

The Five R's of Media Relations: Becoming a Better Resource

By Glenn Gillen

In the practice of media relations today, perhaps too much emphasis is placed on the former and not enough on the latter. Whether working for internal or external clients, public relations professionals are often too focused on short-term results such as pickups and total impressions when they should be focused on developing long-term relationships with journalists.

Journalists are viewed as a means to an end rather than as partners in disseminating messages to select publics. The key to effective long-term media relations is developing good one-to-one relationships with editors, reporters, bloggers and photojournalists.

The time invested in getting to know journalists as individuals and providing them with the information and visuals needed to help them do their jobs will be rewarded with increased trust and consideration.

Get to Know Journalists

Before the advent of the Internet, personal information about journalists was harder to come by. Research took the form of consulting the massive Bacon's Directories, consulting experienced colleagues, or phoning the main number of the media outlet.

Today, we have access to vast subscription-based databases (e.g., Cision, Vocus, MEdi-Atlas, MyPRGenie, etc.) that list particular details such as, "This editor doesn't take phone calls," "That beat writer welcomes email pitches on Wednesdays," or "This

blogger is interested in stories about African-American entrepreneurs."

If you subscribe to one of these databases, by all means read what it has to say about the individuals you wish to engage. Be aware, however, that databases are not always up-to-date, and that some journalists and media outlets don't list any contact information.

When researching journalists, see if you can answer these questions:

- Are they an appropriate contact for my press release or pitch? If not, which of their colleagues is a better contact?
- When is the best time to reach out to them? Likewise, when should I not contact them? What are their recurring deadlines, so I know when not to bother them?
- What are the major topics/issues they are interested in presently? Have I read their recent articles or asked them directly?
- Has one of my colleagues worked with them before?
- Where else have they worked?
- Where did they go to school?
- Are they on LinkedIn or Twitter?

By better informing yourself about the individual, you will be better prepared to pitch journalists at the right time with the right message.

The "5 R's" of Media Relations

Many believe that the current model of news delivery is not sustainable. According

to the **Pew Research Center's** State of the News Media 2013 Annual Report on American Journalism (www.stateofthemediamedia.org), there are 30 percent fewer newspaper journalists in 2013 than there were 2000. Shrinking newsrooms have left the remaining journalists stressed and overworked.

Respect journalists when they can't or won't cover your story. Ask them what might better capture their attention next time, and accept that some things are beyond your control.

By helping journalists do their jobs quicker and easier, you can position yourself and your clients as valuable resources.

The following are what I call the “five R’s” of media relations that can help you build and sustain relationships with members of the media:

Be respectful. A television news assignment editor relayed to me that a PR representative once cussed her out for not sending a reporter to cover a specific event. That type of behavior is unacceptable. Respect journalists when they can't or won't cover your story. Ask them what might better capture his/her attention next time, and accept that some things are beyond your control.

In general, extending courtesy and politeness to stressed journalists costs you nothing and can bolster your image as an ethical PR pro (see sidebar at right). For example, if you find a major error in a story, politely ask for a correction framed within the context of providing the most accurate and up-to-date information possible.

Be responsive. Today's journalists are working on tighter and tighter deadlines, sometimes just minutes in the matter of

Ethical Media Relations

The **Public Relations Society of America's** Code of Ethics expresses several values and provisions that impact media relations. Among them are the following:

Honesty

We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.

Fairness

We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media and the general public. We respect all opinions and support the right of free expression.

Free Flow of Information

Intent: To maintain the integrity of relationships with the media, government officials and the public.

Guidelines: A member shall: Preserve the integrity of the process of communication. Be honest and accurate in all communications. Act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which the practitioner is responsible. Preserve the free flow of unprejudiced information when giving or receiving gifts by ensuring that gifts are nominal, legal and infrequent.

online articles or blog posts. The reality is that you should provide the means for them to contact you at all times. That means giving out your cell phone number and regularly checking email from your smartphone. Reply to them as soon as you possibly can.

Find out deadlines and try to get them answers or interviews as soon as possible. If you don't have an answer at hand, let reporters know you're looking into it and will relay the information as soon as you have it.

Be reliable. In short, being reliable means doing what you said you would do in the time frame you promised to do it. Reporters will reward you for this with increased trust.

A journalist once contacted me in a pinch when one of his prospective interviewees failed to show. He mentioned specifically that

his colleagues said I could be counted on to quickly arrange a Q&A with my client.

Does the reporter need a high-res photo? Send it. Links to the company's annual report? Here it is. Industry data referenced in an interview? Out it goes.

On the flip side, swallow your pride and apologize when you are not able to deliver. Do what you can to make amends, and work with them toward an agreeable solution.

Be realistic. Let's face it—not every press release, media advisory or pitch is suitable for every reporter. As optimistic as you or your client may be, the information or messages you wish to disseminate are not always relevant or actionable to a reporter. Work towards a better understanding of what types of stories a journalist or outlet covers and what they do not cover. You can do yourself a huge favor by not wasting reporters' time.

Sometimes your announcement just warrants a news brief. Or your press conference is scheduled for a particularly inconvenient time. Or a major news event bumped your story. Understand where your news fits into the big picture and adjust your expectations.

Occasionally send a reporter a tip, report or study that has nothing directly to do with your client.

Be a resource. The previous four R's are all negligible if you're not what matters most—a good resource. The difference between be-

ing a contact and a resource is that contacts are just names, numbers and emails while a resource is a known and valued asset. Being a good resource means reporters will actively reach out to you when working on a story.

One trick to being a good resource, however, is to not always be “selling” the reporter. Occasionally send them a tip, report or study that has nothing directly to do with your client. Pass it along as an FYI and see if they acknowledge that you're thinking about their needs.

The more you get to know journalists as individuals, the better your chances of building relationships are. In that regard, treat them as business partners and recognize that not every communication has to be self-serving. Congratulate them on promotions or awards. Compliment them on good stories they've done. Retweet or favorite some of their tweets. Comment on their professional Facebook page. If you discover some mutual interests, occasionally contact them about that rather than about work.

Don't overdo it or you'll come off as disingenuous. One of our clients has a motto that I believe applies well in regards to media relations: “Don't be annoying.”

Practice the five R's of media relations and you will improve your chances of developing long-term relationships with journalists who know you, trust you and want to work with you. **PRN**

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