

RICK HALL PR

FOURTH ESTATE

A multi-part series on what every client should know about the media

Better know the press

*Part 6: Terrence Belford
Freelance Business Writer*

YOU'VE BEEN IN THE BUSINESS FOR 40 YEARS; WHAT DO YOU THINK CLIENTS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE MEDIA?

I guess the most important thing that your clients, people who are seeking publicity in newspapers, should realize is that newspapers are not what you think they are. As Lord Chesterfield said, “The purpose of a newspaper is to serve the public interest at a profit”.

As a result, newspapers are now industrial products; large corporations own them and they have been redesigned and streamlined.

They are organized in cubbyholes – finance, celebrities, religion, for example. To get your story into press it has to fit the parameters of a cubbyhole. Just because you think it's a good story doesn't mean an editor is going to think it's a good story. The editor has a specific agenda that has to meet the requirements of the cubbyhole. You may think it's a terrific story, but if it doesn't meet his or her requirements, it hits the floor.

There is intense competition for a limited amount of space. So what you have to do is learn to express your agenda in terms that meet the agenda of editors. For that you generally need a professional who can advise you. It's very difficult to learn independently, and while it's not complicated, it takes a certain understanding and skill.

One example I can mention is from the '80's when I represented the landlord association in Ontario. The landlords wanted to oppose Premier Peterson's proposed changes to rent control. All the association wanted to talk about was how they weren't making enough money.

I pointed out this had no appeal to most people other than themselves. However, if they aligned their interests with the interest of the general public, then they would have some success influencing government.

As a result, I convinced the association to focus on pointing out the end result of rent controls was a terrific shortage of accommodation, because of a lack of investment in the sector. Only one in a thousand units was available for rent, and the stock was decaying. The message was that landlords weren't concerned about the amount of money they were making for themselves; their concern was there wouldn't be housing available for young men and women entering the market. When we convinced the association to use that approach, and they started doing that, the result was the winning of the editorial support of every major newspaper in the province, which then exerted pressure on the government. That's a classic example of how you have to express your own agenda in terms of what newspapers need and want.

HOW DO FREELANCERS FIT INTO THE INDUSTRY?

In newspapers there are freelancers and staff writers. Freelancers tend to focus on advertising driven sections or on sections where there aren't staff writers because the sections are too small.

Freelancers work for editors. Editors come in various forms. The copy editor's job is to correct the English, check the facts and often write the heads. There are section editors, who are responsible for entire sections, and above them is another level of editors that are usually management. It's an intricate process and all along the way, depending on the paper, there can be intense scrutiny and stress on accuracy. Some papers are extraordinarily well edited, some aren't.

AND THE DIFFERENCE IN WRITING FOR NEWSPAPERS VERSUS MAGAZINES?

The difference between magazines and newspapers is considerable. Magazine stories are edited, not written,

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actually. Magazine stories are based on a string of pearls, which means you start out with a premise that runs throughout the entire story. Once you establish that premise at the beginning, you string anecdotes, facts, and quotes to back it up, and then you wind up with a tailpiece that takes you back to the beginning.

A newspaper story, on the other hand, is really focused on delivering information. That's the whole goal of a newspaper; it's to give readers information they can use in some form or fashion. Especially in business sections, when a reporter is writing a story the focus has to be on giving people information by which they can make money — or avoid losing it.

The difficulty most clients face is that they think their story is worth telling, and that may not be because it only relates to them. The story has to relate to a readership, and even in financial papers, it's a more general readership. With newspapers there has to be a reason to run a story. If there are two dozen stories on file, the ones that have the most current reason to run make the paper while the others drop off.

Now with newspapers themselves there are all kinds of opportunities. The general news pages have standing features, and breaking news, which is very straightforward. An example of a standing themed page is the *Globe and Mail's* Tuesday property page that I write for, and deals with commercial property. Then there are special reports, such as the *Globe's*, which are especially good. These will target specific topics over the course of the year, and are listed ahead of time. It's the same with *National Post*. These newspaper opportunities generally offer more leeway, as they are more news featurish, which means they tend to tell a story rather than deliver hard news.

HOW TO MAKE THE "PITCH"?

If you are really good at what you do, you have to express things in a way that people will want to read. If they don't read your first paragraph, they won't read your second, and if they don't read your second, they won't read your third — and then what's the point of doing it?

Good reporters and editors work as a team, and the idea is to create a package with photos, headlines, and copy that compels people to take the time to read the story. There should be a story there to be read. For a

good story you need three people: you need the client who's telling the story, you need one of their customers who is using the product, and you need a third party observer to sit up in the heavens and look down and put everything into perspective. That's sort of the holy trinity, and then you can embellish and build on that. Generalities suck; specifics are vital. Details are always more compelling.

So when you're approaching any reporter or any interview, do your homework, be prepared and understand your subject. Get an idea of what you can tell him or her to maximize the impact of what you want to say. Before you start and do an interview, most reporters will tell your PR person what they want to talk about, and your PR rep will brief you. Spend a bit of time doing your research, understand the intention of the interview, and be ready. And if the question is, "How many clients do you have in that industry?" you can say "26" instead of "Ummm, I'm not sure, a couple of dozen". The specific always works better. Understand your own business and the philosophy behind what you do.

Media training is really important, as is understanding all this about newspapers before you go in and do interviews, as well as being comfortable with the process, because in many ways the media is another one of your customers. You want to be sure to deliver a good service and product to them, as much as you are delivering a service to your customers. There has to be a definite business reason to seek media coverage, and it can't be just ego driven. The solid business reason should be because you hope to go ahead and sell more, because you hope to create a brand, because you hope to lay the ground for a new product. You have to keep the business objectives in mind and direct your efforts towards those goals.

HOW DOES A FREELANCER TYPICALLY OBTAIN ASSIGNMENTS?

For most freelancers it's up to them to come up with story ideas to pitch to editors. That means whomever is your PR advisor has to know and understand the strengths and weaknesses of individual freelance writers, because each writer tends to focus on specific publications, whether it's trade or general interest. A client wants to work with writers who cover regularly the areas of interest to their business. Clients shouldn't

overlook the trade publications; they have an important role because they appeal directly to your customers in a particular industry segment.

The whole idea of successful PR is to be a cumulative effort that over time creates a brand identity, creates a perception of your company. It cannot be a one-shot deal. Don't look for huge coverage all the time; take a look at a program built over time where little hits are as important as the big features.

The more you deal with the media and freelancers, the more confidence you will have in your abilities to provide what they need to write a good story. At worst, freelancers will keep the stories you've pitched on file, with your contact details, so that when another story comes up they can easily pull up your number. Again, it's a cumulative process.

HOW MANY FREELANCE ARTICLES DO YOU WRITE IN A YEAR?

300

AND WHAT DO YOU NEED FROM A NEWS SOURCE TO GET THE ARTICLES WRITTEN?

I will sometimes work with an idea suggested to me, if I think it is good. By and large when an editor assigns me a story the very first thing I do is figure out who I need to talk to, make a list on a piece of paper, google companies and find a contact number. Often within hours of receiving the assignment I will be on the phone making contact.

The hardest thing about the business these days, isn't doing the interviews, it isn't writing the story, it's just getting people to return your calls. I always like to begin with the editor giving me a strong one-paragraph outline of what their expectations are for the story. The best stories are always edited before they're written. If you have a strong sense of the story going in, it naturally makes the writing process easier because you know who you have to talk to, to create a well-balanced story. You then find out who and where they are, and then you start writing. My own approach is somewhat different than most freelancers, who will do three interviews for a story, because I often like to do five to seven. I find the more people I talk to, the better the story gets. For me, after all these years, it doesn't require a whole lot more time. I just prefer to do it that way because I'm only as good as my last story.

When you've identified the people you want to talk to, you line up the interviews. These shouldn't take more than 15-20 minutes. What more can people say, when they know exactly what you need from them? Often going in, I will talk to the PR person and explain what I want to learn from this interviewee, and the PR person will then try to book an hour, and I'll say forget it, I need 20 minutes. I have an appreciation that what I do is intrusive and these are busy people, and that's why I'm talking to them — I want the best in their field to talk to me.

When the interviews are done, I'll type up my notes. When I feel I have enough material I will sit back and think about: what is this story really about, what is the most important thing to tell, what is going to sell this story, what is going to make a connection with readers. Then I find a way to express that essence. Often it is through the experience of the customer of the interviewee; people want to read about other people's experiences.

So it's important for your clients, as interviewees, to remember that not only do you want to have your story told, but also to tell it in a readable fashion — which most often means telling it through the eyes of their customers. You also should not be afraid of addressing shortcomings, as well as pluses. It's life and no one expects you to be perfect. The readers don't expect you to be perfect.

WHAT MAKES FOR YOU A GOOD NEWS SOURCE?

First of all it is someone who returns my call promptly, and understands that these stories need to be written within tight deadlines. Next on the list is somebody who knows the important details of his or her own business, and can answer me with specifics rather than generalities.

I don't like waffle or evasiveness because I can see through it, and it always boomerangs against you. I also don't like people who try to push their agenda in interviews, rather than addressing mine. I'll just drag it back and say, "No, you didn't answer my question".

HOW DO YOU FIT UP TO SEVEN PEOPLE INTO AN ARTICLE?

Most of my articles are 800-900 words in length depending on the publication, but how many people you interview depends on how much space you have.

If you are writing 500 words then you can't handle more than three people, if you do 100 words for each of them, and then write the transitions plus closing.

I will try to use all my interviewees by having them discuss a different aspect of the story. They may only get a paragraph or a paragraph and a half, but they shouldn't be concerned because with the cumulative approach to PR, you want your name out there on a regular basis, associated in a way that helps develop the brand. That helps develop recognition, and is a long-term process.

SHOULD MY CLIENTS FEAR THE MEDIA?

The only people who should fear the media are those with something to hide. There is a tendency to screw things up among certain publications and certain reporters. It's often unintentional. You've got to understand this is a business that deals with me reporting what you say, or me reporting what I thought I heard. There are all kinds of room for error.

After 40 years, I still have the ability to mess up people's names. It's not an exact sort of business. You can't demand a retraction if someone got things wrong in a minor way. You have to look at the totality; did the article get your story across? Having said that, there are also good people and bad people in the freelance business, some who know what they're doing and some who don't.

WHEN IS IT IN THE CLIENT'S INTEREST TO SPEAK WITH MEDIA?

There are two things here. The first is "News". When you have an initiative that you are proud of, you would like to see it recognized — that's news value. Then there is the understanding that the media can be a relatively cheap way to create brand awareness and augment marketing efforts. Advertising budgets go up and down. PR is infinitely cheaper to do than advertising.

If a PR program is well crafted, and done as a long-term project, it can take advantage of numerous media opportunities. It's cumulative in effect, and builds to an end. Little bits are helpful, big stories

are helpful. But there has to be an underlying quality and value to what you are offering the media, and your interactions with journalists. If you're not creating value, you'll soon be caught out.

YOU'VE SEEN A LOT OF CHANGES IN THE MEDIA; WHERE DO YOU THINK THE MEDIA IS GOING NEXT?

We are going through an interesting period, and the only thing you can count on is change. Newspapers are not as profitable as they once were, because they are having to adjust to the Internet. Many newspapers are increasingly getting into electronic media. There will always be a requirement for print media, however, because people like it. It may be a smaller group and readership, but as long as media outlets deliver something that creates value, there will continue to be a demand for their services.

Many newspapers are very good at finding new ways to create revenue. The future depends on whether they can find revenue to sustain the information volume. I'm not unduly concerned; radio was supposed to kill newspapers, television was supposed to kill radio, the Internet was supposed to kill them all. The media will always exist, just not necessarily in the same form. There will always be a way for bright people to adapt. And there will always be a role for hacks like me because the media will always need content.

ANY FINAL WORDS FOR MY CLIENTS AS "NEWS SOURCES"?

Never look at things in isolation. Look at PR as an ongoing plan, a long-term process to achieve specific measurable goals.

TERRENCE BELFORD is one of Canada's leading — and busiest — freelance business writers, with articles appearing in the *Globe and Mail's* Special Reports, Travel and Tuesday property page sections. He also writes for the *National Post* entrepreneurial section on Monday, as well as the general news and business sections of the *Toronto Star*.

Belford started his career with the *Globe and Mail* in 1968, and then worked in Ottawa as a speechwriter, journalist for CTV, and at the *Globe's* news bureau. His experience in magazines includes being on the masthead of *Weekend Canadian*, *Enroute* and a variety of other publications. In 1975 he was part of the team that launched *MacLean's* weekly newsmagazine, and then the Sunday edition of the *Toronto Star*. By the early '80's, he was in management at the *Toronto Star*, running the news office. He has also operated his own PR agency.



Effective media relations, in public, private and non-for-profit sectors, is critical. Success depends on it. Without exception. And key to effective media relations is understanding the media – print and broadcast. In a series of web postings on www.rickhallpr.com, direct feedback from today's important writers and editors will be featured, offering clients a rare window into the world of journalism, what works and what doesn't in media relations. The better a client knows the media, the more effective media relations will be.

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