



Tiptoeing Through the Media Maze

By Dana Kader Robb

I used to work in the newsroom of a fairly large metropolitan paper. It surprised me to discover that many people were awed when I told them I knew the columnists and reporters. "But they're just regular folks," I always thought.

Now that I'm a business owner, I understand a little better what the big deal was. People who work in the media have the ability to offer us something that is literally and figuratively priceless — free publicity. Here are some tips for getting to know these "regular folks," pitching them story ideas, sending press releases and surviving interviews.

Putting Your Best Foot Forward with Journalists and Reporters

Reporters need us. We are their sources of ideas for stories, people to interview and trends in the industry. But first they need to know who we are. Find out who covers the beat for your industry or specialty and give them a call. Invite them for lunch or a cup of coffee. Offer to be a resource and put them in touch with others who can provide insight and interesting stories. Keep in touch (a newsletter is a great vehicle for this) and let them know when you have news of substance that they can use.

That said, you also need to be aware of some of the don'ts. Don't call during deadline. How do you know when deadline is? Ask!

Don't mention the fact that you buy ad space in their paper or magazine. Some

publications do offer "advertorial" opportunities to advertisers. Discuss this with your ad rep, not a reporter.

Also, don't bug reporters with self-serving information. Make sure you are offering details that are of interest to their readers, not just to people who know you. Finally, don't send them gifts or offer to pay for lunch. This violates journalistic ethics. But thank you cards are often appreciated!

Press Releases Help Get Your Foot in the Door

Sending regular press releases is a great way to get the media to recognize your name. There are two kinds of releases. One focuses on a specific piece of news that you want to share, maybe an event, award or big client. These usually get picked up in the "business shorts" section. It's not a lot of coverage, but you'd be amazed by how many people read it.

The other type of press release is the one you send in the hopes of landing a larger story or feature. The guidelines for these releases are similar to those noted below for pitching story ideas.

Sticking Your Toe In: Testing the Waters with Stories Ideas

When pitching story ideas, be familiar with the publication. Read a couple issues and visit the Web site. Make sure you're pitching to the right person.

Focus on what is new and different. Jonathan Friendly of the Atlanta Jewish Times says, "Reporters are trained to seek the new and unique. We like sentences that contain "st" words — biggest, newest, longest, most."

Tie your idea to something seasonal or whatever's happening in the news. For example, when Elian Gonzales was all over the headlines, it would have been a great time for adoption agencies to suggest stories about almost anything! You can also take advantage of special sections that focus on your industry. To know what's coming up, call and ask for the publication's editorial calendar.

Keeping Your Foot Out of Your Mouth: What to Do When the Reporter Calls

This is what you've waited for. Now don't blow it! Be as available as possible. If a reporter leaves a message, get back to them ASAP so you don't miss the opportunity. Get them the information they want, the way they want it, as quickly as they want it. Refer other sources who can help broaden the scope of article.

Speak slowly and use short sentences, so the reporter can take accurate notes. But remember that he won't use every word you utter and there's no such thing as "off the record." Don't ask to see the article before it's published but it's okay to ask for the publication date and then follow up if it doesn't appear. And, oh yeah, this is another one of those places where thank you notes are appropriate.