



Five Ways to Get Coverage without a News Release

by Bill Bradley

NOTE: This is a summary of the full article, which includes additional analysis along with specific “how to” steps. Send Bill an email (address at the end) to receive a complimentary copy of the full article.

To many sales and marketing professionals, “doing PR” is the equivalent of pounding out news releases in order to obtain media coverage. In fact, some companies have a “measure quality by the ton” mentality when it comes to issuing news releases.

In truth, only a small percentage of news releases actually results in media coverage. Journalists are flooded with hundreds of announcements every day and, after the obligatory coverage of dominant, highly influential vendors like Microsoft, Sun, Cisco, AT&T, IBM, HP and Intel, there’s not much room left for all those releases from “tier 2” vendors and niche players.

Still, the news release remains the only recognized formal method of going “on record” with your new product, executive appointment, customer win or whatever it is you want the world to know. News releases inform the media, but they don’t drive coverage.

The good news is that there are a number of ways to get great media coverage without issuing news releases. In fact, some of the tactics we’ll discuss result in placements that cannot be obtained via a news release. We’ll just talk about five approaches here. Not surprisingly, each is more effective in “getting ink” than simply sending out a release.

#1 Read what the media writes on your market and suggest reasons to write more.

If you’re not one of the handful of major players in your industry, your company is not mentioned regularly in the major web sites and business and trade pubs covering your key market. You find yourself inwardly screaming, “Hey, we should have been in there too.”

Well, guess what? There’s always another issue coming out, and you may be able to get coverage next time by acting quickly. Pick a particular article on which you have a strong, *objective* opinion, the more passionate the better, and send a *brief* email with your point of view to the journalist who wrote the story. The key is to provide *factual, relevant* information regarding the article that the journalist likely didn’t know or hadn’t considered, being careful not to sound like sour grapes because you weren’t covered originally.

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What makes this different from the normal “letter to the editor” is that you also *ask if the reporter would like to speak with you* in more detail on the matter. Ideally, he or she does, and you succeed in making your points. This prompts the journalist to run a follow-on piece or other related story that does mention (or even feature) your company in a positive light.

It obviously won’t work every time. But even so, journalists appreciate your interest in their stories and they know you better than before. This makes it easier to approach them next time. And if you follow this step regularly without overdoing it, publications will become accustomed to hearing from you, and soon may be calling you for input *before* writing their stories! That’s when you know you’ve arrived. A news release simply cannot work like this for you.

#2 Let Your Customers and Partners Do the Talking

In the high-tech field, where “solutions looking for problems” abound, the surest way to a journalist’s heart is to hand them a customer who solved an intriguing business problem in an *innovative* manner.

Virtually every company has some customers who meet this definition, and most of them would be slobberingly grateful to you for getting them featured as a success story in a respected publication or website. You stand to gain even more from the exposure than your customer.

Don’t just look at customers when offering the media credible third-party references that can validate your competitive claims and market position. Virtually every vendor has business, marketing and/or technology partners, and sometimes the pairings can be quite unexpected. Partnership news releases lack a true pay-off, since the relationship has no traction when just announced. Instead, pitch the media on partner relationships that have stood the test of time and have produced measurable business benefits for both parties. There is a reason for such success, and a good journalist will want to know the details.

#3 Write Articles and Give Speeches

Identify a few C-level executives or VPs who have good ideas, express themselves well and enjoy the limelight. Keep them busy by preparing guest editorials and other by-lined articles for potential publication in your key media outlets. Also, submit their credentials for speaking slots at trade shows, conferences, seminars and other events. The media always attend these functions and routinely write about who said what, often including interviews with the speaker for more in-depth information.

Be prepared to work up a sweat here. It’s not easy to get by-lined articles and op-eds published and speaker abstracts accepted. The good news is that a given topic can be used as a contributed article as well as a verbal presentation (and vice versa), so you can get maximum mileage out of your efforts.

#4 Product Reviews are Your Best Sales Tools

Most of us read reviews of movies, books and CDs before making a purchase decision. Well, it’s often the same with technology products. With so many choices in every product category, we generally look for critical reviews of a class of products to help guide our decision making.

Find the trade pubs and web sites that publish product reviews on a regular basis, and contact their test labs or other staffers to find out if and when they’re evaluating your type of product, and what the evaluation procedure they follow. If all goes well, you’ll get some kind of “Editor’s Choice,” or “Top Pick” ranking in the published review, which, believe me, looks just great in article reprints, in sales collateral, on your web site – and, yes, as the subject of a news release.

But be aware that you can't control or effectively influence the evaluation process or results. So, while a rave review can do wonders for your sales, a negative ranking can have just the opposite effect. Take a "warts and all" look at your product's overall strengths and weaknesses before going forward with a product review.

#5 Editorial Calendars Still Have a Place, but Don't Expect a Lot

The majority of business publications issue an editorial calendar (ed cal) towards the end of each year that lists some of the feature articles, departments, product review categories (if applicable) and other standard content that they plan to include in each issue during coming year.

The idea is that you look at this list and say, "Oh, in March, July and September they're going to write about my product categories or targeted markets. I'll contact them to be sure we're included." But you quickly learn that editorial calendars are a tool of the publication's advertising department, not the editorial staff. The true objective is to allow advertisers to plan their insertions in issues that correspond with editorial coverage relevant to the advertiser. The listings frequently change based on ad space reservations, so be prepared for the unexpected.

Think Las Vegas odds when looking for placements based on ed cals, regardless of whether you're pitching a monthly pub with a 3-4 month lead time or calling on a weekly book with lead times of 2-6 weeks. Plan on spending lots of time retrieving the calendars, searching for potential fits and doing the outreach. Not surprisingly, ed cals are a favorite pastime of many PR agencies because it's a good way to break in their junior staff members. The process also involves lots of billable activity, and gives the client the impression that there is a lot of potential for coverage.

Don't ignore ed cals entirely, but focus on selected publications that cover your industry or market on a regular basis. Regardless of placement success, one benefit of the ed cal process is that you can verify which reporters cover your "beat," and you can probe for other potential coverage opportunities while you're speaking with various staff members.

Conclusion

News releases will always play an important role in media relations and obtaining coverage. But simply sending out news releases is nothing more than direct marketing, which typically produces a return rate of one to four percent. Consistently securing positive coverage requires knowing what is newsworthy to the media, delivering the information they need quickly and understandably, and being available to answer follow-on questions.

The truth is, the news release process does not meet these requirements. But each of these five steps does, and can help create a PR program that will produce and sustain a high level of media visibility. Beyond having a "good story to tell," it helps a have handy a healthy dose of creativity and persistence. After all, life is tough. Get a helmet.

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