

The Ten Commandments of Media Relations

TIPS TO IMPROVE MEDIA COVERAGE OF YOUR BUSINESS, PROFESSION OR CAUSE BY DAVID LEONHARDT



Have you ever seen somebody interviewed on television and thought, "No, that's not how this industry works"? Have you ever faced criticism in the media of how you manage your turf?



The media act as a filter for society. It is the battleground in the war of public opinion. After 3,000 media interviews, I've learned a few things about the media. What follows are the Ten Commandments of Media Relations. They will lead you to greener pastures – and sports fields – in the war for public opinion and boost your credibility among potential clients and the public.

Though shalt not waste a journalist's time. Believe it or not, journalists are busy people. Editors wade through hundreds of news releases each day. Reporters struggle to assemble a story by deadline. The whole team works to edit

for space or time, check spelling and grammar, choose headlines and visuals, and bring it all together. Send a news release only when you really have something to announce. When calling a journalist, make it short and sweet; give the journalist the information he needs and respect his time as you would want yours respected.

Thou shalt build relationships with reporters. Of my three strategies to attract media attention, this is the one most likely to give you recurring benefits. This is the fertilizer that can make an "expert" out of you in the public's mind. And the one that gives you the heads up when a



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future trouble spot is brewing in the media. In my online **Make some NOISE!** course, I propose a four-step process to build relationships with journalists. This takes some effort – and like every other relationship, it has to be built on trust.

Thou shalt stick to thy message.

This seems obvious, but so often media spokespeople fail to stick to their messages. For instance, if your statement is about the safety of dense turf for children running on the field, focus on safety. Don't try to also sneak in messages about the environment, your expanding market share, or some award your company has won. (And it is not your responsibility to defend pesticide companies, or anybody else, just how you handle pesticides responsibly.) Define your message and make sure everything you say supports that message. Similarly, if a journalist tries to put words in your mouth or get you to wander away from your message, don't let her get away with it. Answer the question in a way that bridges back to your message.

A reporter asks you a question. You don't know the answer. Do you try to fake it or do you just admit you don't know the answer? David Leonhardt explains in point #9 – thou shalt not fake it!

Thou shalt not be a dead end. So the reporter calls you with a question you cannot answer. Should you hang up? If you are a reporter's dead end, she'll be unlikely to call you up again. If you can't answer her question, refer her to someone who can (preferably not a competitor). So if a reporter asks a question about residential lawn care, refer them to someone who is an expert in that field. Or promise to call her back with the information. Or give her some other information that may be useful for her story. But don't send her away empty handed.

Thou shalt not advertise. Is the media there to provide you with free advertising? No way. It's there to deliver news to its audience. Erase from your mind the attitude that you are advertising. Don't write news releases to sound like market-

ing pieces. Don't speak to the camera as if you were taping a commercial. The credibility media coverage gives you comes from the fact that it is NOT advertising. And journalists will feel no responsibility to do your marketing for you.

Thou shalt not have another

spokesperson. This is the only NEVER I offer in my online course and in my live seminars. NEVER let someone else be your spokesperson. It's fine to hire someone to write and distribute a news release or to set up interviews, but nobody else carries your credibility in the media. It has to be you. Your expertise is sports turf. A P.R. firm's expertise is P.R. Guess which one the reporter will trust when seeking expert advice on sports turf.

Thou shalt comment. So a reporter asks a negative or embarrassing question. What do you do? Avoid saying, "No comment." No answer you can give will look worse in the media than a report that you refused to comment. Provide an answer in your own words; don't repeat a report-

er's negative answer. Say as much as you can. Explain why you cannot divulge more (client confidentiality, the information will be announced later, etc.) When confronted with bad news, the best thing to do is what the makers of Tylenol did in 1982 and 1985. The company pre-empted media questions about the dangers of some poisoned tablets by announcing the safety steps it was taking.

Thou shalt give notice. If you want the media to cover your story, give them notice. They need time to reserve a camera. They need time to do background checks and find other sources to comment. Making last minute announcements is not a good way to cut naysayers out of the story. It is a great way to kill the story. The "naysayers" give the story balance – and without balance, the journalist has no

story. When my book, *Climb your Stairway to Heaven: The 9 Habits of Maximum Happiness*, was nearing its publishing date, I sent out an advance notice to reviewers. I sent out a reminder note again that the publishing date was fast approaching

Thou shalt not fake it. Here's an interesting scenario. The reporter asks you a question. You don't know the answer. Do you try to fake it or do you just admit you don't know the answer? A former boss of mine answered a question incorrectly before a parliamentary committee, when he knew he had no idea what the right answer was, leaving me to pull up his weeds. You are more impressive saying, "I don't have those statistics in front of me, but here's what I do know ..." than to prove to the world that you don't have a clue what you're talking about.

Thou shalt piggyback. Wow! You received great coverage in the morning paper. But did the local radio station see the story? They did if you forwarded a copy. Did all your potential clients see the story? Make sure they do. I was impressed by a marketing kit I received from a high-end caterer. I opened the folder and there I was faced with two items: a letter of introduction and a pair of press clippings. What about other things you do? Do you have a newsletter? Have you added key media contacts to the distribution list? What about a home page on your web site? Do you advise the media when you make major changes? Piggybacking means getting more for your efforts. It's one of several bonus tips I offer in my online course.

Now that you've read this article, are you ready to become a media spokesperson? Well, there's still a lot more to learn. But this article does give the most important information you need to know – the Ten Commandments of Media Relations. ♦

For a copy of David Leonhardt's special report Get In The News, send \$15, or for the video It's your message. That's what counts, send \$25 to 417-711 Bay Street, Toronto, ON, M5G 2J8. Or visit him at www.leonhardtonline.com.