

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

Many businesses and professions have faced more than their fair share of negative publicity in the past few years. While the media has focused on the negative, they have largely ignored the positive side.

Unfortunately for those trying to promote a positive image, bad news makes good headlines. News is largely about things going wrong. Therefore it is more difficult to interest the media in worthy day-to-day or even major events.

The media will come to you for the bad news - you have to take the good news to them. It needs to be packaged and promoted in a way that will attract them.

Identifying Your Audience

If your aim is to get your message across to the general public, then you are looking for mass coverage in the daily and local newspapers, in magazines, on the radio and on TV. You want to be in the news bulletins, you want to be in the magazine programmes.

If, on the other hand, you want to explain complex concepts to people with special expertise or interests, then you should be looking for the business newspapers, the business pages of the dailies, the specialist magazines, radio and television shows.

Many people have failed to get any coverage of worthwhile issues or events, simply because they didn't ask the first question of all: Who am I talking to?

Getting The Good News Across

While it is true that the media won't come to you looking for positive stories, newspapers consume a vast amount of material, and filling the inside pages is as important as filling the front page.

So supplying your local paper and radio station with information on upcoming events in advance will probably bring you a steady stream of small, positive stories. Large events can expect interest and publicity as a matter of course, but small local happenings can be made just as attractive with the right promotion. But they won't write a story about it, invite you on to talk about it, take a photo of it - if they don't know about it.

News releases and phone calls to the right reporter (roundsman) about upcoming events make the job of the media easier. "Space Fillers" are often a godsend to a newspaper. Supplying them with good stories makes for a positive relationship, particularly if those stories are written in their language.

For news releases and "upcoming events" information, your fax or email is your best friend.

Creating News - And Photos

News can be what you make it. And if you want to be noticed, always try to create a photo opportunity.

For example: As part of the "Law in Schools" programme, local high schools have regular visits from lawyers, arranged by the District Law Societies.

Fiona Flange LLB is to address the local girls' high school on "The Law as a Career". This is part of an ongoing education programme, and is not likely to have a news editor leaping up from the desk with excitement.

But - Fiona Flange LLB is going to take along a few wigs and gowns and set up a mock court with the 7th formers. This will make a darn good photograph. This could, on a slow day with no earthquakes or deposed Prime Ministers, make the front page of the local paper.

And if the news release includes some material on "Law in Schools", a few interesting figures on the number of women entering the law these days and a couple of sentences about Ethel Benjamin's pioneering struggles in the profession, the legal roundsman almost has a story written - the way Fiona Flange and her colleagues would like it.

It's possible to find an "angle" on almost any story with the bit of lateral thinking. It's possible to turn the mundane into an "event" with imagination. And a photo opportunity, as the politicians well know, is worth a 3000 word article.

Suburban Throwaways

You may never glance at these papers, but for many people they are the equivalent of the parish pump. They are read avidly, particularly by families who don't subscribe to the daily newspaper - people who otherwise wouldn't see your stories.

Another plus is that the suburban throwaways are more orientated to positive stories. They have fewer staff and less time to chase news than dailies, so they are likely to devote a lot more space to your story. They love taking photos, and a photo always drags the eye to a story.

They will often be delighted to hear from someone prepared to write a regular column for them. This is the equivalent of free advertising for you.

Your local suburban throwaways should always be included in your news release list. They can be good friends.

Radio

Does your local radio station have a regular programme on your specialist subject? Most stations are happy to consider new programmes which will interest listeners and not cost them money.

A programme where people can write or ring in with queries and have them discussed by an expert can make excellent listening - with the right person at the microphone. Seniority doesn't always guarantee audience appeal. Sometimes there has to be a trade off between expertise and charisma.

Talkback is a good way to get a positive image across - but it has its hazards, too. Callers may want to talk about niggly little problems they've had with individuals in your business or profession. Tedious to listen to and difficult to comment on. It is important to have calls vetted before they are put to air.

Since the callers dictate the direction of the discussion, there is a danger of talkback becoming fragmented, defocused and boring. It is often useful to confine the subject to a fairly narrow field in each session.

Television

There is precious little local news on the networks these days, though the regional stations are a different story. If you have a regional station, you should be pushing to get your stories onto TV as hard as you do with radio and the papers.

If a story is good enough, or visually interesting enough, it may make the national news. In the main centres, TVNZ and TV3 have newsrooms. In smaller centres, news "stringers" - camera people who work on a freelance basis - cover stories for TV news.

Your local network newsrooms or stringers should be included when you are sending out releases that might interest television.

Relationships With The Media

Someone should be responsible for coordinating news dissemination and actively promoting a positive image. An organisation or profession needs to have a focus. If individuals don't recognise opportunities, or know where to send their stories, ideas or information on upcoming events, these stories will probably never see the light of day.

Conversely, on a day when the media is looking for "space fillers", they need to know who to call if they're looking for a story to fill that space.

Media Liaison Officers are a plus in any organisation that does not have an active public relations department or company. There should be one in each office or district, responsible to a main liaison person who has an overall brief and strategy. Each MLO should make it a priority to get to know the chief reporter and appropriate roundsman from the local daily, the news editor and reporters from the local radio station, the local TV journalist or stringer, and the editor of the suburban newspaper (who is often the chief reporter as well).

He or she should also have a good knowledge of suitable spokespeople within the organisation or profession and be able to steer the media in the right direction when news stories break or expert comment is required.

This is a job that can be shared or rotated if necessary, but if it's possible for it to be handled, or at least overseen, by one person, it will be more effective in the long run. A Media Liaison Officer need not necessarily be a senior executive. A younger person may have more time available and could be very suitable for the job, which requires energy, enthusiasm and creative thinking.

It's A Two-Way Street

If you help and cooperate with the media on a local level, they can be valuable friends in times of trouble. A good, ongoing relationship with the local press and radio makes it more difficult for them to put the boot in when bad news strikes. At the very least, they may listen to you more sympathetically, and put your side of the story more objectively.

A positive image will make your profession or organisation stronger, both internally and in the eyes of the public.

For further Media Tips, check out our website: www.brianedwardsmedia.co.nz