

10 quick tips: Working with disappearing media

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Bad news in the newspaper industry is everywhere. Papers are going bankrupt, buying out journalists, demanding pay cuts, selling land and buildings, suspending daily delivery and threatening to shut down. Ad revenue has plummeted: Circulation is eroding. Newspapers outside of major metros have suspended print editions and gone entirely online. Total US demand for newsprint has dropped more than 20 percent, and one credit rating agency predicts several cities could have no newspaper by 2010. The US Bureau of Labor statistics shows newspaper jobs of all kinds dropped by 22,400 positions in 2008. Another study estimated that the newsroom population dropped by 15 percent last year, a record.

The bad news impacts public relations as well. Media relations is still an essential component of PR but how does one persuade media when there are fewer and in some cases, no reporters left? Where does one turn for credible, third-party verification of organization claims? Or, does one go back to the future and get digital or other ink in any way possible? E.g., paying bloggers for positive stories, which some companies have tried to do.

It is becoming clear that PR will have to work harder and smarter to persuade fewer reporters with less time and more responsibility. But, what does that mean? Here are 10 tips, some of which you may be doing.

1. **Follow the crowd:** As traditional media move to online news, follow. Media relations specialists have been doing this for some time. Some publishers now are reserving material for online columns. For example, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune* and the *Washington Post* have news, opinion and blogs that never enter the print edition. These are not lesser venues. They have the same power in reprint form as an article in a printed publication.
2. **Go nontraditional:** Freelancers and working reporters write blogs and participate in forums. Use them. Blogs and forums have readership that is usually lower than traditional media but something is better than nothing. However, take care in approaching media writing in nontraditional formats. Principles of unpaid persuasion apply. Make sure the story idea fits the blog or forum.
3. **Pick spots carefully:** Online, there is more opinion than balanced information and reporting. Build media lists accordingly. Know where you are going before pitching anyone in nontraditional media. That means reading blogs and forums in depth to get a good sense of how a person thinks and reports. It is more dangerous to pitch a blogger blindly than a

- member of traditional media. Reporters learn to shrug off, throw out, ignore or otherwise, get rid of press releases and information they don't want. Bloggers may and, often do, fire back publicly to the embarrassment of the practitioner who sent unwanted information.
4. **Expand targeting:** Freelancers now write a great deal of editorial content, even in major newspapers. Newspapers are becoming more like magazines that depend on a flow of freelance material rather than full-time staffers. This means PR practitioners should work to identify freelancers and their interests and target them as carefully as working journalists. This is not always easy to do. Some freelancers' bylines show regularly and others occasionally. Even with a Factiva search, it might be difficult to produce a dossier on a freelancer. It is also difficult at times to find out how to contact freelancers. Newspapers often won't give out their e-mail addresses or phone numbers and prefer to route information through their editorial departments. This means a practitioner can never be sure that a pitch or query has been passed on.
 5. **Write smarter pitches:** Do more research, use sharper reasoning and write more compelling presentations of story ideas to reporters. Distill, distill, distill. Get the news hook into the lead sentence. Back claims with facts. Answer questions any editor or reporter would ask. Look for holes in a story idea and fill them early. If you can condense a pitch into a short e-mail that grabs attention instantly, that is best. Pitch crafting is less creativity and more editing and careful reasoning. It is taking a reporter or editor's point of view and showing how your idea fits their criteria for news. It takes time to write well and there is never a time when presenting story ideas becomes easy.
 6. **Do more advance work:** It is axiomatic that a reporter with more areas to cover has less time to cover them and less capability for thorough reporting. This means the PR practitioner should be spending more time lining up materials, contacts and resources for a journalist before contacting him. Lay out the story and support it with facts. Tell the story concisely and credibly and provide contacts for the journalist to verify what is written. It has always been important to do advance work but never more than now. Ask and answer a journalist's questions before the journalist asks them.
 7. **Take more time:** With fewer and busier reporters, it may be slower now persuading media to write about your idea. One should adjust programs and promises to clients accordingly. Media relations has always been difficult to synchronize with events and marketing. It may be more so now. Although marketers want on-time, on-target messaging and frequency, this may be hard to guarantee going forward. The publicity window may have to be widened and corporate communications deadline stretched. The advantage of credibility may have to offset the disadvantages of poor frequency and lack of timeliness

8. **Adjust client expectations:** With an absolute decrease in traditional outlets and mainstream reporters, one needs to control client expectations about how much coverage can be achieved. There is no use trying to hide a fall-off in mainstream media. It will show anyway in a decline of clips. Tell clients what they already suspect.
9. **Don't trick readers:** Marketers have tried to slip positive reviews of products and services into web sites such as Amazon.com. Eventually they are caught, and credibility suffers. Readers are incensed when a company tries to pull one over on them. Don't do it, and resist marketers who push for it. What little is gained isn't worth the downside. There will always be operators willing to pay for publicity. The value of PR is that it is unpaid and when that quality is corrupted, there is no value left. Even though the earliest modern publicists freely handed out cash and other perks to reporters, both the publishing industry and consumers have matured.
10. **Adjust metrics:** Page views and print circulation don't go together. If you don't have targets for each already, set them for publicity campaigns. Be prepared for an absolute decline in metrics. It is harder now to reach millions. Be prepared as well for difficulties in getting page-view measures. Many web sites and blogs don't publish them and others make them available only to advertisers. Oddly, though online is the best measured medium, the more a story is online the harder it is for PR practitioners to show how far it has reached, once one leaves well established web sites and blogs.

There is no turning back. The newspaper business in the US is in a fundamental shift to a smaller industry with a niche readership. There is still room for persuading traditional media, but their jobs are different now, and their influence may not be as great. As the absolute number of reporters and editors declines, be prepared and be flexible.

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