

Media Relations as a Marketing Tool

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For many people, “media relations” implies putting a positive spin on an unfavorable event, or getting particular key messages across. However, there is another aspect to media relations – helping journalists find expert sources they can interview for their stories.

Demonstrating that they have sound expertise is an increasingly important part of the marketing mix for many organizations. Early players in this game were those that primarily sell advice – firms involved in consulting, accounting, law, architecture, and engineering. However, more and more organizations earn their living, and differentiate themselves, on the basis of the expertise they offer.

Office products companies, for example, do not sell boxes anymore – they have repositioned themselves as “document flow experts”. Software makers nurture their user groups so they can be associated with solutions to their customers’ problems. Associations want to be seen as sources of knowledge on the issues they deal with.

By demonstrating their expertise through the news media, all of these organizations show themselves to be sources of solutions to the people they want to reach.

A word of caution: reporters do not like to think of themselves as part of anyone’s marketing program. But if you can work with their occasionally prickly, distrustful independence (which is absolutely vital for the good of society), you and the media can each get what you want. You get positive coverage, and they get information for their story.

So how do you get your organization onto the Rolodex of influential journalists?

- **First step is to make sure that they know about you.** Get listed in media directories, the principal one being **Sources** (www.sources.com) widely used in hundreds of newsrooms across Canada. Consider publishing your own resource listing for journalists, listing your experts and the topics they can talk about. Find out what reporters cover the “beats” you are interested in, and put them on mailing lists for your newsletters and publications. If your organization publishes articles in trade magazines, be sure to send copies of these articles to the relevant mainstream media reporters.
- **Next, be available.** Many reporters are frustrated by sources whom they contact for a story, and find their call does not get returned until several days later. Often, the story has been written by then, and the reporter is on to the next topic. If you want to be taken seriously in this business, be in a position to respond to all reporter’ requests within an hour.
- **Getting spokespersons to return reporters’ calls on such a short notice can be a challenge.** Most organizations have at least someone willing to do this, however, particularly the hungry up-and-comers. If you can get some good “wins” in media coverage with these people, the others will get envious and want to get involved as well.
- **Be sure your sources understand the rules reporters live by.** Media training may help, mainly to help your people get their ideas across in understandable terms. Be assured that most interviews in this line of work will not be the adversarial kind – the reporter is looking for expertise, not to do an exposé.
- **Publicize your publicity.** If one of your people is quoted as an expert, be sure others in the organization know about it. Put clippings on bulletin boards, include them in your newsletter, post them on the Intranet. This way, your most responsive sources are reinforced in their behavior, and will continue.

It takes effort to start, but the result can be a publicity “machine” that runs itself, to the benefit of your organization, the news media, can the general public.