

In PR, Always Have a Plan B

By Rusty Cawley

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PR Rainmakers know they can do everything right, and still fail to make news.

It is a fact of life. Accept it now.

All news is affected by whatever else happened that day. All news is relative.

Newspapers have only so many columns to fill. The TV news has only so many minutes to devote. Even Web sites have only so many slots to fill with news of the day.

Even on a slow news day, more copy is thrown away than is ever used. More emails are deleted than followed. More faxes are trashed than considered.

There is also a hierarchy to news, especially in the mainstream media. Breaking news will supplant soft news, such as features and analyses. News of broad interest will supplant news of specific interest; for example, a tornado that wipes out your downtown area will likely push a suburban school board meeting to the back pages, if not out of newspaper entirely.

You can arrange the most visual, most intriguing media event possible. But if City Hall is burning down at the same time as your event, then that is where the news cameras are going to go. The news demands it.

We all know what happened on Sept. 11, 2001: Two passenger jets slammed into the World Trade Center, while a third crashed into the Pentagon and a fourth was forced to the ground in a Pennsylvania field.

Just think how many important and interesting news events were chased out of the news media on Sept. 11 and during the weeks that followed - not to mention all of the soft news features and media events that were canceled.

So how do PR Rainmakers handle this reality? By leaving nothing to chance.

In others words: Always have a Plan B.

Keep the time window for your media event as open as long as is reasonably possible. If you arrange for a media event to last only one hour, then you severely limit the media's ability to attend. You may force the media to choose between your event and breaking news. If you force that choice, you will lose. Keep the window open for at least three hours. If the participants (such as the CEO), balk at this idea, ask them bluntly: "How badly do you want to be in the news?" The media are in control of whether you get coverage, not you.

Choose a time that will work best for the news media. Generally, the best time for any event is between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. These are the times when the news media have the most resources available to cover events. These windows also give the reporters plenty of time to meet their deadlines.

Have your own video crew on standby. Almost any city will have a company that provides video services for a variety of needs. Arrange to have a crew on standby, ready to step into the situation if breaking news draws the media away. Your crewmembers can shoot video and audio of the event, just as if they were the news media. They can then edit the raw footage into what is known as a "B

roll," which is a videotape of event highlights that you can provide to the local media. You must move quickly. Shoot the footage, prepare the B roll and get it to the TV stations on deadline. You cannot wait for tomorrow.

Be prepared to move to another date. When designing a media event, be sure to compare the event date with other events around the city. Avoid conflicts whenever possible. Monitor the news media as your event approaches. Have a back-up date in mind, in case other events threaten to eclipse your own. And if the newsworthiness of your event is threatened, especially by breaking news, do not hesitate to make the change.

PR Rainmakers understand and accept they are not fully in control. They know the daily news is driven by immediate events, not by advanced planning.

The only insurance policy is a sound Plan B.

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Rusty Cawley is a 20-year veteran journalist who now coaches executives, entrepreneurs and professionals on using the news media to attract customers and to advance ideas. For more free articles and e-books, visit the Free University of Public Relations at www.rustycawley.com .

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