Public Relations Strategies: Expert Tips for Effective Media Relations
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It’s 10:30 a.m. on a Tuesday morning and the phone is ringing at the desk of an Account Manager at a mid-sized PR agency. News had broken earlier that morning that two telecom equipment manufacturers were merging – an event which would have major implications to suppliers of telecom equipment. A reporter from a prestigious telephony trade publication wanted to know if the account manager, who represented several telecom start-up companies, had someone available to comment for a story.

The reporter was on deadline and the interview had to take place within the hour. The Account Manager contacted her clients and was able to arrange an interview in the prescribed time. The news story was published later that afternoon and included an insightful quote from the Account Manager’s client. The client was thrilled.

This anecdote perhaps provides the best possible outcome for which a public relations professional could hope: An influential reporter secured a credible source that added value to his story and by default, rightfully portrayed the client as an industry authority. In addition, the Account Manager confirmed her standing with a reporter from a key trade publication as a responsive, reliable and credible source for news commentary and analysis.

Such are the hallmarks of good media relations, but what’s hard to ascertain from this story is the hard work – the relationship building effort – that led to this welcomed and unsolicited phone call on an otherwise average Tuesday.

This whitepaper aims to provide you with useful and proven ways you can build solid relationships with the reporters that are important to you or your organisation. It will discuss pitfalls in media relations, tips for establishing relationships, advice on how to strengthen those relationships – and pitching tips for generating coverage.

Pitfalls in media relations

One of biggest pitfalls in media relations is off-topic pitching or the distribution of irrelevant press releases. Some reporters indicate they receive as many as 100 emails a day from PR professionals with less than 20 percent of those even remotely close to representing the reporters’ area of coverage.¹

As one business editor from a national daily newspaper wrote in email correspondence, "I get so, so many press releases that have nothing to do with anything I've ever written about. They're clearly sent to the email of every journalist someone can find. It takes up my time and leaves me less time to actually read and think about press releases that could be important."²

Fed up with the deluge of email – to the tune of 300 emails a day – Chris Anderson the editor-in-chief of Wired, an online monthly periodical, published a list of PR professionals he had blocked from his email account. The event stirred outcries of protest from the PR industry, but Anderson explained in his post, "I only want two kinds of email: those from people I know, and those from people who have taken the time to find out what I'm interested in and composed a note meant to appeal to that (I love those emails; indeed, that's why my email address is public)."³

It's important to know exactly what the reporter covers, so do your research," said Lauren Stone, Media Specialist at Porter Novelli in an interview with PRWeek. "You want to make sure what you are pitching has an organic connection to a reporter's beat."⁴

¹ Private email correspondence; informal poll of select media from technology trade publications
² Private email correspondence, 17 August 2009
³ The Long Tail, "Sorry PR people: you're blocked," 29 October 2007
⁴ PR Week: Interviews via Twitter, basics of media relations, and more, 7 April 2009
The best way to identify reporters for targeted pitching and to understand a reporter’s coverage is to read (or watch or listen in the case of broadcast media) to what they have published. Some PR management software can assist public relations professionals in conducting this research by automatically linking recent stories penned by the author to their media database profile, but a quick Google search by the author’s name ought to be the bare minimum. The more research you do, the better you’ll understand a reporter’s beat and that will help improve your pitch, its relevancy and chances for a return call.

“Do your homework before picking up the phone or pressing ‘send’. A simple Web search is usually enough to tell you whether a certain journalist covers a certain subject, or whether a certain publication would be remotely interested in the story you are pitching,” wrote Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson, Media Editor with the Financial Times. “I get 250-300 emails a day, including scores of pitches. I do not write scores of stories a day. I’m afraid that means that any pitch which does not seem instantly relevant will get only a cursory glance.”

**Undermining credibility from the beginning**

A way for a PR professional to undermine their credibility from the very beginning is to over-promise and under-deliver. This may include, for example, promising an interview with a customer or Executive without checking first to ensure that person is available and willing to conduct an interview. Repairing or recovering from such a shortcoming is difficult, so be mindful of the promises made.

Sometimes this happens through no fault of your own – a customer initially agrees to an interview and later changes his or her mind. The key is to be conscious of your approach – so be sure to manage expectations and avoid making a promise you can't keep.

One sure fire path to making irreparable damage is flat-out lying or telling an untruth. This seems to goes without reason, but PR professionals should also take care to temper enthusiasm that might lead to overstating the truth. As one reporter wrote, “Nothing will undermine a relationship with a reporter faster than a source saying something untrue. If there is something you cannot talk about, just decline to comment.”

”Most reporters work on a basis of trust,” wrote another reporter with a major online periodical. ”Remember, we are only as good as our next story. We hate making mistakes, which makes us cautious at times. We can't really take sides; we are only observers. We don't make much money and we don't make many friends. We are just trying to get it right, that's it. But that is very, very hard work.”

Another pet-peeve that reporters often object to is when a public relations professional makes a pitch and then is unable to answer follow up questions. This underscores the need to have command over the details when pitching a reporter on a story. I.J. Hudson, a broadcast journalist for more than three decades, and now Communications Director at Garson Claxton, a law firm, wrote one of the top three issues when pitching over the telephone is when a “PR person is reading from news release and unable to answer questions about the technology or product.”

Liz Johnson, Senior Manager with MGMA Media Relations might agree. “Be prepared,” she wrote in a blog post, ”Make sure you can answer reporters' questions before you have them on the phone.”

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5 Private e-mail correspondence, 20 August 2009  
6 Memorandum to the Greater Washington Board of Trade: [Tips for Building Relationships with Reporters](#), undated.  
7 Private e-mail correspondence, 15 August 2009  
8 Private e-mail correspondence, 19 August 2009  
9 MGMA In Practice blog: [8 media relations tips for medical group practices](#), 28 July 2009
Establishing relationships with the media

Suffice to say, reporters write news stories and public relations professionals represent people or organisations that want to be included in those news stories. Reporters aim to write timely and accurate stories that will be of interest to their audience, while PR professionals aim to promote their ideas to the same audience, through a reporter’s coverage. Though these goals are seemingly at odds, yet as the introductory anecdote demonstrates, they are not irreconcilable; in fact they can be mutually beneficial. Getting to that point requires both sides to establish a relationship, and PR professionals have the opportunity to take the lead in understanding a reporter’s point of view.

"Reporters are not here to promote your company or product -- that is not our concern. Our responsibility is to serve our audience with honest, accurate information,” wrote a veteran journalist and Media Executive who writes a daily blog about the media industry for Bnet.com, he also noted that reporting is highly competitive. “When promoting your company or product be sure to point us toward any negative info out there because we are going to find it anyway. You build credibility that way.”

Once you have identified the appropriate media contacts through research and reading, the first few steps to establishing a relationship include understanding what is newsworthy, the reporters communication preferences and making an introduction.

- **Understanding what is newsworthy.** News by definition is new – a new idea, a new product a new service – or perhaps a new twist on an old product. News should defy expectations and provide a new way to understand events, products, people or places. Keep in mind this definition is relative – what might be considered newsworthy by a company or organisation – might not pass this litmus test in the perspective of an editorial department. This may prove frustrating for some PR professionals, but keep in mind such editorial discretion is what makes news content valuable – and by extension the work of the PR industry.

- **Identify communication preferences.** One area where reporters and PR professionals have some common ground is the communication medium. One survey found that 95% of PR professionals prefer to pitch by email. More importantly though, is how reporters prefer to receive those pitches. Fortunately, another survey found 90% of reporters also prefer email. Still a phone call may be appropriate depending on the timing and urgency of your news, just be sure to ask a reporter if he or she has time for a phone pitch before providing it; and be sure to avoid calling a reporter on deadline.

- **Introduce yourself.** This is a fundamental step that surprisingly often gets overlooked despite the fact that reporters often want to hear from new contacts. In addition, this provides PR professionals with an opportunity to begin a relationship without expectations – that is without pitching a story on the first contact. A pithy but professional email introducing yourself, explaining who you represent and how they relate to that reporter’s coverage will often find itself tucked into an email folder of potential contacts. This can be done when you’ve started a new role, or perhaps when a PR agency picks up a new client.

Strengthening media relationships

Once you’ve opened up the door – the media knows who you are and what sources you can offer – the next step is to advance your relationship. This takes leg work and requires careful note taking.

10 Private e-mail correspondence, 15 August 2009
11 *Bulldog Reporter*: *Daily Dog*, 21 July 2009
12 *Journalistics*: *Social or not, are press releases worth your time*, 26 May 2009
Document your interactions. World-class sales organisations use customer relationship management tools, or CRM to document their interactions with prospects and customers. Public relations people are, in some respects, in business of selling ideas. As such documenting your interactions and writing down the context of what you discussed with your customer – the reporter – is important. This process ensures you never pitch the same story twice – or worse in larger communications departments – keeps PR professionals from tripping over each other and reaching out to the same reporter at the same time. Documenting your interactions may seem tedious and time consuming, but in the long run this pays off by having a complete communication history and a basis for evaluating what works from a PR perspective and what doesn’t. PR management software, such as Vocus, provides an efficient way to document your activity and to ensure that every member of your team has access to details on the latest interaction with each reporter.

Take note of the details. Understanding a reporter’s interests can be important to a future story. One PR professional relayed a story about a reporter who was to interview the company CEO for a feature story and noted that that reporter had published a comment in her public biography indicating she enjoyed Yoga. The company culture was such that the company offered Yoga classes during the lunch hour regularly and the PR professional invited the reporter to attend a session in advance of the interview with the CEO. This provided the reporter with a valuable opportunity to experience the company culture first hand and give details the reporter couldn’t possibly ascertain from just an interview.

Keep the pitches relevant. You’ve worked hard to identify the right reporters and make your introductions – don’t ruin it by sending an off-topic pitch. As you develop your pitch ideas always strive to sell a story, as opposed to selling a company or an organisation. For example, instead of pitching why a product or company is so fabulous, pitch a story about how a customer used the product to solve a problem. The latter relays the same message in a format that readers can understand – and that is appealing to a reporter. "Why should I or my viewers care about what you’re pitching,” asked Hudson, the former broadcast journalist. "Paint me a picture, not a listing of specifications.”

Give without expectation. PR professionals can do wonders for their relationship if they can link reporters with contacts and sources that they might not otherwise have obtained – especially if those contacts have little to do with their immediate PR objectives. You’ve helped them out and while that’s no guarantee of future coverage, you can be sure your future pitches will get a closer review than they might otherwise have received.

Earn big points for responsiveness. Reporters often work on tight deadlines and it’s not uncommon to pitch a reporter several times without getting a response. Then suddenly, the reporter calls you back and needs information or an interview on short order. This is an opportunity to excel and PR professionals should do all they can to oblige the request. Sometimes this means providing sources or resources that won’t necessarily provide an immediate benefit. Remember that relationships take time to

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13 Personal e-mail communication, August 19, 2009
“Journalists work on tight, sometimes brutal deadlines. As a result, they may not care about what you’re pitching until they are right in the middle of it. Then they care a lot,” wrote Rohit Bhargava, a founding member of Ogilvy’s 360 Digital Influence in an article he penned for Ragan.com. “What this means is that sometimes you need to focus less on what your message is, and more on when you deliver it.”

Seven top pitching tips
Pitching is a core competency of good media relations work. The ability to uncover unique and insightful ways to convey an organisation’s story is the concept behind good pitching. Here are seven solid pitching strategies to improve your media relations.

- **Trend spotting.** Journalistic wisdom says it takes three to make a trend, for example, three events, three indications, or three data points. PR professionals can aid reporters greatly, build their relationship and get their story out if they are able to spot trends in the making. News stories are often trying to uncover what will happen next – and the PR professional that can offer a pitch that makes a sound prediction will get a close review.

- **Surveys.** Data driven results, like surveys, are useful because they indicate a collective pool of thought. Take care to craft your questions openly, be willing to share your questions along with the data and disclose whether or not the survey is scientifically valid.

- **Expert source.** A variation of an introductory email goes one step further and provides a potential source for a reporter. For example, you might include a short biography of a given expert, a bulleted list of topics that he or she can speak to credibly and a list of news articles or public speaking events at which that person has already presented. The latter is especially important because it demonstrates credibility – that the expert is in fact already a proven resource.

- **David vs. Goliath.** Nearly everyone likes to root for the “little guy.” It usually makes for a great story when a company is up against significant competitors – or an organisation faces insurmountable odds. These stories usually involve a new idea or concept and are inspirational.

- **Case studies.** Nothing you say about yourself can be as powerful as someone else saying it about you. This is why references are so important. Case studies strike at the core at what media relations strives for: third-party credibility. Case studies are a great way to get your point across and as one Wall Street Journal reporter stated, she’s looking for that “killer anecdote” – a point that articulates how a problem was solved.

- **How-to.** People are always looking for advice columns, which is one of the reasons there are so many newspaper columns dedicated to giving advice on topics ranging from help for small businesses to technology gadgets. Reporters are generally receptive to story ideas on how to get something done – and the better the reputation of the person offering the advice, the better the chances your how-to pitch will wind up in ink.

- **Top seven lists:** Lists of tips and techniques are an easy and simple read. This can be a good way to pitch a contributed article – the top seven ways to get the most out of media relations for example. Some people pitch the lists of top three, or top 10, the number isn’t quite as important as the content, though there is research that

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14 Ragan.com: **Both sides now: PR lessons from a target’s viewpoint**, 19 August 2009
15 Interview with a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, 23 July 2009
suggest seven is the best number hence Stephen Covey’s best-selling book on “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.”

By nature, reporters are always on the look out for new ideas and story themes. Finding new or clever ways to articulate your organisation’s story provides a valuable service to reporters – and will go well to help build your relationships with key reporters.

Conclusion
The anecdote in the beginning exemplifies the end that most PR professionals engaging in media relations hope to achieve. It takes hard work and diligence to get to that point – and the credibility as a resource gained can be lost in a moment. The key points to remember are as follows:

- Research the reporters you target carefully
- Understand what they consider news
- Keep your pitches relevant to their coverage
- Always be responsive and honest when dealing with the media
- Keep track of your interactions

If you follow these guidelines you’ll be on your way to developing solid relationships with the media – and adding value to your organisation through media relations. And who knows, maybe you’ll be the PR professional who gets that unsolicited phone call from a reporter on an otherwise idle Tuesday.

About Vocus
VOCUS, Vocus, Inc. (NASDAQ: VOCS) is a leading provider of on-demand software for public relations management, helping organisations of all sizes fundamentally change the way they communicate with the media and the public, optimise their public relations efforts and measure their impact. The web-based software addresses the critical functions of public relations including media relations, news distribution and news monitoring, and provides the critical capability to monitor and analyse social media conversations from virtually any source and track results compared to key competitors. Vocus is used by more than 3,700 organisations worldwide and is available in seven languages. Vocus is based in Lanham, MD with offices in London, Europe, and Asia. For more information, visit www.vocus.co.uk or call +44 (0)20 7481 6150.