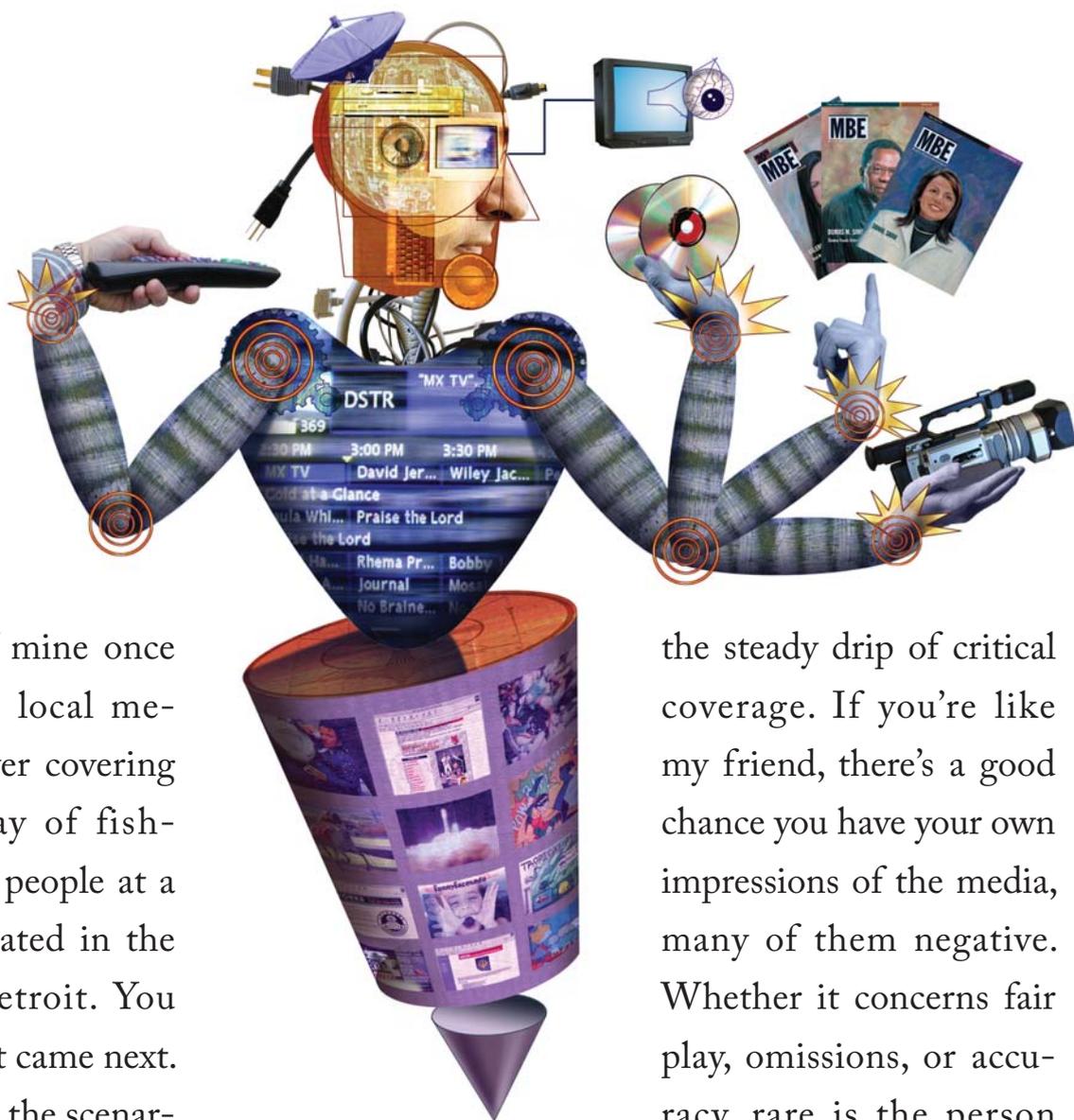


Getting the press to cover your story.

Mmedia Matters

By Darci E. McConnell



A friend of mine once criticized the local media for not ever covering an annual day of fishing for young people at a small lake located in the middle of Detroit. You can guess what came next. He juxtaposed the scenario, a positive story about someone doing a positive thing in the city, against

the steady drip of critical coverage. If you're like my friend, there's a good chance you have your own impressions of the media, many of them negative. Whether it concerns fair play, omissions, or accuracy, rare is the person who thinks the Fourth Estate is always doing things right.

But, as I told my friend, that perception carries with it some inference. He was assuming that the media knew about the event and didn't think it was important. As one editor once told me, a reporter is only as good as his or her best sources. And because reporters are busy chasing the news of the day, it is often up to others to let them know about the positive stories.

Public relations is a field in which one's primary role is to help educate others about an issue, product, event, individual, or service, typically with a desired outcome. Whether it is to highlight an individual's accomplishments or to showcase a new product or service, the publicist's job is to make sure that the word gets out.

In the profession, garnering the media's attention is called "earned media" because it doesn't require you to buy advertising time or space. Many companies use one or both mechanisms to generate an increase in business, introduce its entry into the marketplace, or to attract investors, among other reasons. Return on this investment can be measured through not only savings generated by using earned media versus paid media, but also by direct response or sales that result from such attention.

Without knowing how to navigate the world of mass

media—especially when information is instantaneous and everyone can serve as a reporter or publicist—it is critical that you take the lead on how you convey messages to the masses about your organization.

Find Your Audience

Start by asking yourself, who is your audience? Is there a specific geography, age group, or segment with whom you want to communicate? The folks in Gen Y are much less inclined to pick up a newspaper for that information than are the Baby Boomers. (That means you would have to decide whether you go with an online strategy or one that targets the traditional print or broadcast outlets). Studies have also shown that people of color are more inclined to get their information from urban radio and other ethnic-based sources than from the mainstream press.

Define Your Story

What constitutes news? Just because you have a new company or product, it doesn't mean you have a story, and reporters won't take kindly to a blatant attempt to make them your personal spokesperson. But if you're running the first ever doggy daycare, or your real estate firm is the only one to double its profits while the market is crashing, it certainly has a better chance of being consid-

ered a story.

The information must be timely, can be local or national, could involve a high profile (public) figure, and it is important that it is of interest to the masses. And yes, the media does like conflict.

Reporters and editors also like information that is new ("The first time in history!") or unique ("Man bites dog!"). If your company is the first in its field or region to require your workers to take part in a home build for Habitat for Humanity, it certainly is more newsworthy than the 12th annual build that the company's doing. Once you've figured out what is unique or new or significant, find a short and sweet way to say it. As *USA Today* and the Internet have taught us, the average person wants information that cuts to the chase and is eye-popping.

Share Your Story

Once you know your audience, how do you go about getting a reporter to care about your story? You had better know exactly how editors and reporters determine what constitutes news, how that information should be packaged, and how you can get the details to them at the right time.

Once you've created a 1-page news release (skip the media kit, please), or a 3-sentence e-mail (with information about the topic in the subject line), it is important to know how to get that information to the right media outlet, and then the right person at that location.

Don't assume that there is only one way to get the word out. Before you call up the local newspaper, think beyond the traditional, and think about your field. How do you get your information? Do you read a specific trade publication? Do most of your clients surf the net? When

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Media Matters *(continued)*

someone is being honored, is it the folks in that person's hometown who are most affected, or the place where that person now resides?

Sending the story to the right person is just as critical. Many online publications include a section that says, "contact us," along with direct e-mail addresses for staffers. Other outlets include detailed lists of individuals with titles and their respective areas of coverage, called a beat, so you can whittle down the list. If none of that information exists, then it might be worth making a call to the assignment desk, news desk, or the assignment editor to ask where to send the information.

Timing is Everything

If your event is coming up a month from now, it is best to send the information to your local news-

paper no more than two weeks ahead of time, and to make a follow-up call a day or two before it actually occurs. News happens 24-7, and far be it for any reporter or editor to be tasked with recalling information that came into the newsroom a week ago, let alone a month ago. (Keep in mind that deadlines vary from organization to organization; magazines may have longer lead times, whereas websites may be able to post news nearly instantaneously.)

What matters most is that you take advantage of opportunities to tell your story, and never assume that the media has such insight.

By the way, radio, television, and print outlets finally did cover that annual fishing derby, thanks to an intern in our office who took the steps necessary to get the story told. Most of the reporters were shocked to learn that the event had been tak-

ing place for years.

How many media outlets know about your company's story? ♦

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