

BE RELEVANT, BE REAL

THE MAXWELL WAY OF WORKING WITH MEDIA

By Erica Erland

While we often challenge our clients to think beyond newspapers and magazines to connect with consumers, there's no denying the power of a strategic media relations program to increase visibility, drive trial and lend credibility. Whether you're launching a product, highlighting a destination or telling a company's business story, effective communication with media is the crux of garnering editorial coverage.

It's common in the PR field to cite "relationships" as the ultimate factor in earning media coverage. But without tailored messages, timely news and creative communication, even a strong relationship may earn only a friendly reply of "Thanks, but no thanks."

The key to nurturing productive relationships with media is providing interesting and unique information of specific interest to each writer you contact. However, sometimes that's just not possible, especially when your message needs to get out to more than just a handful of contacts. The trick when working with media is finding a balance between being efficient and still having a personal, targeted approach.

Here are a few tips for maximizing results while building meaningful relationships:

1. **Be real.** Put yourself in their shoes. Print media is struggling and lower ad revenue means smaller staffs, less editorial space and busy schedules. A friendly, down-to-earth tone can go a long way to kicking off an ongoing conversation.
2. **Be brief.** If you aren't able to send a specifically tailored pitch to every reporter on your list, at least get to the point quickly so journalists can determine right away if your news is of interest. E-mail is often a preferred method of communication because it's convenient and flexible, but there's a tendency for PR pros to indulge in the privilege of a one-sided conversation and provide too much detail. Try to resist sending more than the basic Ws (who, what, when, where, why.) If they want more, they'll ask.
3. **Tell a story, but not "their" story.** PR professionals used to simply hand a fully baked feature to journalists. The problem is that reporters also have a job to do, and the good ones don't like us to imply that we could do it better. Instead, show media how your client fits into the larger picture by sharing trends and timely news. Be prepared to help foster the story, but if your ideas are of interest, the writer will do the rest.
4. **Meet face to face.** Again, with shrinking staff sizes, the tried and true desk-side briefing is becoming a thing of the past. Instead, trade shows and media events offer the chance to tell clients' stories in person and bring the experience to life. When possible, let writers know prior to the event that you'll be there and preview what you have to share.
5. **Be professional.** We're often asked by clients to "thank" editors with cards or gifts when coverage appears. While it's certainly appropriate to send a quick e-mail after working with media on a story, we counsel against an explicit thank you. Journalists work for their readers, not the companies they choose to include in their publications. Gifts can imply that an editor has done us a favor and, for a professional tasked with unbiased reporting, that can be offensive. It's a fine line, and a prudent PR professional will know what level of follow-up is appropriate.

