

The Two Cards You Need to Win at PR

By Rusty Cawley

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Poker will teach the PR Rainmaker more about human nature than just about any activity short of physical combat.

Greed versus fear. Risk versus reward. Truth versus deception. You can find it all in a late night session of Texas Hold 'Em.

There are two basic approaches to playing poker. One type of player believes that victory is possible with any hand, if you know how to read your fellow players and how to skillfully execute a bluff. The other believes in waiting for a certain combination of cards that indicate a high probability of victory, then betting aggressively on those strong hands.

In Texas Hold 'Em, you receive just two cards before placing your first bet. The best players will avoid betting at all unless those first two cards are strong cards. They will bet only if they have some combination of aces, kings, queens, jacks or tens, or if they draw a pair.

Anything less, and they fold their hand.

This strategy is called "tight and aggressive."

It's tight, because the player will bet only in very specific circumstances. It's aggressive, because (once the player gets the combination he wants) he plays hard to win, giving up only when it becomes obvious that another player has a stronger hand.

When dealing with reporters, PR flacks and their clients play as if they can win with any hand they are dealt.

They begin with some vague notion that they have a bit of news that someone out there is eagerly waiting to publish. So the flacks hammer out a press release, which passes through a committee that usually includes the top executives and the legal staff.

If the release contained any real news value before it went to this committee, it is now buried under a pile of ego and adjectives. Next, the flacks transmit the release to a long list of media outlets, not bothering to target any specific reporter or editor, hoping the information will find its way into the right hands.

They are then shocked when their story idea finds few takers.

They are playing a loose game of PR, betting on any hand and hoping to bluff their way to victory. They play like amateurs.

PR Rainmakers play "tight and aggressive." Like the professional poker player in a game of Texas Hold 'Em, PR Rainmakers insist upon having certain cards in their hands before placing a bet.

These cards are:

1. Newsworthiness.
2. Timeliness.

If you want to create a story that will appeal to a journalist, you must begin with both of these cards in your hand.

Without newsworthiness or without timeliness, you should fold your hand. You have little chance at

victory. There is no point in betting your time, money and effort trying to bluff your way to a win. The odds are stacked too heavily against you.

What does it mean to be newsworthy?

First, to be newsworthy the story must have significant impact upon the news audience. The fact that the story interests you, or your client, or your CEO is irrelevant. This qualifies the story only for your company newsletter.

To qualify for the news media, the story must interest readers, viewers or listeners. If you want to place a story in an engineering trade magazine, then your story must interest a broad range of engineers. If you want to place your story in USA Today, then your story must interest a broad range of the general public.

Second, to be newsworthy your story must identify a conflict, signal a change, deal with a problem or point out an oddity. A story that lacks at least one of these elements, by definition, cannot be newsworthy.

What does it mean to be timely?

To satisfy the need for timeliness, you must provide the reporter with a news peg: a reason to tell your story right now.

Before Sept. 11, 2001, there was little interest in the news media in the Taliban. After Sept. 11, that lack of interest turned into a frenzy of interest.

What changed? The story became timely.

The Taliban issue had developed a news peg. There was now a reason to tell the story.

That's an extreme example, but the lesson holds in any story situation. It's not news that Xerox hired a new CEO two years ago. It is news that Xerox will get a new CEO this afternoon. The difference is timeliness.

By definition, news is timely. If you can't tie your story to breaking news, or at least to very recent events, then shelve the story. Your best bet is to wait for a future event will make your story timely once again.

PR Rainmakers play "tight and aggressive" at all times. They never let ego, emotion or outside pressure push them into betting on a losing hand.

They insist that every story they take to the news media include two essential cards: newsworthiness and timeliness.

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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 your free copy of the ebook "PR Rainmaker," please visit www.prrainmaker.com right now.

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