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Dealing with Media

How to Deal with the Media

There is no such thing as bad publicity except your own obituary.¹

Brendan Behan, Irish author & dramatist (1923 - 1964)

Psssssst. Here is a key ingredient to business success. It won't cost you a dime. And, get this—it'll make you just like Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie.

Got your attention? Ok, here it is.

Free ink.

Now you're thinking, "How is this "free ink" going to make me like Brad or Angie? Something's fishy."

Hang on. We'll get to Brad and Angelina soon enough. But first, let's talk about free ink. "Free ink" is journalistic jargon for generally positive articles about your business—stories that you did not pay anyone to write. (Articles for which you pay publications to publish are called ads.)

People have a love-hate relationship with the media; businesses are no different. We love the media (newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, Internet) that inform and, let's face it, entertain. We hate the media that confuse or bore us.

So what can be done to change the extreme dynamic between you and the media?

Quite simply, think like they do.

When in Rome ...

Mega-celebrities Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie only have to flash their pearly whites to get media attention. They know any business they frequent, whether it's a



¹ <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/37239.html>

favorite neighborhood coffee shop or a high-end baby furniture store, the media will be there to cover the non-event to death.

Rather than fighting or ignoring the media like other celebrities, the famous couple embraced the media's attention by promoting what is truly important to them.

They took the media to Namibia, where they had their daughter Shiloh. They sold the coveted first baby photos to People magazine for a reported \$4 million—and gave all the money to African charities. “Knowing that someone was going to hound us for that first photo—and was going to profit immensely for doing it—I just couldn’t live with it,” Pitt says. “We were able to turn that around and collect millions for people who are really going to need it.”²

They brought similar media attention to the AIDS orphans in South Africa, the plight of children in Haiti and the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.



They learned the secret to keeping a relationship with the media healthy and happy—in order to get, you need to give.

The Give and Take

What do reporters want from you?

Simply, they want a good story.

So how can you tell your story in a way that excites the media? How can you get the attention of the frazzled reporter who is inundated with e-mails, phone calls, faxes and press releases?

First, you have to check your ego at the door. As exciting as your business, products or services are to you, you'll quickly learn that reporters, oddly enough, often do not share your enthusiasm. In fact, they reserve a special file for announcements of such nature—the trash file.

To avoid the way of the Dumpster, you need to think: How can I best help this journalist write a story? What can I offer this journalist that others can't?

² “15 People Who Make America Great,” *Newsweek*, July 10, 2006

Melba Beals, publicist and former television journalist, offers these suggestions in her book *Expose Yourself: Using the Powers of Public Relations to Promote Your Business and Yourself*:

Be aware of current topics discussed on the airwaves and in print when gaining access to the media. Take note of the kinds of people and products that dominate the specific shows on which you might appear. How does your story compare to what you see and hear? How can you connect your story to current news and provide an unusual perspective? Can you offer something totally different?³

Beals says editors and producers must be convinced that what you have to offer will not bore their audiences. That means your story must have what journalists refer to as a “story peg,” something that is already of topical interest to audiences.

For instance, Beals writes, if you are opening a restaurant you could elect to contribute a portion of your first two nights’ receipts to the homeless, to handicapped children, to the blind, or to a local Red Cross Chapter. Your donation presents an opportunity for you to write and distribute a media release that subtly notes your contribution.

Another way to hook the media is to include a “star” in the event. Now few can harness the star power of, say, a Brad or Angelina, but you may be able to get the mayor or other city officials to wait tables for a good cause. You get the good press; they get good press. And the charity gets some much-needed attention too. It’s a win-win-win situation.

Producers and editors have to filter through dozens upon dozens of story ideas every day. They deem what is a workable story by asking these questions:

- What will most interest the audience?
- What is suitable for television?
- What kinds of visual action can you provide that will demonstrate your point?
- What in the story will strike the fancy of the listeners?
- What will rivet the reader to the page?
- Is there a wonderful anecdote about the way your product is being used that will hold a reader’s or listener’s interest?



³ *Expose Yourself: Using the Powers of Public Relations to Promote Your Business and Yourself*, by Melba Beals, pg. 31

Feed the Need

Here is some good news. Folks in the media need you—especially now, with Web sites, cable shows, in addition to conventional media, clamoring for quality content. True, you will be competing for time and space. But with the right tools, you and your story can rise above the fray.

Longtime journalist Esther Schindler knows what it is like to be on the receiving end of ill-conceived story ideas. She realized the deluge of bad press releases needs to be stopped. With the help of the Internet Press Guild, a nonprofit organization promoting excellence in journalism about the Internet, she compiled a guide that explains the journalist's side of the story.

“Like it or not, we need each other. You need us to cover the products you're responsible for, whether they're your own creations or you work for a public relations firm responsible for getting coverage for your company's products. We need information from you in order to get our stories done.”⁴

Schindler and her cohorts prepared a quiz to help you determine how much (or how little) you need their guide. Here is a sampling:

- If you must use PowerPoint to get across your message, you limit it to five slides.
- You never follow up an e-mail to a reporter with a phone call asking if she received the e-mail.
- You know your reporter and what he has published—before you make the first contact.
- You get the facts fast to the right people, especially when asked directly for them.
- You put full corporate contact and product summary info in all press releases and on the Web.
- You never send unsolicited e-mail attachments, of any kind.

You Had Me at Hello

Wouldn't it be great if the press could just accept your wonderfulness without question, but, sadly, life ain't like the movies. You need to strengthen your pitch (and really, that's

⁴ “The Care and Feeding of the Press,” compiled by Esther Schindler, <http://www.netpress.org/careandfeeding.html>



Pressure

what it is, a pitch to the reporter, editor, producer) with a killer press release.

In Schindler's guide, she offers the following tips for writing press releases:

- State who you are, what you are announcing, and why we should care.
- Make your quotes count. Avoid empty quotes such as "We're going to revolutionize the field."
- Do include, in the press kit, a short written explanation about what the product (or service) is, who it's aimed at, and what features or capabilities make it worth anyone's time.
- Don't describe your innovation (or service) as great, unique, or awesome. Let the reporter decide.
- Keep the press release short. More than two pages and the reporter's eyes will start to glaze over.

Hey Now, You're a Rock Star ...

Now you've nailed the can't-miss press release and have sent it to the appropriate news contact, you wait for the call from the reporter, editor or producer who says, "We'd like to interview you for our Sunday front/radio morning show/6 p.m. newscast. Are you available?"

When that call arrives, the first word you should utter with utmost confidence is this: "Absolutely."

But don't relax just yet because this is when the hard work begins.

While you might think that you know your business/product/service inside out, you need to prepare for your moment in the spotlight.

Nancy White, founder of Full Circle Associates, which provides services that include media coaching, says a person who prepares will appear confident, in control and credible. She offers these pre-interview steps⁵:

- Define your agenda.
- Write down and practice key message points in brief statements or bullet points.

⁵ "Preparing for a Media Interview," by Nancy White, www.fullcirc.com/rlc/mediainterviewprep.htm

Preparing for a Media Interview



- Remove jargon or long explanations.
- Have back up data to support your points if appropriate. Review facts and figures so you are comfortable discussing them.
- Anticipate questions (easy, hard and terrible) and your responses.
- Get to know the media outlet—what type of publication or program is it? Who is their target audience? What other media outlet is covering the story?
- What is the interview format? Length? Live? Taped? Solo or multi-guests?
- If you are part of a group, make sure everyone has the same message!
- If you are meeting with more than one media outlet, make sure your message is consistent with each reporter.

Bottom line, don't be a show-off. Don't lecture to the reporter on how much you know. Keep in mind the goal of the interview is to communicate your key message to the public.

The Fab Five

TJ Walker, founder of Media Training Worldwide, says there are five key factors to achieving successful outcomes from media interviews—understanding and accepting the media's interviewing rules; preparing key messages; preparing quotes and sound bites; presenting professionally; and staying on message. Walker, a leading authority on media presentation, has trained top executives from Charles Schwab, Goldman Sachs and Ernst and Young, among others. He is also the author of Media Training A-Z.



The first thing to understand about the media, Walker says, is this: **YOU CAN'T CONTROL THE MEDIA.** Oh yeah, and that includes the interview process, the questions interviewers ask, the headline or story lead they write, and how you are depicted.

However, Walker writes, what you can control is this:

“... you have 100% control over your basic message and the answers you give. By entering a media interview with no more than three key messages, a handful of sound bites, and clear answers to the two or three most difficult questions, you can be successful in most every interview. While you can't control the interview, you can in the end pretty much control the message that gets out.”⁶

⁶ “Preparing Executives for Media Interviews,” by TJ Walker, www.cyberalert.com/media_interview.html

Now Play Ball!

Once you know the rules when dealing with the media, then get out there and play.

That's exactly what Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards did earlier this year. When faux-news anchor Stephen Colbert announced his presidential candidacy and his bid to claim the title of South Carolina's favorite son, Edwards' camp hit back with a cheeky press release that read in part:

"Stephen Colbert claims to represent a new kind of politics, but today we see he's participating in the slash and burn politics that has no place in American discourse. The truthiness is, as the candidate of Doritos®, Colbert's hands are stained by corporate corruption and nacho cheese. John Edwards has never taken a dime from salty food lobbyists and America deserves a President who isn't in the pocket of the snack food special interests."⁷

The press ate it up. Dozens of publications, including the New York Times, CNN.com, Hollywood Reporter and Rolling Stone, wrote about this mock mudslinging. Edwards received tons of "free ink," which showed the public his lighter side; Colbert, who is pushing a new book, also benefited from the attention. But neither candidate came away the biggest winner. That title went to Doritos,⁸ which had sponsored Colbert's short-lived run to the White House. That free publicity generated new buzz for the brand.

This Above All: To Thine Own Self Be True⁹

The press hates phonies.¹⁰ They can spot them a mile away. If you are going to stage an event or sponsor a charity, make sure you are truly invested in the event or cause. Be like Brad Pitt, who has demonstrated his commitment to his causes. His latest is building eco-friendly houses in New Orleans Lower 9th Ward, which was devastated by Hurricane Katrina.¹¹ He and film producer Stanley Bing have each pledged to



⁷ "Rhetoric vs. Reality: Stephen Colbert Plays Loose with Facts," by Tracy Russo, Oct. 29, 2007, <http://blog.johnedwards.com/story/2007/10/29/121057/41>

⁸ "Doritos still the word for Colbert," by Gail Schiller, Nov. 7, 2007, *The Hollywood Reporter*

⁹ *Hamlet* by Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene III

¹⁰ *While Stephen Colbert is a phony news anchor and presidential candidate, he stays true to his character.*

¹¹ "Brad Pitt Building Green Houses in New Orleans," *CNN.com*, Dec. 3, 2007

pitch in \$5 million to the project. He's asking others to step up to help build 150 homes by next summer. Another sign of his and Angelina's commitment? Earlier this year, they bought a home in the French Quarter of New Orleans.



So when you are caught in the headlights of the media, revel in it, stay on message and be yourself.

As Melba Beals of the book *Expose Yourself* says: "Insincerity stands out like a siren blasting at midnight."¹²

Here are a few links to a few Web sites that offer tips on dealing with the media: Here you can find the entire document *The Care and Feeding of the Press*, which is compiled by journalist Esther Schindler, with members of the Internet Press Guild.

<http://www.netpress.org/careandfeeding.html>

To receive TJ Walker's free video on speaking to the media, visit <http://www.mediatrainingworldwide.com/Walker> is the CEO of Media Training Worldwide and a leading authority on media and presentation training.

Here are some books that include tips on dealing with the media:

The Articulate Executive: Learn to Look, Act, and Sound Like a Leader by Granville N. Too Good

Expose Yourself: Using the Power of Public Relations to Promote Your Business and Yourself by Melba Beals



¹² *Expose Yourself*, Beals, pg. 31

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