

Tip Sheet: How to Deal with the Press

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By Peter Granat

You can have all the facts, know what you want to say, and believe that your message is important to your audience, yet never get the media attention that you've hoped for. Could it be your media relations skills? Listed below are 10 highly effective steps to improving your communication with the media and increasing media exposure for your company or client.

1. Know the journalist and the outlet before picking up the phone. First, build a targeted media list of the outlets that are important within your industry sector and those journalists that can help reinforce your overall communication strategy. PR professionals often direct the right story to the wrong outlet, or the wrong story to the right reporters. Once you know whom to target, you should also research what he/she has recently written to better understand the subtleties of their coverage area. This will help you create targeted pitches and story ideas that will be both compelling and relevant.

2. Always know how and when a journalist wants to be contacted. Some journalists want phone calls, others prefer email, and still others want news the old fashioned way by snail mail. In the case of breaking news, some reporters even recommend that you call them on their mobile phone if they can't be reached at their desks. Contacting reporters inappropriately or at the wrong time, can lead to damaged relationships.

3. Clarify your message before delivering your pitch. There is nothing worse than receiving an email that is a carbon copy of a press release, or getting a call from someone that is not familiar with the news they are announcing. Develop a bulleted 'fast fact' sheet, especially for phone pitches, that outlines your key message points. Most journalists are extremely busy and will give you only 30 seconds to make your case. They will not bite on your idea unless you offer a convincing argument.

4. When sending an e-mail, always get to the point early in your message. It's important to make the journalist's job as easy as possible, so make sure to provide the most important news in the first paragraph.

5. Be careful what you send via e-mail. Never send unsolicited e-mail attachments, as some outlets won't open them due to virus concerns, and others simply won't take the time. In addition, always craft a subject line that will create interest, but avoid using all caps or excessive punctuation as both will raise a red flag that your e-mail might have a virus.

6. When calling a reporter, introduce yourself, reference any previous conversations and ask whether it's a good time to talk. Journalists get flooded with calls, so be as courteous and as specific as possible. The more general you are, the less likely you'll be successful.

7. Offer help when needed. In doing so, you might uncover new opportunities that will position your news in a different light. Also, be sure to offer assistance even if it won't necessarily benefit your organization or client today. Eventually, the reporter will come to you with opportunities -- rather than the other way around.

8. Never make promises you can't keep. Nothing will squelch a media relationship faster than if you promise something you can't deliver. Promise to do your best to get the reporter what is needed in advance of their deadline, but if you can't follow through, let them know as soon as possible.

9. Follow up aggressively. Without being a pest, it's important to follow-up with compelling information that demonstrates what you are pitching is viable, credible and worthy of coverage. Also, be sure to offer additional elements that would round out their story -- photos, graphics, customer or analyst references and additional sources if necessary.

10. Whenever possible, pitch by phone. This will get you better results than email alone. Plus, it's easier to delete an email or send a quick "no" than it is to hang up on someone. Once you have them on the line, it's much easier to make your case and handle objectives as they arise.

The science of media relations is critical to an effective PR campaign. Once you have mastered these basic steps, you'll improve message adoption, which in turn will generate better results.

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