

What You Know Can Work Just As Well As Who You Know

By Carolyn Moncel

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We all know the saying in business, "It's not what you know but who you know", right? This saying is definitely true when it comes to small business and on occasion, the same can be said in media relations. However, what you know can sometimes get you just as far - especially if you're trying to tell your story to the local press.

Some time ago, a small-business client approached me about handling public relations for her firm. She had been writing her own press releases and submitting them to the press but all of her efforts had generated no press. She asked me to critique her work to discover what she might be doing wrong. Upon reviewing her press releases, I found that her writing skills were outstanding but the problem came when I began to investigate the methods by which she was submitting her releases. The five rules below illustrate the lessons that she learned about distributing press releases to the media.

Rule #1: Do your homework on reporters. You can start with the Bacons' Media Directory, which serves as the public relations practitioner's Bible. If you don't know what it is, basically it lists the name, address, phone number, fax number, e-mail, beat (issue or specific type of story to cover), deadlines, and story preferences and angles for most every reporter and news producer anywhere in the world. There are five volumes of books: Newspapers, Magazines, TV/Cable, Radio and International. You can purchase the books or get the same information from Bacons' in CD-Rom format or through an online subscription. These books are invaluable but unfortunately are also very expensive. Here's a tip: You can access them for free usually at your local public library or a college library. Use these books to help you narrow down the reporters that you think would be helpful for launching your story. If Bacon's is completely out of your budget, just follow your favorite local newspaper to determine which reporters cover which stories.

Rule #2: Verify your sources. Just because you found information on reporters in Bacons' doesn't mean that your work is done. Most reporters are assigned a beat but those beats change from time to time and as a result, reporters tend to move around a lot. Because the Bacons' books and their competitors are only published once per year with occasional updates, it's very important that you call media outlets and verify that you can still reach the reporter you would like to talk to. More importantly, find out if the reporter still covers the beat that is important to your story. If for some reason there is a new reporter covering that beat, make note of those changes in a database or spreadsheet, and always call before sending out a new release.

Rules #3: Know where to call for information. Most people are afraid to just call up a reporter (they can be scary people) to find out this information, however if you want to avoid that aspect of the job,

then simply call the News Assignment Desk - the nerve center of news operation. It is here that you can verify the reporter information and also get a sense for the types of stories that an editor might find interesting enough to assign to an individual reporter.

Rules #4: Know how a reporter likes to receive information. When it comes to distributing press releases or letters, all reporters are different. It's your job to find out how a reporter wants to receive his or her information on a potential story. For example, some reporters only read faxes while others only look at releases sent by mail. Still others will only read e-mail, and yet others will only accept a story idea over the phone. This is important because if you violate the reporter's rule for receiving information, then your release likely will never be read. It will get a one-way trip to the trashcan.

Rules #5: Adhere to a reporter's deadline. Just as you can find out the name and e-mail address of a specific reporter, you can also find out their writing deadline. This is very important because the last thing anyone wants to experience is being on the line with a reporter when he or she is on deadline. Here's another tip: Most daily newspapers are put to bed at 5pm. Call the reporter between 8am and 9am because you might catch them before they go their morning editorial meeting. When calling up a reporter directly, always asks the reporter if he or she is currently on deadline as a courtesy. They will respect you for it and this will give you an indication as to how long you have to speak with that particular reporter on the phone. If you're nervous about speaking with the reporter, then create a short script that you can state comfortably in 60 seconds.

While it's always great to know a reporter personally, few small-business owners will ever have that luxury. However, if you know what to do and whom to contact when the time comes to tell your story, your chances of coverage are just as good as anyone else's. After all when it comes to media relations, it's not just who you know but what you know - plus a little luck never hurts either.

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