

Getting them and keeping them

How to interest the media in your event

by Karen Friedman

In the eyes of a newsroom, events are a dime a dozen. Faxes and files bulge with advisories and announcements of upcoming photo-ops and interview possibilities that an event planner or public relations specialist has worked tirelessly to promote. However, most of these carefully crafted announcements simply elicit the following two words from an editor's mouth: Who cares? Sometimes editors and reporters read what's written. Most often however, someone's time and hard earned money ends up in the trash.

First and foremost, too often publicists and promoters fail to target their audiences. As Edward Segal, author of *Getting Your 15 Minutes of Fame and More* points out:

“The news you want to announce about yourself and your company may be like a new suit: one size may not fit everyone.”

TARGET YOUR AUDIENCE

That's why Segal and other media consultants including this one stress the importance of customizing your story to grab the attention of a news organization's audience.

Sometimes it's as simple as preparing a generic announcement with a customized headline. Other times, it means sending word of your event to the right news organization. For example, if Ronald McDonald is making an appearance at the local library, why would the Wall Street Journal or New York Times be interested? However, children's magazines or publications geared toward parenting might find a connection between the character's appearance and an upcoming story. By helping a publication draw a connection, you give an editor or reporter a reason to reach out to you. However, if you consistently pitch idea after idea to the wrong publication or broadcast outlet, you can easily be labeled as the person who cries wolf and damage your credibility for future opportunities.

Every day, thousands of public relations professionals, publicists and event specialists try to contact reporters and editors in an attempt to generate free publicity. As a reporter, I often told people I was not in the business to promote them and they could call back and ask for the advertising department. But every once in a while, one of those phone calls, faxes, press kits or hand delivered colorful balloons would catch my attention. Not because I appreciated the design or the free give away. That has absolutely no influence in a newsroom. If anything, delivering free beach balls to promote suntan lotion or boxes of candy to unveil new packaging make many reporters and editors think twice about covering an event. The truth is; if reporters or editors choose you over someone else, it's almost always because the information can benefit or make a difference for their particular audience.

THINK BIGGER

Reporters are also interested in the bigger picture. That means you need to ask; "What is going on in the world around me that impacts my product, service or event? For example, perhaps you are in the insurance business and have tried, but failed to interest the media in covering your national convention. Perhaps you should re-think your approach by asking; how are world events affecting the insurance industry and its customers? Obviously, the events of September 11 and the existing threat of terrorism are changing the way insurance companies do business, which ultimately affects the American public.

Another example takes me back to the coverage of Hurricane Andrew in Homestead Florida many years ago when there was barely enough time in the day to interview so many affected by the mass devastation. The networks couldn't get the pictures to you fast enough, yet dozens of local stations sent their own reporters to Florida. Why, when the networks had it covered? News outlets want local angles that the networks won't cover. Those stories like the Pennsylvania Mennonites rebuilding churches or Philadelphia area volunteers distributing food and clothes brought the story home.

By tying your event or product launch to an existing story, you increase the likelihood that your event may be included as part of a bigger story. Yet, even that is not always enough.

SATISFY THEIR NEEDS

Reporters need to make you feel what they felt, see what they saw and hear what they heard when they covered the story, so it is crucial to play to the reporter's senses. If it's television, think visual.

Former television reporter and Karen Friedman Enterprises media trainer Susanne LaFrankie advises: "Even the driest event can come alive if you remember the reporter is simply a conduit used to deliver your message to an audience."

When working as a television reporter, a hospital invited us to cover a wonderful uplifting story about a three-year-old girl who was leaving the hospital for the first time in her life. Crippled by severe birth defects, the child had not been able to eat, walk, talk or function on her own. Yet, thanks to the incredible perseverance and patience of an dedicated team of medical experts and volunteers, the little girl was finally going home. However, when we arrived, we were only permitted one picture of the girl leaving the hospital with her mother. We were denied interviews with the family, doctors and volunteers. We were also not allowed inside the rehabilitation wing where the child had lived for the past three years. If it had not been an extremely slow news day, we would never have been able to wait for hospital officials to get the clearance we needed to take pictures and do interviews. The feel good story that critics often claim the media ignores, would not have been told.

Too often, public relations professionals spend far too much time developing and promoting plans, but fail to recognize the importance of proper preparation. Time and time again, reporters are sent to cover announcements only to find the person quoted in the press release is "not available" or required release forms have not been signed. If you're planning an event that you have opened to the media who will report it to the public, it is crucial to pay attention to the details. If you are holding a press

announcement, make sure photographers have adequate space to do their job and that everyone has access to audio. Be aware of media deadlines and optimal times to stage a news announcement or event.

CELEBRITY CHALLENGE

Another popular way to attract coverage at your event is to involve a celebrity. A well-known person often provides a news organization with a hook that is more interesting than the event itself. But don't expect media coverage just because a star is on hand. Sharla Feldscher, president of Sharla Feldscher Public Relations who just launched a special events division says: "Meet and greets are dull. You need to plan an activity for the celebrity so the media will be more interested in covering your event."

For example, several years ago Miss America contestants visited a local oyster house prior to the pageant in Atlantic City New Jersey. That didn't make news. But when Feldscher's team arranged for the restaurant owner to teach contestants how to shuck oysters, the event became much more visual and attracted media attention.

Additionally, think of ways to tie the celebrity appearance to a current event. For example, Charleton Heston coming to town doesn't necessarily demand coverage. However, if the gun control issue were making news, an interview with Heston or pictures of Heston leading a protest to curb gun control laws would likely produce coverage. In order to get media attention, you have to make it easy for the media. That means meeting their needs before you can satisfy your own.

SAVVY SPOKESPEOPLE

While the media has an insatiable appetite for great visuals and sensational interviews, staging the most memorable media event of the year doesn't guarantee you lengthy coverage or better play. In reality, your event means far more to you than it does to them. While reporters are interested in the information you can provide, it is essential that spokespeople be able to deliver messages their audiences can relate to and understand.

Not too long ago, I observed a client interview regarding an event to raise money for a worthy cause. The spokesperson was articulate and knowledgeable, however she only talked about what the upcoming fundraiser meant to her agency and never focused on the benefits to the reporter's audience. Needless to say, the interview bombed and was never used. The event, which had all the elements needed for a story, received a mention on the evening news.

Ultimately, the key to attracting and sustaining attention has less to do with your actual event and more to do with what your event means to the reader, viewer or listener. Planners, publicists and public relations professionals must remember that reporters are not in the business of promoting someone else's cause or event. They are professionals who have a job to do and they are far more interested in satisfying their own needs, than yours. Don't badger them. Don't call them over and over again to see if they received your announcement, but instead, try letting them know in advance that you are sending information they might find interesting.

And finally, if they don't cover your event, don't take it personally. Perhaps another story broke or they were short-staffed that day. It happens all the time. Maybe, they just weren't interested and if that's the case, find out why, then ask how you might be able to help them in the future. But, instead of trying again to persuade them to come do a story on you, your company, client or to cover your next event, you might want to think about giving them reasons to care.

SO WHAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE:

- Think in terms of benefits and advantages. Reporters want to know what your event or product means to their audience, not to you.
- Try to illustrate your point by giving real life examples and analogies. A news release jammed with endless numbers and industry jargon usually ends up in the trash.
- When possible, talk to the publication or broadcast outlet in advance. Tell them what's coming to town and ask them what aspect might be of interest to their audience.
- Don't tell the news organization how to cover your event. Instead, guide them to points of interest and give them reasons to want to be there.
- Pay attention to what's happening in the world around you and look for ways to attach yourself to the bigger story by providing additional information or angles.
- Don't apply the same rules to all media. Think about their audiences and their needs. If you were part of their audience, ask yourself what you would care about.
- If you get them there, keep them there by providing a spokesperson who can deliver relevant messages that are short, to the point and mean something to the reader, viewer or listener.
- There is no such thing as free publicity. Ultimately, the media has the final word.

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Word Count: 1596