

# RICK HALL PR

Media Contact Agent

E-PORTFOLIO v2  
PROACTIVE MEDIA RELATIONS  
The advance guard of public affairs.

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Tools & Techniques

## Proactive media relations: The advance guard of public affairs

by Rick Hall

Virtually all sizable public affairs departments have a media relations function; few, however, practice what might be termed proactive media relations. Most seek to gain positive media exposure only when a concerted public affairs campaign, or push for a specific policy initiative, is underway. Or they issue press releases and engage in media relations when journalists call them after seeing the news.

And yet so much can be gained for an association, and the image of its membership and the industry or profession it represents, by conducting ongoing, proactive media relations – creatively developing story ideas on a constant, ongoing basis – and calling up the media to pitch the story and find it a home.

And this type of media relations can be quickly and effectively achieved.

The media today is a ferociously competitive industry – reporter against reporter to “break the story,” print against broadcast, media operations run like the business they are. For journalists, this means the time they used to have for story idea development has been slashed. Making sense of an ever-growing mountain of information, to find the underlying story while working within tight deadlines, is a daily challenge.

How can the public affairs practitioner take advantage of this situation? Quite simply, pitch a story – and have it “packaged” and ready to go – and you stand a much better chance of finding a home for it.

Develop the habit of practicing ongoing story development and media pitching, and you’ll likely be amazed at all the good news stories about your association or membership that you can pitch – all while building a positive image for the industry you represent and all-important rapport with key journalists, relationships that will stand you in good stead when in full campaign.

How to establish an ongoing proactive media relations initiative, and have it succeed? Here’s a list of suggested “Do’s”:

### 1. Be Positive

Be a “spin doctor” worthy of the term, and find the positive in any story or situation you hear of involving your association, membership or industry. To be of interest to the media, any story has to have a “dark side” – it is conflict, the tension of opposing forces/ideas/interests that will get the media’s attention, and that you will need to use as a “news hook” for your own purposes to be sure of success. Just be sure the positive aspect, the element that reflects well on the interests you represent, is watertight and that you are able to communicate it clearly and forcefully so it will come through in the earned media.

## RICK HALL ON PROACTIVE MEDIA RELATIONS

“This month, the Public Affairs Association of Canada E-news features a guest article by communications consultant and proud spin-doctor Rick Hall, of Rick Hall PR. He explains, step-by-step, how to take charge of media relations before it takes charge of you.”

## THE ADVANCE GUARD OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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### **2. Be Proactive**

Constantly ask what is new/novel/a first/best/biggest in your association or with individual members. Package this information, line up interviewees/experts for possible interviews, know the “so what” (see below), research the media and journalist likely interested in the story – and the media it is most in the interests of your association to attract – and pick up the phone and make the pitch.

### **3. Know the “So What”**

Without intending to sound crass on the matter, the key “pitchability” factor about a story is the “So What” aspect: Why should a journalist, reader, viewer, editor or anyone care about the issue at hand? Does the proposed story tell them something they did not already know, or does it offer information or knowledge applicable to a broad range of instances? It is a truism that folks are always interested most in that which affects them directly, or offers insight into a situation they may be facing. Accordingly, the closer the “So What” comes to a human interest aspect, the broader the media appeal of the story will be. This is of importance if you want to reach out beyond the trade press or beat reporter assigned to cover the industry you represent, and want to develop a positive profile in the general mainstream media.

#### **4. Tie in with broader concerns, trends or issues**

Related to the above, few folks are interested in the vested interest concerns of what might be perceived as a “fat cat” organization or profession – unless they’re one of the felines themselves. Yet virtually every issue an organization or industry may be facing can be tied or compared to a broader issue or trend, therefore making your story of interest to a wider audience – and media. Find this element of commonality, make it your central focus, and build your profile – and case – with the broader community.

**5. Be honest, but be smart too**

As stated above, for a story to have interest to the media, it must involve a tale of unresolved tension or conflict. Play on this issue to ensure your media placement. Make it explicit and state it to your media contact to entice them to cover the story. Explain the complexities in simple terms, respect the opposition (and maybe even acknowledge the validity of a point or two the other side makes) but know your own aces down cold and be assertive (in a pleasant manner always) in stating them – why your position is in the public interest, how it relates to or sheds light on broader trends, the due diligence your organization has done to know the position it has taken is in the best interests of all concerned – whatever is most relevant.

**6. Have your messaging ready**

This is an often-made remark, but needs emphasis because it is so often the weak link in the earned media process. Developing the strongest possible, and approved, messaging for an interview or story is hard work. Get it done, use it to tell the journalist what you're going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you've told them - and the strong messaging you've developed to reflect well on the interests you represent can't help but make it to press.

**7. Always be available**

Another oft-made point, but worth repeating here: Be a journalist's good friend. Help them get their stories into print, their byline noticed and the friendship will pay dividends. And don't just be of assistance when you want them to print a story favourable to your interests; establish yourself as a reliable resource on the industry you represent, and make known you welcome their calls, to assist in any way possible. Tell them who your counterparts are at competing organizations, give them the "heads up" on issues or events they will want to know about, and you'll likely receive a warmer reception when you call with a story you need them to cover.

**8. If you can't think what to pitch - ask the journalist**

As the journalist's good friend, call them up or meet with them to engage them in conversation to find out the topics they may be interested in covering. Working together, you may be able to make stories happen. Most publications, for instance, have special editions several times a year. Does your association have proprietary research you can share with the journalist that can act as the catalyst for an article? Does the association have in-house working or symposium papers that can do double duty? The point is to again act as a resource, to create positive earned media for the interests you represent.

**9. Don't practice only story-oriented media relations, to enjoy positive relations with the media**

Editorial roundtables conducted with “Tier 1” business and financial media for the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario led to the idea of conducting a series of financial seminars for senior editorial staff at the Financial Post and Report on Business at the Globe and Mail. The result was an hour of “face” – and “getting to know you” time every week for a month for Institute representatives with key journalists at the two national papers. A further outcome was an increased number of calls from these journalists to the Institute on stories already in train, enabling the Institute to promote its members’ interests at an early stage of the editorial process. Early summer charity baseball games, pitching journalists against Association representatives, can fill a similar function.

**10. Good Friends, with a Lethal Sting in the Tail.**

While ongoing, proactive media relations, which create an upbeat, positive image of the interests an association represents, can be quickly and effectively achieved, like all achievements worth celebrating, it does not come without risk. And that risk primarily results from failing to know your aces, understanding how deft messaging can protect against the “dark side” tension of a story that secured the journalist’s interest, and inability to communicate your interests clearly and forcefully enough that they will survive the most ruthless editorial process. Journalists can only work with, and are compelled to use, the material you provide them. Package and present it effectively, and there will be no unpleasant surprises when you read the resulting article.

Practicing media relations in this way, developing stories from within, providing media with good information they can use, communicating your aces clearly and in complete confidence, is a sure fire way to achieve the highest level of positive media coverage for your organization.

CONTACT

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Thank you for taking the time to view this media relations e-portfolio.

For further information, or if you would like to view a complete corporate communications, media relations, analyst relations, strategic planning, event planning, corporate sponsorship portfolio, please contact Rick Hall at [info@rickhallpr.com](mailto:info@rickhallpr.com)

Click here to visit our website: [www.rickhallpr.com](http://www.rickhallpr.com)

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