

BEST PRACTICES IN MEDIA RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Unlike virtually every other communications process that directly addresses stakeholders and key audiences, media relations employs an indirect approach that relies on a third-party – the media – to convey the organization’s messages and perspective to its stakeholders. While an organization hopes for impartial coverage, the media can be either favourably or unfavourably disposed. Further, there is fierce competition for the media’s attention.

These factors introduce a considerable element of unpredictability and lack of control – and, therefore, risk – of the media relations process. And yet, the media play such a pervasive role as an efficient conduit through which an organization might effectively inform and engage with its stakeholders that the risk of engaging is far outweighed by the benefits to be derived from doing so properly. Even if this weren’t the case, at any time an organization might find itself in the media’s eye as a consequence of events not of its making, suggesting that some sort of responsive mechanism is required.

This guide outlines best practices approaches to media relations provide a process framework whereby an organization may proactively pursue media attention in support of its strategic organizational and communications objectives, and develop an effective mechanism to respond appropriately to unsolicited media attention.

PRINCIPLES

The following principles will help shape an organization’s approach to managing its media relations.

Be scrupulously honest. While this does not mean that an organization has to answer every question or reveal confidential or sensitive information, it most certainly does mean that everything conveyed to a journalist must be the truth. It’s okay to say you don’t know something or that you won’t provide that answer but it is not okay to prevaricate or fabricate.

Develop and enforce a clear policy on who speaks for the organization. In general, the media wants to speak either to the person who binds the corporation or to a subject-matter expert. In the first instance, this usually means the CEO. It is an acceptable practice, however, to offer a secondary spokesperson to comment on minor issues or on controversial issues from which it is sensible to shield the CEO. If there is a better subject-matter person than the CEO on a particular issue, that person should be offered as a spokesperson. A bilingual spokesperson will also be a necessary part of this policy if the CEO is not fluently bilingual. It should be well understood that no-one else speaks for the organization. All spokespersons should be properly trained, properly briefed and provided with the opportunity to properly prepare for every media interaction.

The organization does not control the process but it is essential to it; use this to the organization’s advantage. Although an organization has no control over what the journalist writes or to whom she turns for additional – possibly even opposing – perspectives, the organization is an essential part of the news-gathering process and can use this to command some level of control. At a minimum, an organization is not obliged to answer any reporter’s inquiry, and most certainly not obliged to answer it without preparation. These guidelines outline how to properly prepare for every media interaction.



Communicate as thoroughly when the news is bad as you do when the news is good. Nothing will erode effective working relationships with target journalists quite so swiftly as disappearing from sight when they want to contact you on a controversial or unfavourable issue. Nothing will cement your relationship quite as surely as being equally available and open no matter whether the news is good or bad. And, as noted above, the story will be written anyway.

Speak to the public interest, not just the company's. The best opportunity to engage in any conversation lies at the intersection of interest between the participants in that conversation. If you speak just about the organization's interests, you will not engage either the journalist or his audience. If you illustrate how the public interest is at stake in a particular issue, you have built that intersection where effective communications can take place.

Use plain language. A spokesperson may have to talk about complicated subjects or use technical terms. In all cases, translate this into plain language, or use metaphors, analogies or word pictures to explain the situation in a manner that most people will understand. Good reporters, especially those in print who can add explanatory content, will help do this but don't rely on this. Also, avoid superlatives and absolutes unless they actually and truthfully apply and provide objective and factual details in your media materials, reserving opinions and judgements for attributed quotes.

BEST PRACTICES

#1: Media relations is a strategic process requiring thorough planning.

If a media relations program is a contributing element of an effective communications strategy, then it too, must be a researched and planned strategic process. It must have its own set of measurable objectives against which its success over time might be evaluated. It must describe the specific media outlets to be targeted and provide a rationale for each. A set of key messages that will come into play during any media encounter must be developed. And, finally, a collection of specific tactics must be identified, planned and budgeted, complete with feedback and evaluation mechanisms.

#2: Media relations is an ongoing and continuous process.

Organizations rarely see the results they are seeking when they engage with journalists on a haphazard basis, or when their media relations activities are limited to the episodic handling of unsolicited inbound inquiries. An effective media relations process begins with an exercise whereby all relevant journalists are provided with thorough information about the organization, are surveyed for their interest in the organization and for their specific information requirements. On an ongoing basis thereafter, that interest is cultivated and coverage is harvested through the proactive promotion of specific news items of interest to the media using a complete set of media relations tools and tactics, while inbound enquiries are routinely generated when the media needs an expert perspective.

#3: Recognize that journalists are almost certainly not well informed about the company or the organization's issues.

This is both an opportunity and a potential pitfall. The opportunity lies in the organizations ability to thoroughly and accurately educate the journalist on the subject matter on which the company is an expert and to whom she has turned for just such a purpose. This allows the organization to frame the discussion, communicate key messages and contribute to higher-level objectives such as awareness



building and thought leadership. The pitfall lies in the organization doing an incomplete job or assuming a level of knowledge that isn't there. Both opportunity and pitfall can be better managed through proper preparation and the development of written background material.

#4: Journalists are under unique pressures that need to be respected in order to foster positive media relations.

Journalists work under immutable deadlines that often leave less time than even they would like to develop a proper understanding of the story. Additionally, the media marketplace is an extremely competitive one that peddles one of the most perishable products imaginable. The organization can vastly improve its interactions with journalists and so to the outcomes of its media relations activities if utmost respect is given to the limitations and pressures under which they operate. Work within their deadlines. Acknowledge initiative by giving the first reporter who calls or who is best prepared on a subject first crack at the organization's perspective, but otherwise avoid playing favorites. Release information in a timely fashion and distribute to every journalist who will have an interest in it.

#5: Always respond. Even if the organization refuses to participate, the story will be written.

There is rarely a compelling reason for flat-out refusing to answer a journalist's questions. Rightly or wrongly, the media are seen to have the public interest at heart, and organizations that avoid media scrutiny are usually seen as having something to hide. Saying, "No comment," or being deliberately unreachable carries highly prejudicial implications whereas saying, "I can't talk about that because privacy laws prohibit me from commenting about specific individuals," conveys a reasonable explanation for the organization's silence.

#6: Monitor and measure.

The impact of a media relations program and the contribution it makes to the furthering of organizational objectives can and must be measured. Measurement best practices go well beyond counting column inches or broadcast minutes and never fall into the misleading and strategically meaningless trap of calculating advertising equivalencies. Rigorous and systematic content analysis of media coverage should be carried out as part of a Quarterly Media and Public Environment Scan Report for staff, senior management and board of directors.

For more information on how these best practices can be leveraged to meet your organization's communications objectives, please contact Ingenium Communications at info@ingeniumcommunications.com or 613.729.1721.

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