

Media Relations: The Basics

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Any PR practitioner who has worked with reporters knows how difficult it is reach them. Some reporters never come to a phone or answer e-mail. So, why contact reporters at all? Increasingly, practitioners aren't. They employ an amorphous group of communications skills and techniques in areas such as corporate communications or marketing communications or investor relations or employee communications. Handling reporters is often consigned to media relations specialists.

But failure to work with reporters can hurt a company, as Wal-Mart learned. Here is Wal-Mart's CEO in a quote (Sept. 9, 2004 *The New York Times*) both revealing and rueful:

What we found is that there is a different group of stakeholders today that are important and that is a person who's not familiar with Wal-Mart stores, they're not familiar with what we stand for. So their view of Wal-Mart stores is what they read in the newspaper and what they see on TV. We have decided it is important for us to reach out to that group.

Mona Williams, the spokesperson for Wal-Mart, elaborated.

For too long, we thought that if we just focused on our customers then everything else would follow. We probably did not realize soon enough how important it was to work with the media. It is an acknowledgement that the media and others offer important venues for telling our story, and we need to continue doing a better job at that.

Wal-Mart avoided reporters for decades, and it did not harm the company, but when it ran into criticism, it was dismissive at first and ill prepared.

Reporters and companies can choose to be invisible to each other, but as Wal-Mart learned, it can be a risk. Moreover, it is difficult to know, as Wal-Mart discovered, when invisibility is safe and when it isn't. Some organizations and individuals are always in the public eye, but most are not. Some organizations and individuals need broad public awareness to thrive, while others have a well-defined set of customers. Some organizations and individuals need PR people while others do well without them. Few of the million-plus corporations in the US have formal public relations or corporate communications or marketing communications departments, and they have little need to work with news media. They are too small and isolated.

A reporter's need to talk to PR practitioners is dictated by events and circumstance. There are reporters who never need to deal with PR practitioners, although they may use a PR product, such as a press release. A journalist who wants to interview a movie star may be forced to go through a publicist who guards the star's reputation. A journalist doing man-on-street interviews won't. A reporter interviewing baseball players in a locker room has no barrier. However, once the athlete leaves the locker room, a PR practitioner may bar further discussion to guard a player's privacy. A reporter wishing to interview a CEO may go through a PR person who vets questions and prepares the executive. A reporter interviewing striking employees on the picket line may not.

So, do reporters and PR practitioners need each other? Yes and no. Reporters who avoid PR practitioners shield themselves from potentially useful information resources, while PR practitioners who ignore media limit their skills or who abuse editorial access destroy their credibility.

News media limitations

A newsroom, whether print or electronic, is an information factory producing and packaging editorial content for consumers. Workers in the factory – editors and reporters – process and publish content with an eye to consumer interest and/or accuracy and fairness to gain and keep readers, listeners or viewers. They define news, what is included in reporting and the order and presentation of stories. They are gatekeepers and filters of information at both fact gathering and editing levels. Consumers value news because they do not have the time to find and sort through information to discover what is of value to them.

News workers are limited by information resources they have and news holes they fill. A typical newsroom is buried in information, but it might not be the right, complete or appropriate information. Moreover, surplus information often has nowhere to go, even with the Internet serving as a news outlet, because it is too costly to vet for accuracy and publish. News workers also are bounded by:

- **Assignments:** A reporter writing shorts for a business page from press releases and wire copy has a different job than an investigative reporter trying to prove a mayor took illegal campaign contributions.
- **Attitudes.** One reporter might be biased and another not.
- **Education and understanding.** One reporter might understand a complex explanation of a product or political situation and another not.
- **Editorial concerns:** A reporter might want to report a story in which an editor has no interest.
- **Commitment:** One reporter might be willing to spend extra time reporting a story and another not.

- **Ability to express themselves.** Some reporters are better visual, text and personal presenters than others.
- **Deadlines:** Everything in a news factory is geared to delivery of a product on time.

News workers are further limited by their attitudes toward information. Reporters and editors can assume:

- They know what is to be known about a topic. This is a **Voice of Authority** that could be wrong.
- They don't know or cannot prove information is correct. This is a **half-story** or a **reporter who misses the story**.
- They have information to write evenhandedly, even though much is unknown. This is the **"He said-She said"** story or **"Even-handed bias"** when one offers another side to an issue that doesn't have one – for example, quoting a creationist to balance a Darwinist.
- They have framed the story correctly. This is **Insightful Analysis** or **Right Issue Wrong Focus**.

Excessive information can distract journalists from what is really happening. They can rely, intentionally or not, on biased sources who misdirect, or they can talk to the same sources too often and limit understanding of issues and events. A reporter's beliefs about issues, persons and news can limit stories he or she does. To one reporter, a celebrity is boring. To another, celebrities are meat. Reporting daily stock results is more mechanical and process-oriented than writing a profile on a company and its CEO. As in any factory, depending on the nature of a worker's task, the need varies for information and relationships with external individuals, such as PR practitioners.

Getting messages out

Individuals and organizations that want to be heard through traditional news media contend with a newsroom's information flood and reporters' limitations. The difficulty is that most do not know or care to understand how and why the media work the way they do. If clients' facts are not compelling, their stories are lost in the information flow, and they wonder why. Moreover, they don't realize that they compete for coverage in a win-lose environment. If they get into the news, someone else doesn't. This creates competition for a reporter's attention and a role for someone who knows the media and can deal effectively with them, such as a PR practitioner.

On the other hand, if individuals or organizations have compelling news, it may be published whether or not they wish to communicate it. So, they use persons

who know how to work with the media to manage the story. A practitioner may strategize how best to present the story to gain a positive result, if the news is good and to mitigate negatives, if the news is bad. The practitioner gathers facts, sets up interviews, provides graphics and visuals, gains access for reporters to key people and assists the reporter before and after news is published.

PR practitioners provide two services in media relations -- knowledge of the news process to help a client tell a story and knowledge of the client to help the reporter express the story. The practitioner is an intermediary who tries to satisfy both sides, although this is not always possible. Practitioners remember who pays them, and as a result, they can be irritating barriers to reporters when practitioners are not permitted to speak for an organization or individual. However, even reporters who do not wish to deal with PR practitioners should respect what a practitioner can do for them.

Tension between reporters and practitioners lies in the dichotomous service-barrier role practitioners play. Reporters appreciate knowledgeable practitioners who steer them into a right direction and save the journalist time in reporting a story. But, a PR practitioner may want a reporter to focus on a story or facts the reporter considers irrelevant or ignore facts the journalist feels he or she needs. This creates negotiation between reporters and practitioners that ranges from polite to tense. Because a PR practitioner cannot compel a reporter to write, the practitioner attempts to persuade a reporter to the practitioner's point of view. This may not sit well with the reporter.

A reporter's perception of a practitioner is critical in a decision to go along with the practitioner. If the reporter considers the PR practitioner credible and useful, the reporter will be inclined to deal with the practitioner. If the reporter considers the person untrustworthy and a barrier, the reporter will go elsewhere. A practitioner with little media experience is less likely to be credible to a reporter.

A PR practitioner's credibility with a reporter comes through transactional experience, through contact whether direct or indirect. The PR practitioner gains a reporter's trust by:

- Delivering information and interviews the reporter needs.
- Providing clear and accurate facts to the reporter, whether good or bad.
- Being there when a reporter calls and handling a reporter's request quickly and accurately.
- Counseling the client on when to deal with reporters and how.

A reporter gains credibility with a PR person by reporting fairly and accurately. If a PR person finds a reporter inaccurate, dilatory about interviews and elusive, the practitioner will go elsewhere to get a message out.

Dealing with reporters is like dealing with customers. You talk to some frequently and others once. And, like customers, it is important for PR practitioners to treat reporters well unless their behavior is out of bounds. Most reporters are trustworthy professionals doing their jobs. Some are not. Because a reporter may deal with a PR practitioner once or infrequently, it is up to the practitioner to know and become well known to reporters and not vice versa. Practitioners who avoid journalists or make no attempt to cultivate reporters consign themselves to low credibility with news media and lack of access when they need it. Further, practitioners find it difficult to know the reputations and quirks of reporters who approach them.

It is up to the practitioner to prove to reporters that the practitioner is a resource. In the best circumstances, the PR practitioner presents accurate, newsworthy information to reporters in an attractive package that makes reporters' jobs easier and serves as an effective case for the practitioner's client. Effectiveness includes the story approach (angle), facts supporting that approach and delivery of content and resources, such as interviews to help the reporter write the story.

Limiting PR

In an era when clients feel they have too much information written about them, they may limit practitioners to issues that benefit the client only, such as marketing communications to boost awareness of products, services and brands. However, clients have more issues than marketing, and reporters will explore them. This is especially true with high-profile individuals and companies. When practitioners become barriers to legitimate stories outside of a client's directive, they lose credibility with reporters who see individuals and companies as part of the larger environment and fair game for different kinds of stories. Reporters cannot be forced to focus only on a client's narrow, self-interested issues, and some journalists see injunctions as challenges to probe further. Therefore, companies that subsume PR under marketing communications are in danger of making a mistake. They are, consciously or not, narrowing the issues a PR practitioner deals with and increasing their risks when issues arise that are out of the practitioner's purview.

Despite this, companies are placing PR, or its equivalent name, under a Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) whose focus is to build awareness and sales. This can work only if the CMO has an expansive view of the company and its relationships to its stakeholders – i.e, the same view as the CEO. Unfortunately, that is rarely the case. CEOs expect CMOs to build consumer loyalty, increase market share, and justify expenditures for marketing communications. CEOs want to know that dollars spent on marketing are actually resulting in profitable sales. The CMO, under pressure to show bottom-line results, is not going to spend much time on issues such as recruitment and retention, diversity, shareholder unhappiness, Wall Street criticism, impacts of legislation, community pressure and a host of

other stakeholder concerns that a typical PR department handles. Thus, it is likely that a marketing communications focus will be forced to shift over time as other issues arise. The traditional structure is to have marketing-focused PR departments at the division or brand-level and a corporate focused department reporting directly to or one step from the CEO. This appears to be the best approach.

Chained together

In many ways, reporters and PR practitioners are enemies chained together. They may not like each other, but they cooperate to get a job done. The PR practitioner is out to position the client well, and the reporter needs an accurate news story. When they accommodate each other, both realize a positive result. But, this breaks down in a crisis or when a story is going to be negative. On the other hand, a reasonable journalist understands the position the practitioner is in and works around it to the best of ability.

In the end, a PR practitioner's credibility and relationship with reporters is up to the practitioner and not to the client. The client may provide entrée and may force reporters to deal with a practitioner. But, if the level of respect between the practitioner and reporter deteriorates, the reporter will go his or her way. When there is mutual respect and credibility, the client's point of view is usually served.

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