

Tough Publicity: Finding a Story When There Isn't One

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It was a typical press release for this client – turgid, filled with jargon and boring. The client thought the release was OK: The PR practitioner knew better. No reporter even in a trade magazine would find this release newsworthy. The client wanted publicity, however, because it was an “exciting new service.” The question was how to get “ink” without using the release, or in spite of it.

This conundrum faces PR practitioners regularly, and there is no easy solution. There are two general directions, however, one can take to generate awareness. The first is to concentrate on something tangential to the topic – that is, to sidestep it. The second is to dig deeply into the topic to see if ideas might be lurking within. The second approach is usually better but it is not always feasible: PR practitioners need to be adept in both sidestepping and digging deeply. It's a basic of the business.

Sidestepping

What if you got a job promoting open-end flat wrenches that mechanics use to fix cars? What could you do with such a boring product? There is nothing to say about open-end flat wrenches that wasn't known 80 years ago. While this task seems far-fetched, many publicity assignments are similarly stultifying.

There is a chance mechanics might prefer a specific brand of open-end flat wrench, but it isn't likely unless the wrench bears a name like Sears or Snap-on. The toolmaker's problem is that open-end flat wrenches are commodity items made all over the earth and packaged in sets to be sold in large stores. Some toolmakers don't even bother to brand wrenches. They concentrate on selling to store buyers concerned with price and delivery.

So what could you do to promote open-end flat wrenches?

Toolmakers learned long ago to sidestep the topic. They don't say much about flat wrenches: They pair the tool with something of interest to mechanics. One item is a pinup calendar. Wrenches are boring, but a pretty girl holding a wrench isn't. Other companies associate themselves with places where wrenches are used, such as NASCAR racing. This is a better solution than pinup calendars because you can't have an auto race without tool chests filled with wrenches. The same idea might work in smaller, less costly venues like Sports Car Club of America racing where amateurs try their hands or with auto clubs, such as Porsche Club of America.

But what if the toolmaker wants publicity, perhaps a photo and story in local papers that mention the brand name?

One could sponsor a mechanics' contest, "The best mechanic in X," with a prize for the mechanic who can tear down and reassemble an engine in record time. The same kind of contest could be done for youngsters in high school and technical schools studying to be mechanics. Around such contests could be a series of wacky audience participation games such as wrench horseshoes in which contestants compete by tossing wrenches or strength tests in which contestants use a wrench to try and remove a nut stuck to a bolt.

There are indirect ways to promote boring wrenches, and indirect promotion is often best.

I recall a well-known seller of lawn and garden fertilizer that pasted dollar bills to the floor around its booth at a national hardware show. When I asked why the company did that, I was told that it attracted buyers' attention. Lawn fertilizer is not a scintillating topic. But this was not all the firm did. It conducted frequent promotions at garden clubs, especially with competitive "green thumbs" who are forever trying to grow the largest tomato or largest pumpkin and need fertilizer to do it. The garden club promotions were especially effective for the firm.

Sidestepping works well for difficult products, services and issues. You don't need lengthy explanations that few care about. You don't have to stretch to make a topic fresh. Just as importantly, you can divert audiences from controversial or unpleasant issues. Sometimes matters are too sensitive to present directly. Before-

and-after pictures of cosmetic surgery rarely show the middle when the post-surgical site is swollen and bruised. Phillip Morris dodged the issue of cancer and cigarettes for years by contributing heavily to arts programs. Abattoirs rarely give tours because one might think twice about eating meat after watching animals get butchered.

Sidestepping needs a connection to a topic that presents a topic in a positive light. In the best cases, the connection is strong and direct. In other cases, the connection is tenuous and requires communicators to work overtime. Placing a pretty woman next to a car in an auto show is a cliché. Placing a female race car driver next to the auto she drives connects to the product. Having the race car driver call spectators out of the crowd to help demonstrate a car's features and functions makes a direct connection between the audience and product.

A pinup calendar attracts attention because sexy pictures of the opposite sex do that. A pinup calendar from the New York City Fire Department of muscular firemen on the force is something women buy eagerly while it promotes the fitness required for the job. That is part of the reason why similar calendars of United Parcel Service drivers have been done.

One of the first techniques that PR practitioners learn is to sidestep topics, and it is a tool they use until they leave the business.

Deepening

Deepening a topic can be better than sidestepping because it focuses atten-

tion on the product, service or idea and shows its relevance. Demonstrating relevance raises the profile of the product, service or idea and creates a bond between the audience and the object.

Relevance always starts with an audience. Work backward from end users when searching for ideas for a complex topic, product or service. Story ideas appear when you connect a topic to one's pocketbook, health, children or other basic needs, even though an end-user may never see a component or need to know about a service or issue.

For example, few people like to talk about sanitation and toilets. But what if one is assigned to tell a story about them? One innovative plumbing fixture firm, Kohler Co., pioneered a way to accomplish this. It almost side-stepped the issue, but in fact it didn't. It deepened the topic by designing and building toilets as elegant designs and home fashion. Through its Arts/industry program, the company discovered that sanitation fixtures did not need to be conventional and white and that consumers would pay for innovation. While not getting into the gross details of sanitation, Kohler was nonetheless able to get people to look at toilets in a new way, and this approach changed the company's positioning. Advertisement's for Kohler's plumbing products today present them as art.

But what if you had to get into the "dirty details" of sanitation?

Another way to approach the topic is to research diseases that do not exist in advanced societies but continue to burden developing countries. One can point to toilets as major contributors to health and not just convenience. A further part of the story might be the tendency of "well educated " people to forget the role of sanitation in preventing disease, especially when it is time to wash one's hands. This story line reminds the audience that sanitation is an essential component of the quality of life.

Another example is auto components. Mufflers and shock absorbers are items that most people won't read about. They're boring. But what if one has to send a message about them? One can research the decibel level of a typical auto with and without a muffler then estimate the sound level of thousands of unmuffled autos on a city street or freeway. Deterioration in quality of life would be significant. The noise could contribute to a loss of hearing.

A shock absorber counteracts the roughness of a road service and allows a driver to maintain control that would otherwise be lost. One could set up a side-by-side slalom course on a rough surface for a car with good shocks and another with bad shocks, then invite drivers to try the vehicles. The difference is remarkable and instructive and deepens understanding of shock absorbers through providing direct experience with them.

Research

To connect the dots between a product, service or idea and an individual,

one must find convincing and interesting facts that lead the reader to the point. This requires research and persistence to stay with a topic until you find answers. With the Internet, one can find enormous amounts of information that was not available in the past outside of a major library.

Skilled secondary research requires search engines like Google or Alltheweb, careful analysis of portal sites, identification of relevant associations and surfacing of research papers, past news articles and other relevant information. Depending on the topic one may have to limit the amount of information collected or extend a search beyond normal parameters.

Library research is hard work. One pursues threads through sources until an answer reveals itself. But, the pursuit gives one time to internalize a topic and to understand how to communicate it. If there is one capability that PR practitioners should have, it is the skill to translate complexity into simple ideas that ordinary individuals grasp.

Unfortunately secondary research is not enough. Secondary information can be out of date and inaccurate: It can mislead as much as educate about a topic. What it does do, however, is help one to learn enough to talk to experts. Experts fill in gaps and confirm, revise or expand on what one has learned. PR practitioners frequently err by going to experts first and failing to understand what they are told. This annoys the experts and slows learning. On the other hand, when one demonstrates knowledge of

a topic, experts are often enthusiastic and impart information they would not ordinarily discuss.

PR practitioners sometimes err as well by moving too quickly to do surveys. It is better to spend time learning a topic than surveying people about it. Surveys should come last. By jumping to a survey before doing homework, one most often rediscovers facts rather than adding to knowledge or coming up with a new view of facts. The outcome is a survey without punch or relevance.

Think

Once you have facts, discuss their meaning and story value. First, state the facts in a logical outline that connects the audience to the topic. Writing the outline can be the hardest part of publicity, especially the task of making it clear and logical. Then take the time to reflect, debate and brainstorm.

One frequent failure among PR practitioners is to brainstorm when participants have little idea about a product, service or issue. As a result, they contribute largely useless insights into what to do about communications. Brainstorming without logically ordered facts is useless if one is trying to deepen a topic. (However, it is useful if one is sidestepping a topic.) The notion that facts get into the way of creativity is wrong. In well-run brainstorming, factual parameters and issues should be clearly and sharply defined. In that way, new ideas, connections, analogies and metaphors have a better chance of usefulness.

Finding a story

Most PR practitioners spend careers working on products, services and ideas that are difficult to explain to target audiences. Any notion that one should only accept assignments that are readily explainable is not real. PR practitioners learn early on that creativity is stretched with difficult assignments and withers with easy ones.

Anyone can generate story ideas for high-profile and desirable people, products, services and ideas. In fact, the stories come on their own, and it is a matter of controlling the flow. PR practitioners earn their pay publicizing hedge funds, chemical compounds and commodity groceries. The hard part of the business is where they learn to be creative developers and good researchers.

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