

The Sources *HotLink*

Tips and Practical Ideas to Get Positive News Coverage

Number Twenty-four, Autumn 2002

Managing the Media: A Lesson in Making Publicity Come First

BY ED SHILLER



The following is an edited excerpt from Ed Shiller's book "The Canadian Guide to Managing the Media" in which he explains how a media relations strategy was utilized to promote a new product in lieu of an expensive advertising campaign.

Howard Fisher, a Toronto chiropractor, wanted to promote his latest invention: the Back Strip, a firm, but flexible foam cushion designed to reduce the risk of back injury by athletes playing demanding contact sports such as hockey and football.

He couldn't afford to buy advertising in volumes that would effectively promote his invention, so he chose, instead, to generate news coverage about it.

Strategy

Ideally, the thing to do when promoting a product is to get third-party endorsement. Your message will be much more credible when a recognized authority whose objectivity is beyond question touts the virtues of your invention. Howard persuaded a couple of National Hockey League players to try out the Back Strip and got permission to use their brief testimonials in a news release. The standing of the Back Strip now assured, we set about our primary goal of getting media coverage for Howard's invention.

Our target audiences were easy to identify: any primary- or secondary-school boy or girl who played contact sports; their parents; hockey and football coaches at primary and secondary schools and universities and in the myriad amateur leagues across the country; professional athletes and coaches; and physiotherapists, chiropractors and other health care professionals who would treat sports-related back injuries.

Our target media included the daily press, community newspapers, trade magazines and radio and television stations.

Procedure

We produced a comprehensive media kit that contained a news release that focused on how the Back Strip would help prevent sports injuries and included quotes from an established NHL player and trainer. Also in the kit were photographs showing the player being checked while wearing the Back Strip during an NHL game; a fact sheet on the Back Strip; biographical sketches of Howard Fisher and Michael Finewax, his business partner and mar-

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A insert describing the Ethnic Press Monitor Service in more detail is included with this issue of *The Sources HotLink*. To discuss your needs, or for additional information, please call Andrew Machalski at 416-964-7799 or send an E-mail to ethnicpress@sources.com



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How Media Relations Helps the Marketing Plan

BY MARK LAVIGNE, APR



You're the Product Manager or Marketing Director responsible for marketing a brand new widget, let's say for sake of argument, a new high tech device.

You have a limited budget to promote the new product, say \$20,000, and you wonder what will give you the better bang for your buck, media relations or advertising?

Your strategic planning to date has definitely satisfied the "new, better, different" criteria, has an identifiable niche, has clearly defined target markets, has a strong point-of-difference from your competition. In short, offers strategic merit.

You wish you could do both media relations and advertising, and have seen the effectiveness of integrated campaigns with ten times that of your current budget.

You have research data that clearly indicates which media your target markets consume. You realize you can't even come close to getting enough repetition on the broadcast segments highlighted, and that even purchasing print advertising in the frequency and size you think is needed may be quite limited.

So what value can media relations bring to the table?

First of all, a seasoned media relations practitioner will help you see the product from the news media's point of view. Your strategic thinking should be focused in the direction of what an editor and/or freelance journalist will see. In short, where is the real story? In what context does it fit? What does your product offer their audience? Development of this kind of strategic key messaging is imperative to give your product's key messaging a chance to get through the journalistic gatekeeper to the desired end audience, your ultimate target.

Media relations is one of the few marketing communications disciplines that has to go through such a gatekeeper exclusively. But in that end lies its

true value. Because the gatekeeper is charged with the formidable task of informing his or her audience with third-party, relatively unbiased information, the value of that information is considered far more believable by an audience than it would accept the advertising. And as the pace of technology development explodes logarithmically, journalists realize the value of helping their audiences with making crucial technology acquisition decisions. In many ways, the opinion of the journalist is that of a trusted family member, neighbour or friend.

The ultimate goal of good marketing communications is generating favourable word-of-mouth advertising through product trial. Good media coverage is that: word-of-mouth from a trusted source, comparable to a family member, neighbour or friend who has tried the product and says it's good. So make the media an integral (if not primary) part of the product trial/word-of-mouth advertising process. (Just make sure to provide an adequate supply of the new product for news media demos).

Many marketers equate news media coverage with an equivalency to what it would cost to fill a similar amount of airtime or space with an advertisement. It is very important to remember one cannot buy editorial coverage. It's not generally for sale. Because of that, its believability with an audience is far greater than the content of an ad. How many times more believable requires a lot more space than here to deal with properly, and frankly, a lot more work by the PR industry to develop academically endorsed, empirical paradigms to determine the true value of an impression. Just remember, media relations, unlike advertising, is more than counting impressions, it's a major step in building long term relationships with the gatekeepers who have access to your target markets.

Mark LaVigne, APR, owns and operates Hunter LaVigne Communications Inc. and is President of the Canadian Public Relations Society (Toronto).

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A Crisis by Any Other Name...

BY ED SHILLER

Crisis communications looms large in the public relations body of knowledge, and theories abound about what constitutes a crisis and how crises differ from other challenges with which the PR practitioner must cope.

We are told that when the presence of trigger points, panic or a sense of loss of control grips an organization and the prospect of dire consequences co-exist, a crisis has occurred. My 1984 edition of *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English* defines "crisis" as a "decisive moment; time of danger or great difficulty."

But are this description and this definition of a crisis truly useful tools for the communicator?

My answer is "no" for this reason: They do not serve to effectively prepare an organization to overcome the very real threat that crises may pose; they do not enable the public relations department to fulfil its mandate to enhance the organization's well being.

It's not that trigger points (such as a deadly explosion, an accusation of immoral or illegal conduct or a product recall) or visible panic or a clear and present danger are not valid signs that a crisis has occurred. It would be absurd to argue otherwise.

But defining a crisis by the existence of these phenomena gives rise to the inference that a crisis exists only when these phenomena are present. This can make it difficult, if not impossible, for communicators to function effectively, since it provides a rationale for keeping information about crises from ever reaching the PR department or anyone else within the organization. It can serve as a catalyst for internal cover-up.

Even though your organization may enforce a strict policy that employees are to report all crises forthwith, those whose negligence may have precipitated a threatening situation may use the standard definition of a crisis as an excuse to keep quiet.

"I don't have to report the chemical spill into the river to the public relations department," the employee responsible for the leak rationalizes, "since it does

not constitute a crisis. While my failure to properly close the valve may have been a trigger point, the valve is now shut. The situation is under control. There's no panic. Hence, there's no crisis. I'll just keep my mouth shut, nobody will be the wiser, and I won't get into trouble."

So you, the Director of Public Relations, the Media Relations Manager or the Communications Coordinator don't know that a threatening situation has occurred.

But, of course, the media find out about it (perhaps they were alerted by complaints from people living downstream, or environmental watch-dogs that regularly monitor the local water courses discovered the spill and went public with that knowledge). You're caught unawares by accusatory media questions. The resulting news coverage is misleading and harmful to your organization. You respond to that coverage with your side of the story, which is reported along with the counterclaims of your accusers. What might have started out as a manageable crisis, has ended up as a public relations disaster.

The purpose of crisis communications planning is not to prevent crises. They will occur no matter what you do. It is to prevent crises from becoming disasters.

An essential part of this process is to counter the propensity of people to cover up their own negligence or wrongdoing; it is to maximize the likelihood that you, the communicator, are informed of any and all crises as soon as they occur.

This is where crisis definition comes into play. The purpose of that definition is not to make the public relations department aware that a particular situation might be a crisis; it is to increase the likelihood that the department will be told right away that the situation, itself, exists. That definition should not be judged by linguistic standards but rather by the degree to which it enhances the flow of information within the organization.

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Managing the Media

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keter; and testimonials.

If the media chose to run the news release and nothing more, that was fine with us. But one of our key objectives was to arrange interviews for Howard and thus get much more extensive and varied media coverage.

To achieve this, we topped the media kit off with a personalized letter addressed individually to sports editors, medical writers and assignment or news editors at our targeted media. The kits were mailed or hand delivered and, a few days later, Michael Finewax followed up by phone to arrange inter-

views. The product was legitimate, the endorsements gave it credibility and the news release pinpointed a persuasive news angle.

The result was that Howard gave more than 50 interviews.

Read the actual news release, fact sheet, biographical information and testimonials used in this case in "The Canadian Guide to Managing the Media." Copies are available from Ed Shiller. Contact him by telephone at 416-496-2243 or E-mail shiller@edshiller.com.

A Crisis by Any Other Name...

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Consequently, my proposed definition of a crisis is "any situation that *might* result in unwanted publicity." This tells anyone who has done something wrong that his or her desire to keep it secret because the reaction would be unfavourable or unpleasant is proof that a crisis has, in fact, occurred and must be reported to the public relations department.

Could this result in a flood of reports to the PR department about occurrences of little or no apparent consequence? Probably not. And that

would be unfortunate; for it is from this kind of minutiae that the public relations practitioner builds a body of knowledge about and a sensitivity to the organization that are vital to effective communications.

Ed Shiller is President of Toronto-based Shiller & Associates, Inc., which specializes in media training, media relations, crisis communications and strategic public relations. He can be reached by telephone at 416-496-2243 or E-mail shiller@edshiller.com.

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