

# **ANY COMPANY CAN USE THE BASIC TOOLS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS**

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## **A Designated In-House Contact Is the Key To Good Local Press Relations**

Any size firm can use some of the basic tools of public relations to seek out new customers or clients and help build its business, just as an international manufacturer uses these tools to reach new customers and increase sales of its products.

You may want to get outside professional help for such things as newsletters, sophisticated capability brochures, slide or video presentations, and placement of feature articles reporting on your firm's activities. However, there is no reason why your firm can't handle basic local press relations in-house.

The key to success with local press relations is a designated in-house press contact. This person can be anyone from the president to the president's secretary.

The fact is that good press relations is really simple and costs very little. It's a matter of:

### **Seven Basic Points**

1. Understand the legitimate purpose and process of local journalism. They've got a job to do, and want to do it well.
2. Take a few organizational steps now to be sure that the press is handled properly when they do contact your firm.
3. Know how to handle routine press inquiries.
4. Get acquainted with a few key local reporters.
5. Recognize the opportunities for gaining positive local news coverage and initiating publicity.

6. Accept the inevitability of unfortunate events that make bad news and organize to handle the press at such times.

7. Recognize the sensitive local issues that may be beneath the surface of a routine event or reporter's inquiry, and respond accordingly.

Let's look at these points one at a time.

### **1. The Reporter's Job**

Remember, the reporter's primary objective is to get the facts for a news story and get it in the paper or on the air at the earliest possible time and before it appears in competing media. A reporter is always working against deadlines, and therefore, speed in obtaining information is essential.

Reporters prefer to get facts from an authoritative source, unless that source is closed to them. To refuse to talk to a reporter, to deny or refuse to disclose unpleasant facts, merely causes the reporter to turn to another, and perhaps less reliable source.

### **2. Organizing For Better Press Relations**

First, designate one or two specific persons as your firm's in-house press contact to provide information to the press, and instruct the designated individuals. It's important to have a backup spokesman or spokeswoman so that someone is certain to be available. Equally important, instruct everyone else to refer all press inquiries to the designated press contact. If you haven't done this already, do it now.

Your in-house press contact can easily answer local press inquiries regarding many of your firm's activities. Such activities might include appointments as well as promotions, awards, honors, and employees' unusual outside activities or other community involvement.

In any event, your in-house press contact should feel free to provide the caller with previously published material -- which is an excellent source of information.

### **3. Handling Routine Press Inquiries**

Following is a step-by-step guide for your in-house press contact in handling a direct call from the media:

a. Be courteous. Find out exactly what the caller wants. Instead of answering questions prematurely, ask a few of your own.

b. Get the caller's name and phone number, the organization represented, and, if possible, some idea of job responsibility. For example, are you talking to the editor or to a political columnist? Learn something about the nature of the caller's assignment.

c. Find out how soon the material is needed; the comfortable deadline and the absolute deadline.

d. Without supplying any information and without making a commitment to supply it, explain politely that you need to do some checking. You can make a commitment that a

qualified spokesperson will get back to the caller as soon as possible. Getting off the phone gives you the time to check facts, clarify positions and formulate a reply.

e. Before returning the call, ask yourself whether or not releasing the information, and to what degree, will be in the best interests of your firm. Also keep in mind whether or not the reporter, by really digging, can come up with an answer somewhere else -- an answer that may not be accurate and may be even more damaging to your firm.

f. Return the telephone call -- within the required time deadline -- and have an answer ready. If you cannot supply total answers to the initial inquiry, be sure to give your reasons why you cannot, and provide as much information as you can give.

g. If your firm represents clients (if you're a law firm, for instance), feel free to give the reporter the names and telephone numbers of your client's public relations personnel.

#### **4. Getting Acquainted With The Press**

Don't wait for an editor to call or something to happen. Take the first step yourself. Have lunch with the editor of each local paper once or twice a year. Same with the news director or assignment editor of local TV or radio stations. Don't overlook the electronic media. Most such reporters welcome the opportunity. And it's better to establish such acquaintances before something happens. If it's just to get acquainted, be sure you make that clear so the reporter doesn't meet you expecting a story when there is none.

#### **5. Recognizing News Opportunities**

If you do have something new, so much the better. New clients with unusual problems. Major additions to your firm. Seminars you plan to run. Employee or client awards. A new electronic office system or modern equipment that makes your firm more efficient. Promotions. Any of these could be of interest to the local press, and could give you something to talk about.

If you're not sure whether some event qualifies as local news, simply call the editor and let him decide. Editors welcome such calls, except when they are under pressure to meet deadlines.

The simplest way to get the word out when you're sure there's news is with a basic news release giving all pertinent facts.

News releases can be deceptively simple, but all stories, no matter how simple, have a basic structure and content that is acceptable to editors. This doesn't mean that an editor will automatically use a story that's properly written. But it will increase your chances of winning press coverage or air time.

Almost all news stories answer the basic questions who, what, where, when, why and sometimes how. Also, good news stories carefully avoid commercialism, which usually is the quickest way to kill an editor's interest.

Format of a news release generally calls for your company name, the in-house press contact's name and phone number, the phrase "For Immediate Release" and a headline. Body of the release is always double-spaced.

Think too about things that might make good news photos. Newspapers need photos to decorate their pages. Often a good photo can get coverage for a story that is marginally newsworthy. Remember, the news photographer will always want to feature people and events.

Even when there's no news, why not invite a local reporter or two to some of your firm or client functions as a social gesture. They may not accept, but it pays to include them in your plans. It's a low-cost way to reinforce positive relationships.

## **6. Handling Bad News And Emergencies**

Emergencies occurring on your firm's or your client's property -- serious accidents, fires, explosions, work stoppages, etc. -- are of immediate and legitimate interest to the community. To forestall distorted, inaccurate reports and minimize possible unfavorable repercussions of such events, accurate information should be supplied promptly and courteously to the community through the news media and public officials.

Crisis management could be the subject of a separate article. In essence, however, the things to remember are: get organized, develop a plan and be ready beforehand to handle emergencies.

## **7. Recognize the Sensitive Issues**

Remember that there are a number of sensitive issues -- discrimination, safety, air quality, politics, job security and specific current local issues -- that are controversial and, in the reporter's mind, make good copy. One of these issues may be beneath the surface of a reporter's routine inquiry, so be alert to these issues. You should be prepared to respond to such questions in a manner that will reflect favorably on your firm. A good way to do this is to write a background paper as a guide.

### **A CHECKLIST FOR DEALING WITH THE PRESS**

Following is a checklist to help your in-house press contact communicate effectively with members of the press:

- Remember, the editor's first obligation is to his reader.
- Reply to inquiries promptly and as thoroughly as possible.
- Play it straight. Be honest and truthful. Know the media.
- Respect a reporter's exclusive article and don't discuss it with competing media.
- Treat competing media equally in distributing general news releases and developing feature article ideas.
- Photographers can always use help in lining up subjects, but don't interfere.
- Don't question why material isn't used (you can always ask how to improve your offerings). Never ask a reporter to kill a story. Never beg an editor to run a story.

### **Concluding Tip**

Plan on having a professionally prepared background press kit available to hand out to

any member of the press who wants information on your company. The kit can contain news releases and fact sheets describing your firm, its history, mission and products. You can also include biographies and photos of key people as well as literature on your products or services -- all of which can be updated as needed.

Ray Schumack is president of RS&A Public Relations. He has more than 30 years experience as a Newspaper Journalist, Magazine Editor, Public Relations Specialist and Director of Corporate Communications for a Fortune 500 company. His news stories and feature articles have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and other major daily newspapers, as well as national consumer and business magazines. He served as an adjunct professor at Long Island University, establishing and teaching a course in public relations. He also has been a guest lecturer on business news reporting at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

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