

RICK HALL PR

# FOURTH ESTATE

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

## Better know the press

*Part 5: Mitchell Brown*

*Editor-in-Chief, Canadian Retailer Magazine,  
Retail Council of Canada*

### **HOW DOES A MEMBERSHIP-DRIVEN OR ORIENTED PUBLICATION DIFFER FROM OTHER TYPES OF MEDIA, AND PUBLICATIONS THAT ARE SOLD AT THE NEWSSTAND?**

We cover the retail industry, which is a pretty broad term. Our members range from the largest retailer names you can think of to the corner shop that's been owned by the same couple for 50 years.

In my experience, magazines that are sold on a newsstand or delivered for free have two major constituencies they write for – they write for the readers, and they write for the advertisers. With an association publication, it's a little bit different because we consider our readership as Retail Council of Canada (RCC) members and prospective members. We're constantly looking for new ways to service and inform our current members, and attract the interest of prospective members, and the magazine is an important part of our marketing plans.

### **CAN YOU SAY MORE ABOUT WHAT YOUR MEMBERSHIP FINDS OF INTEREST, AND EXPECTS TO READ, IN CANADIAN RETAILER?**

RCC represents more than 40,000 storefronts across the country. That number includes all of the franchise locations of some of our bigger members, as well as a number of our smaller members. Independent retailers currently constitute about 70 per cent of our membership.

Our smaller members appreciate merchandising and business consulting advice. The larger members tend to value the government advocacy work done by RCC. We also speak on behalf of the industry when there are contentious issues covered in the press.

Retailers of all sizes find the topics of import taxes, the environment, logistics, and transportation of huge importance. Retailers, for instance, have a major stake in maintaining the roads, bridges and ports that keep our businesses supplied.

### **WHAT'S THE CHALLENGE FOR YOU IN TERMS OF DECIDING ON YOUR STORY LINE UP WITH SUCH A VARIED MEMBERSHIP? WHAT'S THE EDITORIAL PROCESS YOU GO THROUGH?**

My main criteria to decide what stories to cover are: "How does this news or development help retailers build their businesses? How does this information help their businesses survive in the current economic times?" So if I have a press release talking about, say, how store theft rates are increasing and how to prevent this, I will likely follow up because loss prevention issues affect every retailer. Supply chain issues, sustainability and "going green" issues are all very important to retailers right now, as is anything to do with how to staff your store and how to give good customer service.

Because of that, we favour articles on themes like how to deal with unruly customers, how to create the best storefront for your business or how to get the best out of your employees – articles that appeal to all segments of the readership.

We get a lot of product announcement press releases: "XYZ corp. just announced a new way to do this or that." These are often not very useful for our purposes because we represent retailers of every stripe, and a smaller retailer may not necessarily have the means to invest in the kind of technology that one of the bigger players is looking for.

### **ARE THERE OTHER ISSUES IN ADDITION TO STAFFING AND HR THAT ARE OF CONSTANT INTEREST TO THE READERSHIP AS WELL?**

Anything to do with technology is a perennial favourite – the latest technology to help with

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inventory, point-of-sale, loss prevention and merchandising, to name a few. Digital signage is huge right now in the retail business, as well as anything about consumer marketing – new ways that marketers and retailers work together to influence in-store shopping behaviour.

Health and safety has also become a major issue, and we've made some effort over the past two years to cover the topic. Much of the news here is recently introduced government legislation, so we're responding by providing our members with information in regard to the latest regulations: What they need to know about accessibility in their workplace, for instance, or what they need to know about ensuring everybody knows their health and safety obligations.

#### **HOW WOULD YOU ENSURE A TECHNOLOGY ISSUE WOULD BE OF INTEREST ACROSS YOUR MEMBERSHIP, FROM A COMPANY LIKE WAL-MART TO AN INDEPENDENTLY RUN SHOP?**

The way to do it is to be sure the editorial makes clear the benefits of the technology, and the type of retailer and application to which it's directed. To cover all these bases, we've just launched a newsletter called "The Independent Retailer," which is targeted to our smaller retailer members. If someone comes along with new technology specifically for small business, then I would consider that for the new publication.

As an association, we're constantly looking for new ideas on services and information to offer our members. In the past three years, we've also launched publications aimed at loss prevention professionals and human resource professionals. These are the key areas where we've anticipated our members will need the most up-to-date information possible.

#### **AS YOUR MAGAZINE AND NEWSLETTERS ARE A MEMBER-DRIVEN SERVICE, HOW DO YOU LEARN FROM THE MEMBERSHIP WHAT THEY WANT TO READ ABOUT?**

We conduct a reader survey every summer, along the lines of: Can you tell us a little bit about what you'd like to see in the magazine? What you like/don't like? What kind of services would you like to see advertised in the magazine? The last one we did was very informative; we found nine times out of 10 we hit the

mark, so we will continue the course of trying to ensure that every issue of the magazine has something for everybody. So here's something informative for the IT manager, something for the small retailer, and something for the CEO.

We also learn story ideas from our government relations team, who will say, for example, "This security legislation is really big in Alberta right now. We should talk about it and let all of our members know because it's coming up and has nation-wide implications."

#### **HOW DO YOU USE NEWS SOURCES FOR A MEMBERSHIP PUBLICATION IN WHAT IS, AFTER ALL, A HIGHLY COMPETITIVE INDUSTRY?**

Retail is an inherently competitive business. One of the challenges we face is asking a member to provide a case study on their success in, say, loss prevention, when they know their leading competitors will probably read the same article. But we make it clear that we want to celebrate our members' successes and sense of accomplishment in our publications. We want the members we deal with to regard an article on their success in this magazine as recognition of the excellence they've achieved.

At the same time, it goes without saying, there are certain stories that a Globe and Mail reporter might cover that we would not consider. This could include competitive battles between specific retailers, especially if both of them are members. We aim instead for a magazine that unites retailers. That's why we focus on celebrating retail excellence, to lift all boats by spreading knowledge of current best practice ideas.

#### **SO IF YOU'RE DOING A CASE STUDY ARTICLE, HOW DO YOU FIND A NEWS SOURCE, A RETAILER, WHO'S WILLING TO SHARE AS FRANKLY AS POSSIBLE THE SECRETS OF THEIR SUCCESS?**

PR folks can help in this regard. For our recent tech issue, we had the PR people who represent Microsoft come to us and say; "We'd like to talk about this retail technology that Microsoft is working on. Would you be interested?" I said I would be if you could find me a retailer who'd be willing to talk about how they implemented this technology with their operations, and how it benefited the bottom line.

They came back with a mid-sized pet food supply chain company in B.C. that started out with note pads and paper in their offices, and have now completely automated their operation. This has enabled them to establish a great customer loyalty program, as well as operate paperless from any store location.

I think the PR people who know what they're doing don't call up and say "Write a story about this great technology provider." They'll say, "Here's a story about a retailer who has used our client, and has some great things to say about it. They want to tell other people why it was so beneficial for their business."

As a publication, that's what we have in common with newspapers and other media outlets, in that we ask: What's the story? You want to tell us how this retail technology is changing large retailers. It would be nice if you could tell us who they are, and how they are changing, because otherwise we're just talking about how wonderful you are.

#### **IN THIS KIND OF CASE, WHAT IS IT YOU WANT TO KNOW FROM A NEWS SOURCE?**

I want to know what the business challenge/purchase decision/implementation process is in as plain a language as possible because with our magazine we are dealing with everyone from the CIO to Joe Smith at the store down the street. The story has to be something you can explain in simple terms. Supplying the name and contact information of a retailer, who would be more than happy to speak about the implementation, could seal the deal. I've had PR companies call me out of the States and say, "My client has just invented the most amazing thing ever." I'll say that's great, but we're Canadian Retailer magazine, so can you give me a case study of someone in Canada who's used it. And it becomes a question of whether this product or service is really so revolutionary that we want to run with it along the lines of "this is what's coming in technology." If it is just an improvement on last year's widget, then I don't care.

#### **GIVEN THIS EXPERIENCE, WHAT FOR YOU MAKES A GOOD NEWS SOURCE?**

Well, it would really help if they did their homework. I've gotten so many calls from people who have no

idea who we are, what our purpose is, who prints us. They just know the name Canadian Retailer and they will call up: "Hello, I've got a great story idea for you." "Ok, do you know who our audience is?" and they don't. I'll get a pitch for the latest consumer product on the marketplace – we don't care about that. There are other places where you can find out about the latest camping gear, the latest shoes and things like that.

What we want to know is what's out there that's the latest for retail business. What are the latest innovations in store design, technology, loss prevention, and so on.

#### **WHAT DO YOU WANT TO HEAR FROM THEM?**

I like to hear, "We just completed a case study with somebody we think you'll be interested to hear about. They have an ROI of 4:1 on this application." Some of the pitches we receive are understandable. People think "Retail Council" and they think we represent everybody who sells anything. We'll get pitches for the latest in grocery store or car dealership innovations, but they have their own associations and publications. I let the caller know our focus is more on general merchandise.

#### **HOW OPEN ARE YOU TO OUTSIDE EDITORIAL?**

I'm very open to outside ideas. A lot of the times outside people will assume that I just want to run verbatim with whatever they send me, or they assume I will take their story pitch and run with it as-is, and say this is the greatest company ever.

Instead, I will be interested in the trend the story represents, and tell my freelance writer "this is a big trend in retail and here's an expert with this company who can offer some comment on it." I'll also tell my freelancer that he/she is a good source but the story's not about their company, it's about the larger trend. I don't throw away a lot, but I want those suggesting stories to understand the trends affecting the industry, and can say how and why their client has something to say about those trends.

If I come up in a few months time needing a source on the issue, I will call them back and ask if their representative is still available to comment on it.

**WHAT'S YOUR LEAD TIME?**

We're a bimonthly publication, and we try to work about two months ahead of time. Between now (early July) and mid-July, for instance, I am collecting stories for the September-October issue. The writers have about three weeks to a month to write their stories and then we have three weeks to edit the material, and a final three weeks for layout. It's a pretty significant lead time. We're obviously not as deadline-driven as a wire service or a daily newspaper, so in that regard we try to go for quality instead of quantity.

**HOW DO YOU HANDLE THE ADVERTISING VS. EDITORIAL BALANCE ISSUE WITH YOUR MEMBERSHIP PUBLICATION?**

Our printing partner also handles the ad sales for us, so we can be hands-off in that regard. There have been a couple of cases, however, where an advertiser seems to have thought because this is an industry magazine they would make their ad look like an article. We had this instance a couple of issues ago, and we put the word ADVERTISEMENT at the top of the page, so it's clear it's not an article. But it's a pretty fine line some days. We make it clear that stories are not driven by what our suppliers want. They are driven by what our members need to know.

**IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT MY CLIENTS, AS NEWS SOURCES, SHOULD KNOW?**

For your clients, I think magazines like Canadian Retailer or those representing other associations or trades offer a clear advantage, in that you know at the outset the type of readers they reach. In return, it would be helpful if those approaching us with stories did their homework – got a sense of who we are, what we're trying to do, who we're trying to reach. We have that niche audience you may want to reach, and we're happy to work with you, but you have to meet us halfway by doing your homework first.

**CAN YOU WALK ME THROUGH THE PROCESS OF PUTTING AN ISSUE TOGETHER?**

We're starting work on our September-October issue now, so it's brainstorming time. What are the big things our members are talking about, what's being covered in the media, what are some of the Council's current initiatives we want to highlight in the publication? We'll sit down as a team in the office, and we'll knock out a couple of story ideas. I'll then develop the story outline and run that by the publisher, who is also our president and CEO. When she signs off on it, I start the process of assigning stories to a stable of freelance writers. I also keep a file of suggestions for bylined articles that I get from PR people; most of them are not very helpful because they are badly written, but some of them are actually pretty good and they speak exactly to the kind of topics retailers want to know about. So I keep them on hand in case a forthcoming issue deals with the theme.

The system functions pretty well; we can actually make final changes up to two weeks before print. Any big developments can be added at the last minute. It actually has happened that I've done a store design piece on a retailer that has gone bankrupt between the time I assigned the article and when we go to print. That's when you really have to scramble and find a story that can fill the sudden void. That's when PR people can really come through for you.

**MITCHELL BROWN** is the Editor-in-Chief for *Canadian Retailer* magazine and Manager of Publications for the Retail Council of Canada. A graduate of Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B. and the University of King's College in Halifax, he followed in the footsteps of many Maritimers by heading west to Toronto in search of opportunity. Since then, he has worked for a variety of community and daily newspapers, B2B and consumer magazines, and Web sites. He has been with the council since 2006, learning more about the retail industry than he ever thought possible.



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](http://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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