

Salesmanship in PR

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If there is one question that irritates PR practitioners, it is, “Who are your contacts in the media?” It is fruitless to say contacts aren’t as important as a story. Clients assume they have a good story: It is a matter of a PR practitioner calling press contacts and telling them to publish it. Would that were true. At the national and international media level, at least, the strength of one’s media contacts makes little difference, if a story is weak. National and international media are buried under story ideas and calls from publicists beseeching them to pay attention.

Still, contacts count in media relations. It is easier to have a reporter, editor or producer consider a story idea when he or she knows and respects a practitioner. The question arises then of the kind of salesmanship a practitioner needs to gain credibility with national and international media. The question is dangerous because many reporters, editors and producers don’t like to be sold or to be thought of as relying on PR practitioners. As a result, no rules of thumb guarantee entrée into *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *Washington Post*, *BusinessWeek*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *Financial Times*, *CNBC* and other national and international media. Here, however, are observations of what salesmanship entails. Most of them are obvious, but it is disappointing how often practitioners ignore the basics. There are reasons for that. Training is one, but bad management is at the heart of failure. Practitioners never received proper guidance in the first place nor were held to a high standard of service.

Salesmanship and the media

Salesmanship at the national and international levels demands that PR practitioners work with media individually. Reporters, editors and producers are not a face-less audience to be bombarded with releases and story ideas but individuals with likes, dislikes and interests who view journalism as a calling or business, or both. There are sources that track media and their backgrounds. There is little excuse for failing to know something about them before approaching them.

Salesmanship also requires an understanding of media processes. The media manufacture content. They produce more or less accurate stories and analyses regularly for readers and viewers that will not only inform them but keep them coming back. National and international media choose content from stacks of releases, hundreds of e-mails, dozens of in-bound phone calls and their own resources. The challenge for reporters, producers and editors is to determine stories that best inform news consumers. A PR story idea is one of a thousand options that the media consider daily. From a statistical perspective, a practitioner should expect a low percentage of wins – lower than a poor hitter’s

batting average. Therefore, persistence is an essential part of salesmanship. The practitioner doesn't give up easily and is always looking for new doors to enter. This in itself is a barrier for many practitioners. It is deflating to get turned down so often, and it is hard to explain the reasons why to clients. If there is a truism about how PR practitioners work with media, it is that clients never understand the process. All they want are results.

Time

Salesmanship understands that the media's time is valuable, and a PR practitioner never wastes it. In an era with fewer national-level media and continued downsizing, the media have even less time. And, with demands that reporters, editors and producers supply copy and video not only to print and electronic media but also to blogs and web pages, their work hours are stressed. This means that the PR practitioner:

- **Knows the media's beats.** There is good reason for reporters' rages against publicists for stupid phone calls, imbecilic releases and spam e-mail. There was never justification in PR for spamming story ideas: Failing to do so now is heinous. It is a measure of how poorly PR has matured that national and international media continue to complain about clueless publicists. It would be an extraordinary day if the media could say that most PR material they receive is relevant.
- **Responds to media queries.** One of the largest wastes of media time are phone calls and e-mails that go unanswered. It is not that a journalist gets a "no comment." It is that the reporter gets no response. It is basic salesmanship to respond swiftly to media inquiries, especially if the answer is no. That gives the media time to find other contacts and still get a story in on deadline.
- **Is accurate.** It is a waste of the media's time to provide them with inaccurate information. It is a hit to one's credibility to have done so. Check and recheck information before it is sent. Errors creep in, but they should be an exception and not a rule. PR practitioners learn that some clients are careful about accuracy and others aren't. They take extra care with those who are careless with facts.
- **Works quickly.** Knowing that the media work on deadline means one works to the media's speed. The PR practitioner should adopt the same race against time in which the media engage. Salesmanship means setting up interviews promptly, getting information to the media swiftly, answering follow-up calls immediately.

Getting to know you

Respect for the medias' time is not enough to build credibility. One can be respectful and anonymous, handling reporters correctly but forgotten once a story is filed. Salesmanship requires going farther.

Salesmanship means staying on the job long enough for key media to get to know one. Once a reporter, editor or producer has talked to a PR practitioner several times, the practitioner's name gets added to contact lists and more importantly, short-term memory. Corporate PR practitioners who stay in their positions for a number of years have an advantage. On the other hand, if there is a need to take a story beyond reporters whom a corporate practitioner knows, it is easier for the agency practitioner. This is because agency practitioners often work with the same national and international media repeatedly on behalf of different clients. While corporate practitioners know the media in their industry in depth, agency practitioners know the media horizontally.

Face-to-face familiarity counts as well. There is something about taking the media to lunch. A reporter, editor or producer has a chance to size up the PR practitioner and vice versa. Unfortunately, at the national and international level, it is harder than ever to have a meal with the media. They don't have time to take two hours out of their day. Salesmanship finds other ways to get to know individuals, such as attending meetings or events where the media are present.

Maintain contact. It is one thing to know the media and another to maintain an open channel. If one waits for the media to call, chances are they won't, if there is no news in the offing. One must reach out to the media regularly without harassing them. This might be in the form of sending them information they can use for background, arranging update briefings for them with company executives, occasionally checking in to see what they are working on and maintaining a blog just for the media.

The story idea

PR salesmanship judges the newsworthiness of a story idea before submitting it to the media. This requires the practitioner to think like the media and to select story ideas that are likely to pass media scrutiny. This is why successful PR practitioners are often former members of the media who know how to judge news value. It is also why many practitioners without media experience never understand why their efforts are rebuffed. They think like promoters and marketers.

A poor story idea wastes a reporter's time. Therefore, salesmanship requires approaching a reporter with a strong idea. This means a PR practitioner treats every media approach like a one-call situation. The salesman with one call works hard to make the call successful long before contacting the prospect.

Preparation begins with constant research and intelligence – who is interested in what. What has the reporter written in the last six months? What are the current

stories about the industry, issue or individuals one represents and where are the media going with them? What is likely to be the next series of stories the media will report and how does one get just ahead of the media? PR practitioners should never stop thinking about how to position messages within the context of news flow.

Use a pyramid style. Write a short but compelling lead that summarizes a story idea. Capture the reporter's interest, then add data to back up the opening statement. There is little need for cute leads, fabulous adjectives and piles of adverbs. Reporters have seen most of the cute leads one could create, and they are conditioned to disbelieve adjectives and adverbs. What they need is information that helps them determine whether a story idea is newsworthy or not. Salesmanship provides information quickly, so a reporter can make a fast determination. Reporters have no time to tolerate loose or bad writing. They have no time to go searching for data to back assertions either. Prove story ideas while pitching them. Salesmanship provides evidence that the story idea is real and newsworthy. Do the reporter's work for the reporter. The reporter will still need to research the story independently, but the facts a PR practitioner provides are a base from which to start, and they make a story idea credible.

Media resource

Salesmanship requires consistent procurement of information, timeliness and accuracy to create an advantageous situation for both the reporter and for a message. Serving as a media resource means helping a reporter even when one can't get a message out. For example, if you are not the best source for a reporter, who is? Recommend whom to call. Perform quick research for the media to get data they need. Brief them regularly to keep them up to speed. Don't expect a story with every contact. Build relationships that produce consistent and accurate stories over time. This means that salesmanship knows when to back off. There is a time to take "no" for an answer. If a reporter, editor or producer doesn't like an idea, reformulate it. Or, demonstrate that there is marketplace interest in it. Send along clips of stories on similar topics and show how they connect to your story. If the media still show no interest, abandon the idea and find another one.

Salesmanship also knows when to avoid a member of the media. There are media who resist story ideas from outsiders, and they dislike PR practitioners. Respect their feelings. In the end, they are hurting their own productivity and missing good ideas that could come their way. Most members of the media accept the service PR practitioners provide. It is not worth getting upset by those who don't.

Dos and don'ts

There are many heuristics to salesmanship in PR. For example, national and international media want to talk to the CEO, not the CFO nor VP of marketing nor other senior executive. Salesmanship requires getting the CEO's commitment to

be the prime spokesperson. However, it is difficult to distill all rules into one article. Even if one could, the result would be a list of “do’s and don’ts” that are hard to implement. It is one thing to tell a person how to play a piano. It is another to play the piano yourself. PR salesmanship is learned on the job and through mistakes and victories. It doesn’t come from books or essays like this.

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