

Five ways firms can get more from the media

It is essential for any successful professional services firm to be able to communicate effectively with clients and potential clients. Making appropriate use of the media is one of the best methods for achieving this – it is remarkable how a few good quotes in the right place can establish you as a pre-eminent expert in your field.

Yet it is perhaps not surprising that many otherwise-savvy organisations view the press, radio and television with suspicion rather than with open arms. In my role coaching senior executives to improve the way they come over to the media, I frequently come across people in management consultancies, and law and accountancy firms who truly believe the journalist's only aim is to catch them out.

It is true that the recent Hutton Enquiry has lifted the lid on a number of somewhat questionable journalistic practices. Even before that, a survey we carried out at Media Training Associates* during the summer suggested that the public relations professionals, who deal with journalists on a day-to-day basis, believe that media coverage in the UK is less balanced than it was five years ago.

More than half (56 per cent) told us that the journalists they deal with are now more likely than before to make the facts fit the story, rather than the

other way around. 46 per cent said that they are now less likely to be willing to trust journalists with off-the-record material than they were.

It remains true, however, that if you can strike up the right relationship with the media, the benefits can be considerable. Here are five suggestions to set you on the right road.

- **The starting point is to have an effective media strategy.** As Claire Gilbert, who has run media relations departments at two of the top ten accountancy firms points out, you have to align it with the business plan. "You have to look at what areas of service you want to develop", she says, "and ensure the media plan mirrors this, instead of just focusing on the areas that are easy to promote".
- **Be professional in how you handle the media.** Do not just see it as a branch of marketing. Cynical journalists are never impressed when somebody says "hello, Marketing!" when they phone up with a press query. Also, marketing people may be excellent at promotion, but do not always have the right skills to deal with the awkward issues that can crop up from time to time in even the best-run organisation. The crucial difference between media relations and marketing is that

you cannot control editorial copy, only seek to influence it, which is what makes positive coverage so powerful.

- **Get the right spokesperson.**

Journalists want to talk to someone who is chatty and informative, not formal and jargon-laden. Effective training is essential to ensure you are making the best of any opportunities, and not falling into the bear traps if there are tricky issues to face. Accountancy or law firms organised into industry groups need to recognise that the leader of a service line is not always the right person to put forward. There may be aspects of the subject where they know less than some of the specialist journalists in the field – embarrassing when they are being touted as 'our expert'.

- **Target your media effectively.** Many consultancies seem to believe the *Financial Times* is the only paper that counts, but the recent British Business Survey carried out on behalf of all the main newspaper groups showed that *The Times* reaches 40 per cent more Chairmen, CEO's, Managing Directors and company owners than the *FT*. Nor should the other broadsheets be ignored, or the trade magazines automatically be dismissed as 'rags'. Work out the key publi-

cations for your audience and focus on them, but be helpful to other journalists who show an interest, even if you do not regard their publications as particularly important. If you are snooty with them when they work at a small trade magazine, they will remember this when they get promoted to the *FT* or the *Telegraph*, and treat you accordingly.

- **Be clear about your message.** If you and your colleagues are unable to succinctly enunciate what is special about the service you offer, do not expect others to get a clear picture. I encounter huge inconsistencies in what people say about the services their firms provide, and their particular market strengths. Do your best to help the journalist with the questions he needs answers to, but do not let him lead you so far astray that you forget your own agenda. Do not run away from awkward issues but explain how you are dealing with them. Finally, remember that all journalists tend to translate the words 'no comment' as 'guilty'.

*Survey available at www.mediatrainingassociates.co.uk

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