

Are There Secrets to Gaining Media Coverage?

By Carolyn Moncel

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Are there secrets to gaining media coverage or is it pure luck? It's a question that I am asked often while meeting with small-business owners who are seeking press attention for their companies or products. While luck certainly plays a part, the short answer to this question is "maybe." However with a little practice and skill, a small-business owner can significantly increase the chances of garnering coverage by following some basic journalistic rules.

I started my career in public relations the way many college students do - as an intern. While working for a PR agency one summer, I learned the greatest lessons from a crusty, old newspaper editor with whom I had to have constant contact.

Each time that I called him to follow up on a story idea, I would learn something new - by the time he stopped yelling at me. At summer's end that editor had become a mentor for me and the rules introduced by him have served me well in placing news stories over the years. You see the greatest gift that he gave me was not a hypothetical example found in my college textbook. Rather, it was practical experience in pitching story ideas to "real" journalists.

What I learned from him about approaching journalists with story ideas can be summed up in one word - relevancy and its multiple meanings. Allow me to share with you what I learned that summer.

Relevance to Beat Assignments: Only approach a journalist with story ideas that are relevant to his or her news beat assignment.

Relevance to Newsworthiness: Keep in mind that stories must be new, unusual or important, and informative.

Relevance to Time: Take stock in what's happening in your world and in the lives of others around you by paying attention to current events.

Relevance to Audience or Readership: Make sure that your story idea will matter to the specific group of people who comprise the media outlet's readership or viewers. For example, the story idea may only make sense in a magazine that targets working women, or men's health newsletter, or the residents of Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Fifteen years later, I still think about that editor - and every PR mentor I have since encountered - whenever it is time for me to pitch a story idea to another reporter. I still stand by my answer that

"maybe" there are secrets to gaining media coverage, but truly understanding the power of relevancy and how journalists regard it is a better bet. It could make the difference between whether a story idea makes it on the front page or lands in the trashcan.

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