

Adding Public Relations to your Strategic Communications/Marketing mix Part 2 of 3

By Stephen Fairley

<http://www.TheRainmakerInstitute.com>

In the previous post, I offered some reasons why you should consider public relations as part of your marketing mix and some tips on selecting a PR professional. This post expands on those thoughts.

Ways to interact with the media

One of the very first steps in any good media relations campaign is identification of key media with whom you wish to develop a relationship. Target the publications that your prospective clients read. You probably don't have the budget for a wide-ranging media campaign, so you need to have a good focus at the outset.

It is best to have a long-range time horizon and through the assistance of your public relations counsel, to develop a relationship as a "source." Often this is done over a meal where a reporter has the opportunity to get to know you and ask questions to determine the areas where you may be useful to him/her. This is not about you placing a story, it is about establishing credibility with the reporter as: 1) someone knowledgeable about certain topics; 2) someone who can speak clearly and get to the point e.g. someone who is quotable; and 3) someone who is responsive to the needs and timetables of the media. To this end, your PR counsel and your office staff need to be very responsive to media requests. Do not let your assistant use the "He/she is in a meeting" with the media. Media often call with short deadlines, and unless you absolutely cannot be interrupted. If a reporter's calls get "parked" and returned after the deadline, they will stop calling and go to someone who is more responsive.

These sourcing interviews allow you great latitude in what you can talk about, and sometimes it may not be something that you think is critical, but it is a story he/she is developing. As an example, a former client of mine is in the construction business and did a great deal of healthcare construction. We set up a sourcing interview with a healthcare writer at a major US daily newspaper. During that interview, a story idea was born that culminated a few months later with a story that was on the front page of the business section on a Sunday, which is the largest circulation day for newspapers. The story was adapted by a media organization and ran statewide in approximately 20 newspapers. We were given the first quote in the story, which is very important since news stories are edited from the bottom up. When the story ran on the wire service, our quote was the only one included in the story in the out-state papers. And it all began with a sourcing interview where we were pitching experts and a story idea took shape during the interview.

Once you have established a relationship with a reporter, occasionally contact him/her with stories you see that they can "localize" or that you can add to. National stories that can be brought to a local level, such as identity theft, foreclosure prevention, etc. that are big stories nationally can often be made "local" with the addition of some local experts. If you can line up

two or three experts to refer to the reporter, you will have made yourself even more valuable. I had an attorney client who is an expert in automotive safety, and had worked for one of the regulatory bodies overseeing the auto industry. When new safety rules were proposed, we had him sit down with some auto writers for sourcing interviews. A story line developed and he supplied the reporter with other experts inside and outside the government to interview, and saved the reporter a tremendous amount of time in research. Little touches like that go a long way, and the next time something in that area came up, he was at the top of the list to be called when they needed a local expert.

Another method of working with the media is to develop a story idea, or “pitch” and present it to them. This can be something very broad, or very narrow, as in the case of new clean air regulations being proposed by the EPA. My client was an environmental attorney with extensive knowledge of clean air regulations. Our pitch was that, if the regulations went forward as proposed, they might bring back several unpopular programs including auto emissions testing. So we pitched it to the reporter, with some supporting evidence, so that he would be interested. He was interested and used the story as a lead in the business section with a photo of my client. Since the paper’s service area was heavily industrial, any new proposed clean air regulations would have a significant economic impact, which was the direction the story took. And my client was able to translate the impact into terms that business owners and employees could easily grasp.

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Stephen Fairley, M.A., RCC, CEO
Law Firm Marketing Expert • Master Business Coach • Best-Selling Author
Stephen@TheRainmakerInstitute.com

Stephen Fairley is a nationally recognized law firm marketing expert and has helped more than 6,000 attorneys from hundreds of law firms across the country to discover the secrets of generating more referrals and filling their practice. He is the international best-selling author of 10 books and 5 audio programs.

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