow a few basic rules:

Shoot squarely: it is not just politically correct to counsel that "honesty is the best policy" in dealing with the press; it is good business and good common sense. It is agreed that the practitioner's most important asset in dealing with the media is **CREDIBILITY**. It means simply that a reporter can trust the practitioner totally and vice versa. It means never lying. If you can't for some legitimate reason, speak the truth, then say nothing. Journalists point out that good and bad news tend to even out over time, so if practitioners are honest with bad news, then they are more likely to be trusted with good news.

Another fundamental principle is that a practitioner cannot favour one media publication at the expense of others. The safest rule is that spot news should go out as fast as possible, letting the media determine the cycle in which it breaks. As a corollary, practitioners must protect journalistic initiative. If a reporter gets a tip and asks for information, it belongs to the journalist. The same information should not be given to other outlets unless they come after it.

Give service: The quickest, surest way to gain the cooperation of journalists is to provide them with **NEWSWORTHY, INTERESTING AND TIMELY STORIES AND PICTURES** that they want, when they want them and in a form that they can readily use. Journalists work with fixed and sometimes tight deadlines. Practitioners who hope to place stories in the news media must know and adhere to media lead times.

News does not wait – for anyone or anything. In many instances, it's now or never to respond on behalf of your organisation. The well-written, properly reviewed, thoroughly co-ordinated reply or statement will never see the light of day unless it gets to the media in time for their deadlines

Do not beg or complain: Nothing irritates journalists and their editors and news editors more than the practitioner who begs to have stories used or complains about story treatment. Journalists have finely developed senses of journalistic objectivity and news value. If information is not sufficiently newsworthy on its own merits to attract their interest, no amount of begging and complaining can change the quality of that information.

However, nothing is more distressing to the journalist than a practitioner who tries to pressure the editorial side to use a story, change a story treatment, or kill a story by holding hostage the organisation's advertising business.

Do not flood the media: Study and experience teach the boundaries of newsworthiness, and common sense dictates respects for them. If a financial editor receives information appropriate for the sports or real estate editor, the financial editor loses respect for the practitioner who engages in blanketing the media with releases. The best advice is: (1) *stick to what the journalists will consider news*, (2) *keep media mailing lists current*, and (3) *send to only one – the most appropriate – journalist at each publication*. An avalanche of material occurs in newsrooms around the globe and nothing irritates the journalist more than to receive unwanted and unnecessary material.

A journalist has a job to do, and an editor is carefully watching to see that the job is done. The main concerns are:

To get the same story as everyone else: Editors monitor other similar papers and publications and they want to know why a particular story has appeared everywhere, and not in their paper. So journalists are keen to get the same facts, quotes, and handle to a story as the opposition.

To get a different story from everyone else: The ultimate different story is **A Scoop**, which all reporters dream of. Usually its more a matter of getting an extra angle on a current story, or a different quote; something to add individuality to the basic facts.

To file the story in time: The most wonderful article is no good if it is delivered after the deadline. Yesterdays' story is dead today, because other papers will have already used it. Deadlines have a reality to a newspaper, which is governed by that daily, weekly or monthly cycle. Of, course, if something amazing happens after the normal deadline, the deadline will be moved to accommodate it. Why do journalists ring up at 4:40 pm demanding a comment by 4:45 pm? Why don't they give organisations and in particular corporate communication practitioners reasonable warning? There could be many reasons that you are perhaps unaware of. Whatever the reason, the choice is up to you. You however cannot change the journalists' behaviour because it is dictated not by their inefficiency but by the pattern of their day.

To have ready access to the right people: Journalists do not have the time to be searching around for the right person to talk to when for

example a story breaks to do with a food poisoning scare, or a financial scam in a local firm. The journalist has to rely on the people already known to be reliable and willing.

To get attributable quotes and facts: News editors do not look kindly at stories which have no firm facts in them. Facts, in this context, mean times, dates, names, and quotes that can be attributed to actual traceable people.

Case Study: The Junkie Who Never Was

In the 1980s, a young American woman reporter won the Pulitzer Prize for her account of young junkies in New York. In particular she profiled an 8-year-old boy who was a heroin addict.

*There was tremendous commotion amongst the public when it was discovered that the boy did not exist, but was a composite portrait of a number of young people she had come across. No one disputed the basic facts of her article, and that the dreadful lives she described were real, BUT, she had sinned against one of the basic rules: **your story stands or falls by traceable attribution.***

She lost her prize and her job.

To write something that readers can relate to: Reporters learn from the very beginning that it is not statistics, technological description, or chemical formulae that makes news. 'News is people'.

To get 'news': No journalist wants to be a pipeline for company puffs, but will be willing to be used if the product or campaign or event is made to sound 'newsworthy'. Each journalist will have an idea of what his or her own editor will want, and there is no point in over-selling a story.

To get the truth: Not all journalists see themselves as investigative newshounds, out to expose corruption and wrong-doing. But a certain amount of cynicism goes with the job, and no one wants to be manipulated by a smooth PR operator into publishing facts that are shown to be absolute nonsense a month later. So a journalist will ask awkward questions.

To write clearly and attractively: One person's clear language is another person's over-simplification. A journalist will keep away from jargon and technical language and try to present the story in an accessible way. But if you are an expert in the subject, this approach is infuriatingly patronising and ignores all the important subtleties in favour of gross generalisations. Rightly or wrongly, journalists believe that hedging, complex argument and too many shades of grey turn off the general public.

Sheila Tate, White House press secretary at one time, ran a survey among Washington correspondents. It revealed some interesting facts that probably apply to journalists in any situation, in any place in the world.

For example, some 92 per cent rated **CANDOUR** as a key quality in an executive responsible for corporate communications. The same percentage also said that they would be more likely to deal with corporate communications people that they knew personally. When asked to evaluate the helpfulness of various press materials -- fact sheets and speech texts were top, with expensive printed items such as brochures and annual reports at the bottom. There was virtually unanimous support for the fact that a news conference should only be held to handle a major news announcement where questions were essential. Some two-thirds of respondents felt that news conferences were abused as a communications technique, yet virtually all claimed to have read press releases. Hand delivery improved the chances of stories being read by two in every three journalists. Again, nearly all were happy to be telephoned as a reminder for a press event.

These suggestions can help practitioners build and maintain good relations with mediapersons. Because of the crucial gatekeeper role played by reporters and editors in both print and broadcast media, practitioners have little choice but to earn and keep the respect of journalists. At the same time, although the public has a right to *public information*, there are limits. Some information is confidential, and some information cannot be disclosed because of individual privacy.

Contacts and Journalists	
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Am I contacting the right person in a given publication?
H	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do I know the best time to phone to arrange a meeting or chat about a story?
E	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have I worked out, before we meet, what I want from the meeting (to give a background about my organisation; to correct misconceptions; to discuss future stories...)?
C	
K	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have I brought to the meeting any useful in-house publications, fact sheets, leaflets, etc.?
L	
I	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do I know what I want to find out (deadlines, other useful journalists' names, types of stories wanted, good times to phone...)?
S	
T	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have I carefully read the publications, and this journalist's work in particular?• Have I noted down afterwards any useful personal details about the journalist for next time• Do I keep regular contact, whether or not I have a specific story to place?

Golden rules

They have a job to do; and most of the time their interests will coincide with yours

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They are looking for 'newsworthy', topical and attributable stories, preferable with an individual touch

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They are under pressure of tight deadlines

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Find the journalists most involved with your sort of story and talk to them

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Keep up regular contact

(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit's workshop held in Mumbai on June 14, 2001)