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Got PR?

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The dramatic capture and death of terrorist Osama Bin Laden has become one of the most compelling stories in recent years. It also provided another example of the instantaneous global reach of mainstream and online media to report and analyze the facts and their implications.

To PR professionals like me, it's always instructive to see how such momentous events are reported and covered. For all the dismissive nicknames (e.g., flack, press agent and spin doctor) the media and others use for people in my profession, it's seems only fair to acknowledge the less flattering side of the media profession. So I couldn't resist the Osama/Obama miscues that appeared during the early coverage.

Those who accuse the media of bias in their reporting of the news need to know that the PR profession can be just as biased. The "Whisper-Gate" episode of a couple of weeks ago has PR titan Burson-Marsteller (of Tylenol reclamation fame) teaming up with social media king Facebook in a disgraceful violation of core PR principles. Embarrassing incidents like this serve to demonstrate the downside of such behavior, so hopefully the PR profession will learn a valuable lesson in proper conduct.

As we all know, it's an online world when it comes to media relations. I cite some new research that shows how pervasive this really is, and why companies need to establish online newsrooms to give journalists what they want – and in the format they want it. This applies to customers, prospects, investors and other key stakeholders.

So much for Spring. Can't wait for Summer!

Media goofs on Osama/Obama references

Reporting breaking news can be tough, especially when the president's name is one letter away from that of his country's nemesis.

In the race to be first in reporting Osama Bin Laden's death on May 1, accuracy fell by the wayside on a few embarrassing occasions. All in all, TV reporters earned high marks for their coverage of the event. MarketWatch media columnist Jon Friedman wrote: "The much-maligned television news media excelled in the coverage of Osama bin Laden's death Sunday night."

Still, there were some notable gaffes, such as these:

- MSNBC correspondent Norah O'Donnell mistakenly reported via Twitter that Obama had been shot and killed.
- CNN: "Inside Obama's Compound."
- Washington, D.C., Fox affiliate: "President Obama is, in fact, dead."
- Gizmodo published a screen shot from the BBC News website, stating "Obama Dead."
- A Sacramento Fox affiliate: "Reports: Obama Bin Laden Dead."

Dishonorable mention goes to the *Chicago Tribune* (photo at right) which evidently had trouble clearing the cache on its website, announcing Bulls coach Tom Thibodeau's coach of the year win accompanied by Osama Bin Laden's photo.



(Above) This Fox affiliate was one of several prominent media outlets that erred with Osama/Obama references. (Below) Sometimes a caption doesn't align properly with the photo.



Next target: Ronald McDonald? No clowning around!

With Osama Bin Laden out of the way, McDonald's venerable clown pitchman Ronald McDonald has become a target of a group that lobbies against firms that specifically target unhealthy products at children.



Corporate Accountability International asked Ronald (demonized in photo above) to retire at McDonald's annual meeting this month, and has stepped up its campaign by taking out full-page ads in six major metro dailies calling for his head.

The group, which campaigned against the Joe Camel cigarette mascot in the '90s and complained about Ronald as a role model at McDonald's annual meeting last year, says the iconic figure encourages kids to eat junk food, contributing to a rise in childhood obesity and related diseases such as diabetes. The new ads, signed by more than 550 health groups and professionals, carry the headline, "Doctors' Orders: Stop Marketing Junk Food To Kids."

Meanwhile, The Ronald McDonald House remains a positive association for at-risk kids. I think McDonald's should keep that name even if it drops the clown as an active marketing brand. The company says it has no plans to bid adieu to Ronald, so expect this saga to continue.

Top PR firm and ‘secret’ client unmasked in sleazy media campaign against Google

In early May, staffers at PR mega-firm Burson-Marsteller, hired by an unknown client, pitched to several journalists a story about how Google’s Social Circle service was purportedly endangering consumer privacy by supposedly scraping private data and building “dossiers” on millions of users.

In one case, the firm even offered to draft op-eds and help get them placed in top news outlets. Emails between one media target and a Burson staffer were posted online by the target, who sensed something fishy when the agency declined to name the client making the claims against Google.

News trickled out all week about a so-called “whisper campaign” targeting Google. The details of the campaign gained traction, and within 48 hours the details of “Whisper-Gate” became clear.

Facebook had hired B-M to pitch stories about how Google’s foray into social networking was supposedly causing privacy concerns.

The episode has become an overnight textbook example of the worst practices of PR. First, refusing to identify a client is violating a fundamental code of conduct. Next, it turns out the allegations being made against Google were unproven if not totally unfounded, which violates another PR tenet: verifying your facts before going public.

“Sneaking around, conducting negative research, surreptitiously placing anonymous hit pieces based on one-sided bias, is normally associated with PR bottom feeders in Washington and L.A., not respected firms like Burson,” said Fraser Seitel, who teaches PR at New York University.



I took this photo to poke fun at the notion that sales, PR and “bodily functions” go together. Thanks to Whisper-Gate, sometimes it’s an accurate statement.

Here are some accepted PR principles that I live by.

- 1. Ethics is not an abstract word.** Live it, breathe it, and incorporate it into every action. It’s not only the right thing to do, but it will help reset the bar for the PR industry — and let you sleep at night.
- 2. Be prepared to say “no” to a client.** This applies no matter how big or small the client is. Clients hire PR firms for their expertise and counsel, not just to carry out their campaigns.

PR is not a service industry, and practitioners are not just vendors. We are professionals who work as partners with our clients.

- 3. Check out your client’s claims.** If they say they did nothing wrong, check it out before telling the world they did nothing wrong. Remember, it’s the messenger who gets shot most often.
- 4. Set reasonable expectations.** It doesn’t matter how good you are; selling a nominal product or idea won’t get results.
- 5. Maintain credibility.** We are in this for the long haul, and misleading our contacts by misrepresenting our interests today will only hurt us tomorrow.

For journalists, it’s an online world. Is your online newsroom ready?

Again this year, PWR New Media surveyed 200 journalists to learn about their news release preferences. The main purpose was to find out how journalists want to receive news releases and what assets they want included with them.

The findings make it clear that journalists are embracing the online world:

- 77% contribute content to a website or a blog in addition to their usual duties
- 87% prefer to receive press releases via email
- 91% want “easy access” via a link in the email to relevant background, bios and supporting information
- 87% want access to high res images
- 76% want verbiage they can cut and paste easily
- 79% are more likely to pick up a story with an image.

For the first time journalists are asking for digital assets with embed codes:

- 44% want access to low res images
- 32% want embed codes so they can easily grab and reuse the images on websites or blogs



- 22% want an image player they can transfer to their site with a few clicks.

The use of video is also gaining ground:

- 85% of online media sites are using video with their news stories
- 30% of journalists are now looking for web quality video
- 23% say that embed codes for easy transfer of video to other sites and blogs are important.

Journalists are relying on the digital world for information:

- 96% start with a search
- 84% like to receive electronic media kits
- 87% use online newsrooms
- 85% tap social media (Facebook, Twitter)
- 82% read blogs
- 32% get information via RSS feeds.

There are 30% fewer journalists, and the way they are expected to do their job is rapidly changing. If you want to get coverage for your news stories, you have to change too. When you give journalists the news in the format they prefer it pays dividends.

- Create a rich news environment on your website – an online newsroom – where journalists can find all the data they need
- Post your news in the social media release format (it’s like an electronic media kit)
- Add images and videos
- Add slide decks and graphics with players that can easily be transferred to a website or blog
- Provide embed codes for all visual material
- Include bios and relevant background/supporting material
- Add media contacts
- Send emails to journalists with links to this content
- Make it possible to subscribe to your news in a feed or by email
- Make it easy for any visitor to share the news content.