Five Metrics for Media Placement: Why Bigger Isn't Always Better

By Bill Bradley

Public relations professionals are expected to use their media relations skills to generate print and online coverage that reflects the strategic messaging, market positioning and brand equity that their employers or clients want to project. While the number of placements is one barometer of success in this area, I use five qualitative metrics to get a better idea of whether the results of the communications process met strategic objectives. Finally, I roll these metrics into a numeric score-the Media Branding Analysis (MBA) rating-to assess the potential bottom-line impact of media coverage.

These metrics are listed below, and then explained individually as they relate to the MBA score:

1. How important is the media outlet?
2. Is the article a stand-alone or a roundup?
3. Are your key strategic messages included?
4. Is the overall perception of the story positive or negative?
5. What is the measurable response to the published story or article?

1. How important is the media outlet?

This question is important on two levels. First, did you make *The Wall Street Journal* or did your mention appear in *The Rapid City Gazette*? Clearly, print and online outlets differ greatly in terms of readership and overall prestige, and that's an important distinction to remember. But the other point is the extent to which the outlet reaches your specific target audience—the titled individuals in specific roles within their organizations who are the actual decision makers when it comes to buying your products or services.

As good as *The Wall Street Journal* may be in terms of readership and prestige, if you're selling a specific kind of software or other narrowly focused product you may not be reaching a large number of true decision makers when you consider the relatively elite profile of most *Journal* readers. In fact, you might do a better job reaching more of your decision makers in a tightly focused monthly vertical publication (or Web site) with a circulation of 10,000 or even fewer.

2. Is the article a stand-alone piece or a roundup?

Your goal always is to generate stand-alone coverage, or perhaps coverage that mentions others in passing but is clearly focused on your client. They're not easy to obtain, especially if your company or client is not well-known. Roundups, which are stories that mention a host of companies in fairly balanced coverage, naturally diminish your mind-share. Another downside of roundups is that readers have a gift-wrapped list of competitors; some of which they might not have known about. This could create more problems for your

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sales cycle, but roundups are certainly better than no coverage at all.

3. Are your key strategic messages included?

Every organization has carefully crafted words and phrases that define its brand and influence market perception. The words may be product names, specific technology, tag lines or slogans, or service methodologies. With today's focus on search engine optimization and online keyword searches, this metric has grown in importance. It's critical that your media coverage include your specialized words and phrases—the more the better.

For example, getting coverage of an important new product announcement is great. But without specific and prominent mention of any new technology you're unveiling by name, and why it's noteworthy, a lot of the luster is lost. Without these key strategic messages, readers view your announcement as "just another new product." The messaging is so important because how your product works, and the benefits it delivers, are far more important than what it does.

Many products do essentially the same thing in a given functional category, but the "how" is the essence of competitive differentiation and perceived value. If you're getting stand-alone coverage, then you've probably done a good job communicating your strategic words and phrases. If the pickup is mostly roundups, then you've been less successful. Either way, have a short list of keywords in mind when you scan coverage, and count the number of times these words and phrases appear.

4. Is the overall perception of the story positive or negative?

I'm probably in the minority when I disagree with the statement that "any coverage is good coverage." All we have to do is look at massive brand and financial damage suffered in the last few years by **BP**, **Toyota** and even Tiger Woods to recognize the flawed logic in this way of thinking. As you assess your media coverage, be honest about your company's or client's market perception based on the positive or negative tone present in your media coverage.

The positive placements go on your Web site and other marketing/sales collateral. The negative ones are judged on their merits and corrective action may or may not be advisable with the outlet that published it. But most reporting is balanced, meaning that even stories that are primarily positive will contain some cautionary language.

Similarly, predominantly negative coverage generally will still include some encouraging or supportive reporting. Your job as a PR practitioner is to make a judgment about the overall perception of the coverage as being positive or negative. Even if the good and bad seem equivalent, you have to make a decision. On stand-alone pieces or lengthier roundups, the headline, lead paragraph and closing paragraph will generally determine what kind of sentiment readers will take form the story.

5. What is the measurable response to the published story or article?

This is the bottom-line metric in this discussion. Did the media coverage result in a measurable increase in inquiries about your company or client, or the specific product or service that was covered? A hefty clip book looks nice, but if the coverage didn't move the needle on sales activity then you really haven't met your business goals.

Look at your Web site stats, phone call volume, e-mail traffic and other channels—including social media activity—to get a near-term idea of the marketplace buzz and the potential bottom-line impact of your media coverage. Another indicator of media effectiveness is how often a particular story or report is cited or referenced by others. Longer term, you must judge collected media coverage the only way it matters: measurable contribution to increased sales activity. PRN

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Scorecard: Give Your Media Coverage the 'MBA' Test

Based on the discussion of the five metrics covered in the previous pages, this Media Branding Analysis (MBA) methodology can be used to score the effectiveness of media coverage. The ratings are on a 1-3 scale, lowest to highest. An MBA score of 10 is a solid performance. A score of 4-10 is underperforming, and 10-15 is exceptional. Here are some guidelines:

1. **Importance of media outlet**

    1-low-yield outlet with marginal reach and influence

    2-recognized industry resource

    3-crossover business/trade outlet that represents a major win

2. **Is the article a stand-alone piece or a roundup?**

    1-roundup, with less visibility than other companies mentioned

    2-roundup with equal or greater visibility than others mentioned

    3-stand-alone coverage

3. **Are your key strategic messages included?**

    1-generic industry/market coverage, little or no keyword value based on strategic messaging

    2-three or more specific mentions of desired branding or strategic word or phrase

    3-focus of article is the real or potential game-changing impact of strategic messaging

4. **Is the overall perception of the story positive, negative or neutral?**

    1-negative but with some redeeming qualities; some damage control required

    2-overall positive with expected balance of language to remain objective

    3-suitable for framing, only minor caveats

5. **What is the measurable response to the published story or article?**

    1-lower than expected queries; e.g., less than 5% spike in Web, phone and/or e-mail activity

    2-encouraging response; 5%-15% spike in Web, phone and/or e-mail activity

    3-strong response; more than 15% spike in Web, phone and/or e-mail activity, and additional media opportunities created from the reporting

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