

Romancing the Press

Public Relations as a Thrifty – and Often Effective – Marketing Tactic

By *CHRISTINE PILCH*

Public Relations (PR) is a means by which companies gain media exposure on a complimentary basis. Some people think that sending out a press release is enough of an incentive for a newspaper to write a story or a TV crew to show up at your door, but it is much more complex than that.

PR requires consistent relationship building and lots of romance. Yes, that's an odd word to find in an article about PR, but good PR and romance have a lot in common.

As in a romantic relationship, good media relations, which leads to your coveted free press, goes through phases — introduction, acquaintance, courtship, and marriage. Each relies heavily on reliability, dependability, and trust. Media people must know that you are the most reliable source for information about your product or service in order for them to put you at the top of their call list when something relevant breaks, or even to have them read your press release when it is received. They must have confidence that you won't waste their time with useless or irrelevant information.

The introduction and acquaintance phases of public relations are the foundation from which you either move forward or get deleted from the media person's contact list. Ideally, you should find an opportunity to meet personally with a member of the press, introduce yourself, and have a really captivating angle that you can work into that initial conversation.

There has to be a certain degree of chemistry that will allow the conversation to continue or the media person will look for a quick out. Your appear-

ance and eloquence are nearly as important as your message, so be mindful of them. Remember that media people need a steady stream of fresh content. They are always on the lookout for anything that would interest their readers, listeners, and viewers, so if you can deliver something new and interesting, you are an asset to them.

The courtship phase of devel-

The courtship phase of developing your media ties consists of solidifying yourself as an expert while respecting the demands of a busy media person.

oping your media ties consists of solidifying yourself as an expert while respecting the demands of a busy media person. This is your relationship-building phase, when you will be tested and rejected if you fall short. You must at all times:

- Return calls promptly;
- Be accommodating to their schedules;
- Answer questions honestly and directly;
- Avoid "off the record:" and
- Position yourself as a future resource

Remember that members of the press usually work on tight deadlines. Returning a phone call the next day or even several hours later often results in pushing your media contact to call a competitor, and thus, another company receiving your PR. Do this a couple times, and you'll likely be off the media call list, and pushed to 'ex' status.

Think about the timing of pulling together an edition of a daily newspaper or an evening news broadcast. Field reporters must get their interviews and return to put together their story in time for deadline. This is stressful and requires discipline. Reporters must be certain that their sources are reliable enough to make an interview their priority. It's a bit odd to consider that

this may mean putting off a customer or client, but this is essentially what must happen if you are called on as an expert in your field.

You must thoroughly know your topic and be comfortable offering commentary and opinion when interviewed. There is little more frustrating to an interviewer than a source who double talks and refuses to answer questions. Tap-dancing around answers is the kiss of death if you are trying to position yourself as a media resource.

Also, preserving your relationship is nearly impossible if you offer, 'off the record' information. Reporters need information they can utilize, and off-the-record material is frustrating, disrespectful, and bothersome because it can't be used. Occasionally, and usually much further down the road, with a deeply established relationship, (the marriage phase,) off-the-

record information may be okay as a means to lead the reporter in a specific direction for more information. At that point, you will already be a trusted source, and the press will know that off-the-record is unusual for you, so you have good reason for being coy.

Your goal with PR is to remain at the top of your press contacts' call list, and this is best done by positioning yourself as a future resource. Let the press know that you are willing to accommodate them at any time, and prove it whenever they call you. Keep the romance alive.

Remember that anything you say to the press is fair game. Off-color remarks and anything derogatory could cause a spin in the story that paints you in an unfavorable light. When speaking with a media representative is not the time to reveal prejudices or imply a bond that may be nonexistent reporter's mind. Don't poke him or her in the ribs with your elbow saying, "You know how that is," wink, wink. At all times maintain a professional relationship.

The marriage phase of media relations is the comfortable stage when you are regularly utilized by your media contacts. When something breaks in your field and the press needs local commentary, you are the person who receives the first phone call. This relationship should never be taken for granted however. It can't be stressed enough how important it is to be a reliable resource to the media. Remember that your competitors are eager to have your PR opportunities, and they will fight to earn them. Despite a long-standing relationship, you must continue to do all the things you did in your relation-

ship-building phases. Always treat your contacts respectfully or they will divorce you.

Also, dress for your role. It may be casual Friday in your office, but few professionals look the part of an expert on television when dressed in khakis and a polo shirt. If you don't have a jacket, button down shirt, and tie in your office, it is better to pass on the opportunity than present an unprofessional image to the public. The same goes for female executives.

The flip side to positioning yourself as a resource for the media to call when need arises is your ability to garner publicity for your company with a press release. There are several steps to take in order for this to be a successful marketing tactic. Most significant is your writing ability. It is essential that you are a strong writer. Members of the press receive hundreds of press

releases on a weekly basis, and they are unlikely to fight through poorly written material. Make sure that your grammar, punctuation and syntax are correct, and know the proper format to use when drafting your release.

It is also essential to send your press release to the right contact at each appropriate media outlet. For example, information about a new tax law will not be appealing to the entertainment editor. You should know what publications your customers read and refrain from sending your release to media outlets that they don't pay attention to. Editors know their readers, and if your customers don't read their publications, there is no benefit to running your news.

You should also beware sending your release to a busy editor whose publication does not cover your type of news. For

example, receipt of a release about a male executive will annoy the editor of a women's business magazine. Be careful to customize your mass PR list to the most appropriate recipients of each individual release. If you position yourself as someone who blasts out irrelevant information all the time, your press releases may be deleted before they are even read.

Utilize E-mail when sending press releases. Reporters and editors are harried and time-poor. Don't disrespect them by requiring them to retype your material because you faxed the information, when they could simply copy and paste from your E-mail. Don't make them do extra work to cover your business news; make it easy for them. If writing isn't your strong suit, or you don't have access to E-mail, find someone who can handle this for you. Remember

that media outlets are always looking for material, so the better your offerings are, the stronger the likelihood that your press release will be used.

Public relations can be a powerful yet thrifty tactic for businesses that survive on shoe-string marketing budgets. Keep in mind though that PR is not actually free.

Cultivating and maintaining relationships and drafting press releases takes time away from your primary business, and for most executives, time is money. PR is usually a good investment however if you're willing to put in the effort to treat media representatives respectfully and keep the romance alive.❖

Christine L. Pilch is a marketing specialist who helps businesses position and brand themselves for accelerated growth; (413) 967-4433; cpilch.com.