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## Effective Public Relations Is All About Getting It Right

*By Gary McCoy*

My college journalism experience at Iowa State University provided a solid foundation for my career in broadcasting and later in marketing communications and public relations. That's because the journalism program was built upon educating students to become the best at what they do.

With professors like Bill Kunerth, making your way through journalism school was all about "getting it right." *In Professor Kunerth's Journalism 201 class there was absolutely no tolerance for mistakes. Any articles that were submitted with any spelling, style or grammar errors were automatically failed.*

The bar of excellence was set high. Fortunately, he gave us the opportunity to rewrite the paper and get it right the next time around. I eventually passed that class, but the lesson I took away has always stuck with me: get it right the first time. That principle of "getting it right" aptly applies when it comes to putting together effective public relations.

To communicate your company message through public relations, I believe there are three principles of "right" that will help you put together an effective public relations program:

- Right Message
- Right Media
- Right Away

### **Right Message**

Marketing communications professionals constantly talk about integration. It involves putting together a cohesive message or story that can be used all across your organization. Whether someone sees your advertisement, your web site, or your news release: the message should be consistent across all platforms. Unfortunately, some companies send mixed signals. Their web site says they are an innovative product development company, while a news release touts their excellent customer service, and then their sales force emphasizes the low price message.

While it is not unusual to have several message points, one primary message should shine through everything you do. This will provide consistency and will help build company morale.

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Your inside sales team will be saying the same thing as your outside sales force, along with your customer service team and company management. It is called "singing from the same songbook." When it comes to public relations, you want the media and the public to walk away with this impression: "This company has their act together because they have a common vision and purpose."

The right message also involves putting together a news release that has compelling news value. The question that you must ask is: "Based on the publication(s) we are targeting, is my news release something that they might publish?" Writing a good news release doesn't mean it will get published, it has to be relevant to the audience you are trying to reach.

If you are publishing a new product release, ask the question: "Does this solve a problem for my industry or consumers?" If it is a company announcement: "Is this news so important that everyone in the channel we sell to should know about this?" Or is it: "Interesting news, but not worth publishing?" I'll say more in a moment about targeting the right media, but an important way to find out if your release will get published is to read the publications you would like to see your news in. Time invested in reading these publications and their editorial calendars will help you discover the messages that have a chance of getting printed and those that will go in the circular file.

Do your homework. Don't overlook the fact that the right message will always find a way to get printed or broadcasted to the right audience.

### **Right Media**

This might be the most obvious, but it is often the most overlooked point: make sure you target the right media. It all starts with a good media list that is constantly being updated. You may want to purchase one of several media guides available from organizations like Bacon's or Gebbie Press.

If you can't afford this option, most publications have a web site that lists the various editors and writers who work for them. This is a great source to find the right person at each publication to send your release to. In some cases, it could be several people within a single publication. In addition, most trade shows will make available to you a list of the media in attendance. This is another great source of information that you already paid for when your company decided to exhibit in that show. Invest time in research like this and it will pay off down the road when your release is published.

I've had numerous conversations with editors who receive releases that have nothing to do with the publication they write for. If you send out a news release about tires, and one of the publications you send the release too focuses on the automotive aftermarket trim business, your chance of getting the release printed is pretty remote. However, if the CEO of the tire company you wrote a release about used to be the president of an automotive trim company then they might print the story.

If your company is focused in one industry, like the automotive aftermarket, spend time getting to know the editors from those publications. Ask them what they like, and what they dislike. Once you have established a relationship, then you have earned the right to call or e-mail them. Next time you have some worthy news, there's a better chance you will get published. Don't abuse the relationship though. They have a limited amount of time and constant phone calls from you will not win you favor.

### **Right Away**

I can't overemphasize the fact that when a member of the news media calls you looking for help, that you drop everything and respond to their request immediately. Hopefully, you have prepared for this moment because opportunities like this usually don't come along all the time. The first question that I like to ask a reporter is this: "What is your deadline?"

While some writers are preparing stories months in advance, many will call at the last minute and look to you to help bail them out.

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Be ready to help them put out the fire. As an author who continues to write articles for *Aftermarket Business* and *Aftermarket Insider* magazines, sometimes I can wait a few weeks for the information I need. However, most of the time my deadlines are pretty tight and I need information within 24-72 hours.

I always appreciate those who can get me information quickly and painlessly. It should mean that access to your company leadership is not an impossible barrier. Your leadership must be educated and adopt the same "serving" mentality you have accepted. They must be ready and be willing to give a quote or interview at a moment's notice.

Being prepared means you have a press kit ready to go with company background information, bios of key executives, and a stack of news releases that have been issued during the last 6 to 12 months. Ideally all this information should be available at your website in a "newsroom" type area. In addition to the items mentioned above, the newsroom should have a section with photos, logos, white papers, etc. that can be easily downloaded. Writers sometimes are too busy during the day and are forced to write their articles at odd hours or on weekends. Making your information available to the media 24/7 is a great public relations program that is always working, even when you are not.

One final note: help every writer who calls, even if the story they are working on may not immediately benefit your company or organization. When I was director of communications for the Automotive Service Industry Association (ASIA), I had a reporter call from *Entrepreneur* magazine. When the reporter said the story was about "detailing" I immediately knew that our association didn't really have the expertise in this area. Instead of hanging up the phone at this point, I told the reporter I would call a few people I knew in the detailing business and would get back to her the same day with the names of sources she could call. With just a little effort, I lined up detailing sources that were willing to talk and I phoned the reporter back with a detailed report.

About a month later the phone rang and it was the reporter from *Entrepreneur* calling to thank me for basically "writing the story for her." To thank me for my help, she said: "Gary, please give me a quote I can use in my article so you can get some publicity for your organization." We agreed on a quote and our organization garnered some national publicity, even though initially, it was not obvious that a little extra hard work on my part would pay off this way.

The principle is this: always go the extra mile for the media who phone you. The reason? It may pay off for you down the road. Believe me, if you are prompt, reliable and helpful, you'll stand out from most PR professionals. Reporters always remember the people who helped make their life easier.

## **Write Well**

Though it spoils the alliteration that I have followed throughout this article, here is one final "right" point to remember: follow the principles of good news writing and your company will enjoy success. Public relations writing should follow established journalistic standards. Most magazines and newspaper follow the *AP Stylebook*. Get a copy and learn it.

Before you put the release in the mail or hit the e-mail send button, make sure you check your news release for accuracy. Let's face it: there is nothing more embarrassing than putting a release out to the media with incorrect facts, misspelled words, and/or bad grammar. Also remember to keep all your communications simple, accurate, and direct. Releases that are short and get right to the point have a better chance of getting printed.

Why should you follow journalistic standards? "The reason is simple: The less an editor has to do to your release to make it conform to the paper's style, the more likely he or she is to use your material." That sage advice was written by Laurie J. Mercer and Jennifer Singer in their valuable book [\*Opportunity Knocks: Using PR\*](#).

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Effective public relations are all about "getting it right" with your message, making sure the right media receives your release and cultivating a culture of urgency within your organization when the media calls. And don't forget to make sure your communication with the media is written to the highest standards possible. Just think about making my former Professor Kunerth happy by turning in a perfect news release, the first time!

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