

CHAPTER 3: Grabbing and Keeping Media Attention

“Without publicity there can be no public support, and without public support every nation must decay.” **Benjamin Disraeli**

Always keep in mind the reporter writing the story and the newspaper preparing the editorial have final say over articles appearing in their media outlet. However, there are methods and tactics you can employ and practice on a regular basis that will dramatically improve your odds for gaining positive media attention.

Media Strategies

Strategy #1 -- Be proactive: What all reporters want is a good story.

Reporters work to gain sources and contacts, and you can do the same by developing reporter contacts. Keep a media binder and include the name, media outlet, phone number, and e-mail address of every reporter you talk to ... every one of them. Make notes about that reporter including the subject and reason for their call, beat they normally cover, etc. Develop a profile of reporters and media outlets, identifying the friendlies from the enemies. Consistently supply the friendlies with a regular inventory of the positive stories they are looking for and you will develop the reporters' trust and your credibility as a good source. These friendly reporters are people you can work with to increase your chances of getting attention.

You are no longer an unknown Public Information Officer (PIO) or PR person who has no standing, no credibility and no trust. In bad times, you are in a better position to get fair treatment. When the reporter calls with the bad news, or the potentially negative story, that reporter knows who to call first – you - and that's what you want. That reporter has chatted with you on many subjects and you have developed a rapport with them. Therefore, that reporter is more inclined to come to you with questions and to insure that you are treated fairly in the story.

Strategy #2 -- Never miss an opportunity.

There are story opportunities everywhere. Have your own organization's staff members give you tips. Make sure you know the folks in your own organization who do well with media interviews and get them out there when appropriate. The strategy here is that your own people like the press attention for the good things they are going. Present the idea not just as a string of facts or statistics, but as a story.

Find a hook for the story, offering something enticing, with compelling characters who give good interviews with good quotes. Offer "exclusivity". A reporter loves to know that he/she "owns" the story and you gain an ally. Never, ever send news releases just for the sake of quantity. If you send lots of stuff they don't like, you will condition them to toss your releases routinely without a second glance.

Strategy #3 -- Be reactive without fail.

When a reporter calls, return the call ASAP. Reporters are under pressure to get the story by a deadline they need to meet. Understand that without your side of the story, the reporter thinks you are a lamb headed for slaughter. When bad news is at your doorstep, you should be the most accessible. Waiting or any delay might rule you out of the story. Being out of the story means your side of the story is out of the story...dead and irrelevant. Most of all do not sound defensive when speaking to a reporter about a tough issue. Take a deep breath and speak when you are calm. Repeat the facts, offer alternatives and ask others on your staff to address the question.

When the reporter calls, you don't need to give an answer that second – you can say you need to gather information. Make sure you know the deadline for the story, talk to the people in your agency that understand the issue and get your side of the story organized. Help the press understand difficult and complicated issues.

When you are organized, get back to the reporter with hard facts in plenty of time to meet their deadline. Prepare your response with an answer that might steal the headline. If you feel your agency is getting a raw deal, and your agency is right, do not hesitate to react strongly to make sure the reporter gets the message that the other side could be very wrong. To set the record straight, make a bold stroke. If you know negative news is coming, consider a preemptive strike. The side that speaks first often sets the tone and pace, and frames the debate for following stories. Shape the argument, and you will shape the headlines. The first story becomes a reference point.

Think strategically and include damage control in the strategy. However, look beyond and determine the final impression you want to leave with the reporter. If your agency blundered, that cannot be undone, get beyond it and frame the story for the future, the plan to fix it. Reshape the argument and you will reshape the headline. Never, ever lie.

Get your facts straight and make sure your facts are out there in the true context of the story. If things are juxtaposed to make it look like your agency is at fault, and it is not, get to work straightening it out. If you do not tell your story, someone else will, perhaps not to your liking.

If you say "No comment", you are road kill. The media hates a vacuum. "Off the record" comments do not stay off the record for long in a negative story. If you do not respond or refuse to comment, that is not the end of it, they will find someone who will talk, perhaps not to your liking. If you are silent, you will be seen as admitting guilt. Never let a mistake or errors go unchallenged. Doing so locks those mistakes and errors into the historical archives.

Strategy #4 -- Write your own stories.

Every park system and agency has positive programs and events. A PIO is constantly communicating with the field in a never-ending search for stories. He or she writes 8 to 10 features every year, mixed in with many other responsibilities. Write the stories in feature story form, including quotes from the people involved. Then send them to the medium to smaller papers throughout the state, sometimes shot gunned everywhere, sometimes sent to a specific market. The amazing thing will be --- nearly all of these

stories can be printed "as is" ... the entire story. Some papers will call for pictures, maps or charts, be sure you have them on file and ready to send out.

Examples include Op-ed, letters or special stories. For op-ed, see the opportunity for a first strike, and write something for your Director. For letters, respond to op-ed articles that need a response. For special stories -- Many newspapers will accept a major article, such as: "This special report on preservation of wetland resources of the State of California submitted to the XYZ media from Ruth Coleman, Director of State Parks.

Strategy #5 -- Have a web page and use it to your advantage.

Put up a Press Room section on your web and include every press release. Put fact sheets in place and create an area for story ideas. Make sure reporters know it's there and can use it.

Strategy #6 -- Use e-mail in place of faxes

More and more reporters prefer an e-mail. Send press releases by e-mail and include photos. For good story ideas, send a cover e-mail with facts, following up with a phone call.

Strategy #7 -- Train your staff.

Teach your staff to do all of the above. Know your audience and the media that serves their interests. In PR, you must understand the wants and needs of the general public. As a staff member dealing with the press, you must understand the wants and needs of reporters, editors, producers and assignment editors. If you know how reporters think and work, you will know what you can do to meet the need and get positive attention. Study the media's approach to issues.

Strategy #8 -- The Bottom-Line!

- Effective PR is all about
 - relationships
 - credibility
 - trust
 - telling your story and being understood

Interviewing Skills

- ✓ Prepare and Practice
- ✓ Know Message
- ✓ Quotes
- ✓ Deadlines Met
- ✓ Follow up with Reporters

Interviews are one of the best ways to provide good first hand information about situations and individuals and get the message out. Interviews often use direct quotes and may use an anecdote that gives the story/article a boost.

Providing first-hand information for an article gives it the personal touch that often connects with the reader. Reporters generally contact potential interviewees ahead of time and advise them of what the interview will be

about. This gives the interviewee time to prepare and gather any materials that might be relevant to the interview.

Sometimes contacting the reporter is a hard task. Either they are busy or just do not want to respond. In this event, it might be necessary to deal directly with their secretary or assistant as a liaison or try to connect with them electronically. Most reporters answer their own phones and e-mail and often have a cell phone number available to call.

Once a date and time for the interview has been established, begin right away by preparing a list of questions that might be asked and possible responses. Conduct some research ahead of time to get familiar with other stories the reporter may have covered by searching the media outlet's web site. This creates a positive environment because the reporter may be very knowledgeable on the subject.

Be careful to stay on message.

After an interview starts, it often progresses and leads into more specific questions about a topic or subject. The best thing to do is stay relaxed so that a free flowing environment is created and the reporter talks freely. If the interview goes silent for a few seconds, that's okay. Sometimes reporters try to get their best material after things stay silent for a moment, because an interviewee thinks that they will need to be speaking and begin talking more in-depth about the subject at hand and go "off message." The key to remember is to stay focused on the message. If a reporter thinks they are not receiving the desired response to the question being asked, they may ask the same question in a manner that forces a yes or no answer.

Be attentive.

Make the reporter feel at ease by creating small talk or asking about a hobby of theirs that might have been revealed while researching their profile, this can lead to building a good rapport. Comfort is a concern for the interview. If the interviewee is unfamiliar with the process, it might be a good idea to hold the interview at their office, work place, or home to feel more comfortable. Be understanding when needed. Many interviews have been declined because the interviewee was not sympathetic to the reporter's needs. Someone that is sympathetic might get the reporter to expand on the topic or report more accurately on the message. This includes verbal acknowledgements and visual cues as the reporter takes notes. The reporter's notes also help generate more questions because of the thought process involved with note taking. Finally, the reporter may use a tape recorder for transcribing later.

Once the interview has been conducted and the story is composed, a reporter may make a final call to the interviewee. This allows another opportunity to verify and check accuracy. It also may be a time to let a quote stand on its own, with no further comment. However, if it is to check on last questions from the reporters editor before the story goes to print, it may be a good idea to make sure the reporter had it accurate. Always remember to thank the reporter for their time. You may consider sending the reporter a short note of thanks, too.

Interviewing Dos:

- Do know the key message and stay on the message to get across in the interview
- Do look for sound/media bites
- Do prepare. Watch the television programs and read stories in publications the reporter has written
- Do find out about the reporter and his/her story before agreeing to be interviewed. Have they covered the issues, organization or profession before? Who else are they talking to about this story? Do you really want to be in that mix? Politely decline the interview request if necessary. Often they are working on a deadline. Get information to reporters on time
- Do dress the part for TV interviews with conservative professional clothing. Wear solid colors, not white. Avoid stripes, checks and other busy patterns
- Do provide background info to reporter before interview
- Do prepare main message points and rehearse until you can say them smoothly
- Do talk in slow, clear, short sentences so reporters can get quotes/sound bytes. Sound bytes should be under 30 seconds
- Do ask them if they would like you to repeat any information. Create 3-5 talking points
- Do have good eye contact
- Do make the case and restate to stay on message
- Do use transitional phrases. *What's important here is... The bottom line is... The real issue is... Let me explain something... That is a good question, but what is really important is... I'd like to make this point before I continue...*
- Do be an active listener, be confident, and tell colorful stories/anecdotes to illustrate. Hand gestures and facial expressions are good, because they show enthusiasm
- Arrive early to familiarize yourself with the surroundings
- Do give reporter a media kit
- Do be forthcoming with photos, bios, etc.

Interviewing Don'ts:

- Don't say too much or rush to answer. Pause....
- Don't hesitate to tell a reporter you will call back if you are unprepared
- Don't be afraid to say I don't know the answer to a question but instead offer to find the answer and back to the reporter before the deadline. Never respond to questions based on unfamiliar facts
- Don't use professional jargon. Keep your message simple. To avoid being misquoted, don't volunteer negatives
- Don't repeat inaccurate information
- Don't speculate or answer hypothetically
- Don't get defensive, stay positive
- Don't say "no comment". Say, "I have not seen the research you are referring to", or "our policy is to not discuss lawsuits currently in litigation."
- Don't look into the camera; look at whom is talking. Avoid the temptation to look at the monitor. You are always potentially on camera, even if someone else is talking.

- Don't be afraid to ask the reporter to read back your quotes before the story is printed to avoid inaccuracies. Ask the reporter to check the story for facts with you before it is printed.
- Don't automatically agree to an interview. Interviews can be turned down. Would they compromise you in any way? Is it out of your range of expertise? What do you want to accomplish/gain by doing this interview?
- Don't say anything "off the record."
- Don't wear tinted or sunglasses or heavy makeup, but consider using powder to reduce shine. Avoid jangling jewelry. If interview is on-site, consider wearing agency branded clothing/uniforms. If phone interview, turn off computer and avoid rooms with background noise. Find out in advance if it will be live to be comfortable thinking on your feet. If edited, pause before answering, don't be afraid to ask to stop and start over. Stay stationary. Avoid rocking in chair. Be aware of nervous habits like pen tapping.

Crisis Communications

What is a crisis? The criteria for a crisis could include the following:

- A natural or man-made disaster
- A police/crime scene emergency
- An event or activity with potential for negative publicity
- An event or activity under close news or government scrutiny
- An event or activity that interferes with normal business operations, or jeopardizes your image
- Media wants to talk to someone on the scene about the event and are not content talking to a government spokesperson

There are ways to turn crisis into an opportunity. It is important to prevent and avoid crises when possible, but proceed quickly to address and resolve crisis issues before they escalate. The following examples demonstrate this technique:

"It's important to gather as good a picture of the situation as you can before you take action but to do that as quickly as conceivable and then put out everything immediately," said Roger Enrico, retired chairman and CEO of PepsiCo Inc. "A delay only causes people to suspect your motives and your competence. When syringes were discovered in cans of Pepsi diet soda [in some 20 states in 1993], we went public with everything we knew immediately. Craig Weatherup, who was then Pepsi-Cola president, made himself available for television interviews. And we made a video of a production line at a diet Pepsi plant, which runs at 2,000 cans a minute. That showed it would have been impossible for someone to have put the syringes in the cans during the production process. We also immediately hooked up with the FDA to establish a cooperative relationship to get to the bottom of the situation. To me, it's important to determine the accountability of leadership in this situation. If there has been a failure of leadership and management oversight then those leaders and managers responsible should be held accountable and asked to move on."

On the crisis regarding the release of Iraqi prison-abuse photos' explosive images:
Richard Edelman, CEO of Edelman Worldwide, a PR firm:

"If you have pain to take, you take it at the one time. It's like a Band-Aid -- you have to pull it off fast, not slowly. Having Americans wondering how bad the photos are is far worse. Journalists don't like it once the story is out. This story has been totally kept alive by people wondering what the photos could be. One thing they should do is get new photos out there, like ones of high-ranking American officials going over and visiting the prison or showing a new prison that is doing things correctly. The government needs to have new photos and drive its own story."

Sample Rude Q&A

Sample Rude Q&A documents are similar to FAQ documents but are for *internal use only*, and NOT published or distributed in any way to the public or press. The purpose of a Rude Q&A document is to prepare internal staff to answer sensitive or difficult questions from the media, customers and/or general public. The Rude Q&A document is highly confidential and should only be distributed to designated staff who serves as spokespeople for the organization.

The sample Rude Q&A below references a company that has just announced it will lay off 10% of its workforce.

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Does this layoff mean that your company is going out of business?

No. Our business is very stable; however the current market conditions require that we streamline our operations to reduce overall costs. We have chosen to integrate two units, and unfortunately there is some overlap in responsibilities, resulting in us having to lay off certain positions.

Couldn't you have cut costs elsewhere? (Instead of laying off people?)

The decision to reduce our headcount was inevitable; however our decision to combine the two units was the best option we had, resulting in the least amount of layoffs possible.

How will this layoff affect your ability to respond to customer inquiries?

We can assure our customers that they will not see a decline in their customer service. We have customer service systems in place that are not affected by this situation, and our policy of responding to and helping any customer inquiry within 48 hours will continue to be strictly enforced.

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