

How to be successful in dealing with news media

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Media – Who are they?

Mainstream news media include print media, broadcast media and the newest player in the media market – “electronic” news on the Internet. The lineup includes daily and weekly newspapers in both major and minor markets, wire services, news magazines, professional journals, radio and television stations and other sources of legitimate news and information.

What you may expect from media

Perhaps the most common denominator among news media outlets is that they are a business (first) and a news source (second). Journalism is not practiced in a vacuum. It is part of society’s business fabric, and its primary mission is to earn a profit while providing credible, useful news information.

Thus, a news story is not “free” advertising. Newspapers, broadcast stations and even news Web sites are in business to make money by selling advertising. Purchasing an advertisement is infinitely easier than convincing a news editor that your story is worth printing or airing. (Each day the advertising department at a newspaper calculates how much advertising space has been sold for the following day’s edition. They then notify the news department of how much space is “left over” for news.)

A news story is a more believable than a blatant sales pitch, and therein lies its primary value. Credibility!

- Reporters and editors are fully aware of the value of newspaper space and broadcast air time. Don’t waste their time and yours trying to convince them that an advertisement is really a news story. They know the difference. And they won’t hesitate in giving you directions to their advertising department.
- Legitimate news media are under no obligation to print or air anything you have provided. Do not argue or second-guess their judgment. Most won’t take the time to conduct a journalism lesson for your benefit.
- Be cordial and helpful to newspaper reporters and editors. Send a thank-you when someone runs a good story for you. Provide additional help and story ideas, not necessarily about YOUR cause.
- Most editors and reporters are ethical professionals. However, they are also competitive egos. “Scooping” their competition creates a powerful adrenaline

flow in journalists. It may therefore help you to tell an editor that you are offering an “exclusive” or that you are calling him/her first.

- Do not go “off the record” with a journalist unless you know the person very well and trust that s/he will put your interests and your protection above his or her own. Say nothing to a reporter or editor that would embarrass or damage you by its publication or broadcast. Assume anything you say may be printed or aired. It’s fine to be friendly, but journalists are not your buddies, so don’t confide secrets or personal information.
- Finally, editors and reporters are in charge of what they publish and broadcast. They have the final word. You are in charge of what you say and distribute to media. You have the final word about that. Your contact with media should be cordial, businesslike and non-combative.

What media expect from you

Your contact with media needn’t be a source of anxiety. Reporters want answers to their questions. Give them the answers you choose and politely decline or avoid answering others. A curt “No Comment” is unwise as it raises flags of suspicion. Rather, “I’m sorry I’m not at liberty to discuss that issue” is much more agreeable and less antagonistic.

- First and foremost, you or another member must be available to reporters when they call. Yes, you’re busy, but reporters have deadlines. They often cannot wait for a callback at your convenience. Ask the reporter what his/her deadline is – you don’t want to miss an opportunity, do you?
- Be prepared with any graphic material that may support your story – artwork, photos and the like. Fully understand who your sources are and whether they object to being named and/or contacted by media. (Mrs. Smith may be part of your story but she may not want to discuss her role in it. Speak with her before sharing information about her.)
- If you believe you have a legitimate news story, present it to the proper editor. (Lifestyle editors have virtually no interest in business news. Business editors have no interest in fashion news, etc.)
- Media want you to be helpful – not pushy. If a reporter declines your offer of five more pictures, accept that response graciously. If he/she declines extending an interview, accept that decision. If you know of some compelling reason why the reporter should change his/her position then, of course, share it by all means. Then accept the final decision.

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Lots of Websites offer media contact lists

Here are a few:

- US Newspaper List -- www.usnpl.com
- Newslink -- www.newslink.org
- Capitol Advantage -- <http://bit.ly/CAP-Media>

Target Media in your Community

Publicity, like love, is where you find it. And some of the best places to find editors interested in your story are small newspapers, periodicals and monthlies. Most of these outlets have only a small staff, which means they welcome news stories that fall onto their desks unexpectedly. More good news – people often skim through a large newspaper simply to get a sense of what's going on in the world. But when they pick up a small publication it's usually with a purpose – they intend to read it! And that's good for you.

Here are some media outlets you shouldn't overlook in your PR or advertising efforts:

- Community newspapers, often published once or twice a week
- Regional publications, aimed at a specific audience, such as Hispanics, parents or seniors
- Newsletters put out by local organizations (senior centers, hobby groups, charities, and others for which your story may be suitable)
- Chamber of commerce publications and announcements (most likely, you'll have to be a member – but you ARE, aren't you?)
- Newsletters and other promotional methods underwritten by CFRW, NFRW and other Republican organizations.
- Local cable television
- Public access television – they may help you tape your own show and put it on the air!
- Local talk radio – do any of your stations offer specific shows (related to what you're doing) on which one of your members can be a guest speaker?

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