

## A Journalist's PR Advice

As classic advertising gives way to memorable, new tactics such as convergence marketing methods, customer-centric strategies, experience economy marketing, and advergames, we are left with one of the purist and most credible disciplines under the marketing umbrella, traditional public relations or "PR." True, the PR industry has transitioned beyond our wildest digital dreams with blogs, podcasts, social networking and a host of other innovative media technologies. As consumer communications evolve, PR methodology must change to keep up. But if we're talking basics here, what *hasn't* changed is the goal of all PR: influence and credibility built by journalistic objectivity. This is a boon to you and your business no advertising rate card can match.

### **Paying for PR**

When we say PR is "unpaid" advertising, we mean that unlike paid media such as a web banner, a print ad, a TV spot, or a billboard, you are covered by the media without charge. You get coverage just because you're you or your business is unique or interesting in some important way. You don't pay for PR coverage, it merely happens – via luck, happenstance, or as a result of a well-angled pitch from a respected journalist. And if you are ever asked to pay for editorial coverage, beware! The coverage will most likely be tainted to please or flatter you or your business and, in the eyes of the reader, this will greatly compromise your integrity and credibility. You want editorial...not advertorial. There's a big difference.

### **Controlling Your Message**

One of the greatest frustrations of my life as a freelance feature writer has been the seeming arrogance of a few who were fortunate enough to receive coverage but attempted to control the message. All coverage is hard-won, so asking to change the publication's photo selections, insisting on reading and editing the piece before it sees print, or otherwise making a fuss about what has been written is one way never to receive coverage again.

I once pitched an interesting story about a high-profile city official to a glossy magazine.

I pushed hard to do the story, convinced that it would make a compelling read. When the editor agreed, I contacted the subject, did my preliminary research (fitting it into an overwhelming work schedule), and went dutifully across town to his office to conduct the interview, which took literally hours. Certainly it wasn't a project I had extra time to take on, but I believed in this story. I wanted this story told. And because there was no controversy involved, it because it was a true feel-good piece, it should have been a win-win for everyone. During the lengthy interview, I posed numerous questions and took down quotes verbatim to ensure accuracy since the subject matter was relatively new to me. Then, against my better judgment when the subject asked to see the piece in advance, I reluctantly e-mailed it to him with this caveat – “for fact-checking purposes only.” Big mistake. Day after day, hour after hour as the publication deadline approached, he ignored my frenetic pleas for feedback by phone or e-mail. Eventually, we ran out of time and missed the publication deadline, even though the story had been completed in plenty of time to consider any revisions. The subject let several weeks pass without any word whatsoever, and then, out of the blue, contacted the magazine publisher *directly* with copious editorial changes that included massive revisions to his own direct quotes. The editor respected me enough to pass these rewrites directly on to me, the story's originator, encouraging me to proceed as I saw fit. Not that I expected it, but to this day I have not received one word of appreciation for the pitch for coverage, for my personal interest in his story, or an explanation of why he didn't contact me directly with his changes. Rest assured that being demanding and ungracious to the press always works against you in the end. Trying to control your own PR places you in the most unflattering light possible, whether you realize it or not.

### **Be Grateful for Coverage**

Don't obsess about the small stuff. The reading or viewing public doesn't really care if your business was founded in 1986 or 1987, so don't go nuts if a published fact is inaccurate. These mistakes happen. After all, journalists are only human. What's important, though, is the essence and tone of the piece and the fact that you received any coverage at all. Be grateful for that. If you had to pay for the editorial content in inches of ink, you'd be shelling out hundreds, even thousands, of dollars. Of course, there is more

than one kind of publicity. Just ask Martha Stewart. Positive PR/publicity is “a good thing,” while Lindsey Lohan will affirm that negative PR is nothing short of a modern tragedy. Unfortunately, unless you have a high-powered publicist in your pocket who knows magic, you won’t be able to control your inevitable 15 minutes of fame.