

Media savvy: Meeting the test for “newsworthiness”

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As much as we’d like to control the media and determine which issues will make headlines from day to day, that authority and “gatekeeping” role rests solely in the hands of newspaper editors and broadcast news directors.

Unfortunately, as media outlets struggle to remain viable in a new era of ever-increasing information sources, the definition of “newsworthiness” becomes more narrow and specific and can vary markedly from newspaper to magazine to broadcast station. Issues that contain a controversial or sensational element may make the grade even though they don’t meet the criteria in other ways.

Media people gauge their decisions about which issues warrant coverage on their particular audience’s interests, geography and perhaps political makeup.

Five key measures of newsworthiness:

- Size of population/Number of people impacted by the issue
- Current or potential impact on the economy or jobs
- Controversial or polarizing element
- Sensational aspect
- Local impact on a community

An issue that gets a lot of play in an urban news market, for example, may matter little in a rural community and vice versa. Media gatekeepers also consider the scope of an issue, how many people it potentially impacts and the long-term effect it may have on a population or community. A television station may cover an issue because it has visual appeal, while a newspaper ignores it completely.

In other words, the fact that we believe, as advocates for our own organizations and clients, that our key issues should be a top media issue deserving of major media coverage will not necessarily guarantee the issue receives attention. To convince the media that a particular issue is worthy of their time, we need to make a convincing case that it impacts the broad population, the economy, jobs, the environment, etc. It is truly an issue in “the public’s interest.”

News release writing tips

Once you’ve determined that you do have an issue or event that truly warrants public attention, you need to let the media gatekeepers know. Getting an editor’s attention requires some understanding of media operations and an ability to speak their language.

1. Understand your audience. It’s the editor, *not* the public. Your ultimate intended audience may be some segment of the public, but if the release doesn’t pass muster with the editor, it goes into the recycling bin rather than the next edition of the paper.

2. Begin the release with a compelling “lead” that grabs the editor’s attention. The relevance of the topic to the editor’s viewers or readers should be immediately apparent. Most editors won’t read past a poor lead. If you don’t hook them there, you’re done.

3. Include the relevant five Ws -- Who, What, When, Where, Why and sometimes, How) Information should be written in descending order of importance, ending with the least important items.

4. Write tight sentences with active verbs and no unnecessary words. Get rid of redundancies. Avoid superfluous, stilted language or industry jargon. Translate into plain English language.

5. Proofread for spelling and grammatical errors. If you don’t have a solid grasp of grammar, hire a professional. Why risk making your organization look sloppy, or worse, uneducated ?

6. Follow AP Style rules and guidelines. Newspapers, magazines and other professional publications adhere to a journalistic standard, usually the Associated Press or AP Style. When you disregard it, you make work for the editor and decrease the chance of getting your release into print. You can access a stylebook on line or purchase one in any bookstore.

7. Double space for easy editing. Use normal indents and consistent spacing between paragraphs. Double check names, spellings, numbers and dates.

Tradeoffs between PR and paid advertising

All that said, maybe it would be easier to just take out some ads! Advertising’s advantage -- whether in newspapers, on television and radio, on web pages or in outdoor formats such as billboards and bus cards – is the ability to control the message and timing and target specific audiences to sell a product or service. Because of the expense, however, care must be taken to be sure dollars are not wasted on a particular advertising medium that will not reach the desired audience.

Alternately, when an organization’s message appears in recognized media outlets, it tends to carry more credibility than in purchased ads. The public knows the difference and will more easily dismiss the claims in advertising than they will in a news article or TV report. Public relations activities are generally not used to influence direct sales of a product or service; however, PR activities may improve the public’s understanding of a company, which could indirectly impact its sales. The term “PR” is sometimes used interchangeably with “publicity,” because PR practitioners often work through the news media to carry a message to specific audiences. Public relations is more accurately about developing and maintaining relationships with key publics, using publicity as one communication tool among many.

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