



Avoiding Publicity Blunders – Are You Hindering Your Opportunities for Good Media Exposure?

by Linda Pophal

www.stratcommunications.com

When it comes to cutting expenses, one of the first areas to be impacted is the marketing budget. It's ironic, but true – when they need sales the most many businesses are loathe to spend money on marketing efforts to generate more sales.

So...they turn to PR, which isn't necessarily a bad thing to do. After all, what others say about us has much more credibility than what we say about ourselves. Media exposure – through local, regional or national media outlets can be a great way to increase awareness, and generate interest in what you have to offer.

But, it's important to remember that media coverage is not “free” – there is cost involved and that cost represents your time in researching, reaching out to and following up with the media most likely to reach your target audience.

As both a journalist and a PR practitioner, I've been fortunate to be on both sides of the fence when it comes to generating media exposure. As a PR practitioner, I represent my clients (and myself) in attempting to attract interest among the many writers, reporters, editors and bloggers whose audiences best reflect *our* audiences. As a journalist, I'm subject to the input, inquiries – and, frankly, sometimes badgering – of other PR practitioners like myself.

Based on my experiences on both sides of the fence, I have the following recommendations to offer about how you can avoid some common (and sometimes seemingly “silly”) blunders that can keep you from seeing your name in the news. In no particular order, they are:

- 1. Know who your target audience is.** Just as with any other type of communication, effective media relations involves identifying your desired target audience and then selecting the media most likely to reach that target audience. Spending a lot of time using social media makes no sense if *your audience* does not use social media. Similarly, getting coverage through bloggers can be pure folly if your audience doesn't read those bloggers.

2. **Do your background research.** Once you're identified your desired target audience, research the media outlets across all media (print, broadcast, online) that reach that audience. Find out who the editors, writers, journalists and bloggers are that you need to develop relationships with to get your message across.
3. **Develop relationships!** Generating media coverage isn't about blasting emails or news releases out indiscriminately. In fact, media representatives say there is nothing more irritating to them than finding their mailboxes filled with irrelevant pitches. Focus.
4. **Avoid the "hard sell."** While obviously your ultimate objective is to achieve some form of business success for your products or services, you need to avoid the hard sell when communicating with media representatives. They're not all about giving you "free publicity." They're not all about helping you sell your product or service. They *are* all about delivering relative, interesting and useful information to their (and your!) audience.
5. **Be cautious in your use of mass distribution pitches or news releases.** Editors and reporters are inundated these days with information. The general, spam-like pitches they get tend to end up in the trash bin.
6. **Don't "bait and switch."** If you interest a journalist in interviewing you because you say you can provide specific tips on how to raise venture capital, don't switch gears and talk about how your business offers financial consulting services. Chances are, you won't get another chance. I've had sources that fall into that category and, believe me, I've never given them another opportunity to waste my time.
7. **Have something worthwhile to say.** This is somewhat related to #4, but it's important that when you do approach or actually achieve an interview with a journalist representing your target audience, that you have something relevant to say. There have been multiple occasions when I've set up interviews for clients only to find that their words never saw the light of day.
8. **Be responsive.** If you set up an interview with a reporter for a particular time, follow through. Journalists are busy people and often juggling multiple interviews with tight schedules – when you're a no-show you not only irritate the journalist but are also at risk of losing the opportunity altogether.
9. **Be responsive!** Did I say that already? "The early bird gets the worm" as they say. Respond quickly to inquiries and follow-up quickly with requested information. Develop a reputation for being fast, accurate and an expert in your field and you'll become a go-to source.
10. **Be professional.** In all of your correspondence with media reps be professional and courteous.
11. **Proofread your emails!!!** Nothing serves to damage credibility more than hastily written, grammatically poor and typo-heavy emails. And – get the language right. I recently received a pitch from a self-proclaimed "communication consultant" whose email communication included a statement that literally said: "this will be a red flag from the gecko." Uh, does she work for Geico, or did she mean "get go"? Suffice it to say I didn't

follow up for additional information. That may be small-minded of me but, again, I get dozens of responses and even these “little things” provide a reason for putting somebody’s input at the bottom of the pile.

12. **Speaking of proofreading** – make sure you get the reporter and the media outlet’s name right. May seem petty, but some reporters will absolutely refuse to respond to a query where they’ve been misidentified.
13. **If you can’t get it right, hire someone to help.** While I don’t want to appear self-serving and I *do* believe that individuals can successfully self-promote, if your writing skills are not exceptional, it’s worth considering hiring someone to help you out.
14. **Don’t overwhelm the reporter with responses.** If you send an email response or pitch, don’t call as soon as the pitch is sent to make sure they got it. That’s irritating. If you don’t hear back from the reporter in response to your email pitch, don’t send multiple additional follow-ups attempting to convince them that they’re missing out on some exceptional information.
15. **Do provide enough information in your response or pitch to capture the reporter’s interest.** If you feel that you might be a good source for a response to a reporter’s query on HARO, (helpareporter.com), for instance, don’t just email: “You should interview me,” or “I have a great person for you to speak with,” or “Call me.” Speaking from experience, I can tell you that it’s not unusual for me to get *dozens* of responses to the queries I post – I’m not going to waste my time following up with you to determine *why* I should interview you. I’m more likely to follow up with the individuals that included detailed, specific information to clearly convey to me that they would be a good, relevant and credible source.
16. **Be credible!** In an era where literally anybody can set up a web page and proclaim themselves an expert, credibility rules. Make sure you’re providing good, factual information about what makes you a credible source on a particular topic.
17. **Don’t respond to a reporter’s query with:** “Here is my article...” The reporter is writing the article and looking for sources. If you want to write an article, write an article, but don’t presume that what you have to offer will surpass what the reporter already has in mind.
18. **That said, don’t be afraid to provide substantial detail in an email response.** Again, reporters are busy, and sometimes they’ll pick up some of the material you submit and use it as a direct quote from you.
19. **Don’t expect to be the sole source for a story.** You are likely to be one of many sources that the reporter is using to pull together their article or broadcast. The coverage you receive will be commensurate with the value you provide. If you get a one-sentence quote with attribution to you and a reference to your web site/book, that’s great and, in many cases, even more than you can hope for.
20. **Because, again, the reporter is not out there to help you promote yourself.** Demanding that your book title, your web site, your contact information, etc., be included

along with your quotable information is the sign of an amateur. You can ask – but never, never, never demand. You won't be contacted again.

21. **You can ask – and you can offer.** Offer to share as much information as you have available relative to the topic – reporters will love you. Survey results. Copies of articles you may have written or presentations you may have done. Information accessible on your web site. All of this background information can be extremely helpful to reporters and increase the odds that your information will be included.
22. **Don't ask if your comments will be included.** During the data-gathering phase most reporters have no idea. Much will depend on the other information they gather, the value of other sources and the final editing process for the piece.
23. **Do offer to put the reporter in contact with other potential sources that are relevant to the piece.** That can be extremely helpful and is often much-appreciated.
24. **Don't, don't, don't, DON'T ask to see/review a copy of the story before it's run.** That's the clear mark of an amateur and a practice that is prohibited by most credible media outlets. Don't even offer to "take a look" or "check things out" as a "favor" to the writer – they'll know what you're really asking and, in most cases, they won't appreciate the offer. If the writer offers, great – but never, never, never, ever ask.
25. **Don't badger the reporter to get a copy/link to the piece after it's run.** While it's understandable that you would like to have a copy of the piece for your files (and marketing use), it's unreasonable to expect the publication/media outlet or journalist to provide this to you. Again, if they offer – great. If not, a subtle way of finding out how you can get access would be to ask: "How can I get access to this piece once it's run?" That allows the reporter the opportunity to offer to supply it to you – or to direct you to the web site (or newsstand) where it might appear).
26. **Do follow up with thanks for the coverage that you get.** Reporters like feedback, especially when it's positive.
27. **Do keep track of the media outlets, reporters and editors that you've had good experiences with** and follow up with them on occasion to offer story ideas, new information or simply to "check in."
28. **Do provide helpful information or resources to reporters** even (especially!) if it's unrelated to your business/area of expertise. It's a good way to strengthen the relationship and to convey that you're not just in this for what you can gain.
29. **Unless there is an error of fact in a piece, *don't* follow up with criticism or a request for a retraction or republication.** You may spend an hour talking with a reporter only to find that one line of what you said made it into the final story – without your title, web site or the book you just had released. Let it go.
30. **If there *is* a factual error, point it out politely** and unless it's absolutely egregious (and you need to exercise good judgment here) never *demand* a retraction. In the electronic environment, most writers/editors will volunteer to make a correction; in print publications they may even issue a retraction. Or, they may not.

31. **If you feel you've been "misquoted," again, in most cases, let it go.** In many cases you haven't been misquoted; you just weren't represented in the way you'd hoped (and believe me we don't speak as well as we're used to seeing our spoken language in print).
32. **Recognize that when you're interviewed you represent one of many perspectives that the journalist is likely to be gathering.** There is a very high chance that your comments will be used in conjunction with comments from others who may disagree – sometimes quite strongly – with your point of view. And, no, you won't necessarily have a chance to restate your point of view. That's just the way it works.
33. **Don't quote or use material that has been reported about you without permission from the writer or media outlet.** Copyright rules apply even if you're the one being quoted. Make sure you understand what those rules are and that you follow them.
34. **Do link to publicly available articles or broadcasts from your web site.** It's a great way to leverage the awareness/credibility value of the coverage and costs virtually nothing.
35. **Do look for ways to link what you have to say to current events or media coverage** even in areas outside your direct area of expertise. Be creative. Continually look for ways that you can (credibly and appropriately!) gain exposure for your services.

[Strategic Communications, LLC](#), works with clients to generate media coverage on a local and national basis – and to work effectively with the media inquiries in sensitive and crisis situations. Strategic Communications and its clients have been covered in publications such as *USA Today*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Newsday*, *AdWeek* – and many more. **For a list of services and pricing, contact: linda@stratcommunications.com.**