

RICK HALL PR

FOURTH ESTATE

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

Better know the press

Part 1: Simon Beck

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WHEN DEALING WITH NEWS SOURCES, WHAT ARE THE TOP THINGS YOU REALLY NEED FROM THEM?

I think, honesty obviously is nice, for them not to speak in kind of “corporate-ese”, and to frame their answers simply. I’ve noticed in the last few years a lot more corporate managers have been trained; they’ve been media trained and they tend to speak in corporate clichés which aren’t that newsworthy. It depends on the kind of story you’re doing, but I think they should also be aware that journalists are happy to talk off the record and that they can be trusted to respect the boundaries. So it’s hard to generalize because it depends on the industry you’re talking about. But I think to have the honesty and time to spend to talk to us when we call, to return calls is good and also to understand that we have a job to do and not to view a call from a reporter as a negative thing. It’s not always true that bad publicity is good publicity. Very often they have a lot more to gain from being in the media than being out of it.

IF YOU GET “CORPORATE-ESE” FROM A NEWS SOURCE, WILL YOU GIVE UP ON THEM BECAUSE IT’S NO USE: YOU’LL DEVELOP OTHER SOURCES?

Yes. I mean you always expect clichéd bland answers from a PR representative or a corporate communications person. Then when they pass you onto an executive you want to talk to and you get exactly the same language from them, it’s not that useful.

WHAT ARE SOME THE THINGS YOU FIND ARE LEAST HELPFUL OR USEFUL?

Obviously people who are evasive. That’s definitely for a reason. In terms of my biggest problem in the job, it can be the PR professionals who represent them. Often being bombarded with information

that really isn’t useful to me. I would say I probably delete nine out of 10 emails I get that are PR pitches. I read them quickly but PR professionals and the companies they represent really need to target their PR releases more carefully. The problem with email is it increases the tendency to do blanket emails and a lot of them end up with journalists who are not interested in them. I am not saying I don’t want PR professionals or marketing people to pitch me. Obviously I do I get a lot of interesting story ideas from PR pitches but I do only end up using one out of 10.

WHAT IS YOUR MAIN “PET PEEVE” WHEN DEALING WITH A NEWS SOURCE AND HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH IT WHEN IT HAPPENS?

It depends what it is. If you mean it’s somebody (pushing) to try to get me to write something, then yes.

WHY DO YOU NOT LET SPOKESPERSONS READ A STORY BEFORE IT GOES TO PRINT?

It’s for several reasons. I get annoyed when they don’t understand how the media works and they say something like: “Can we look at the story before you print it?” That’s very annoying. Or, “Can I check your facts before you print it”. And they don’t understand that newspapers and magazines really don’t do that and if any media publication does, they really aren’t being professional.

Say we’re writing about a company that we believe has done something wrong. We don’t want them to know. We don’t want them to look at the piece and try to get an injunction. That’s the most extreme case. But other than that, we’re The Globe and Mail and I am sure other papers are the same. We’re a professional organization and we have our own systems in place to check that stories are correct. It’s not the interviewee’s job to tell us a story is right or wrong. There’s a system

in place. If we do make a mistake we correct it afterwards. That's the way it's always been. We think in order to ensure our independence, we have to maintain the confidentiality of what we're printing until it comes out when everybody can see it. Otherwise it would be a slippery slope to losing our independence. If you show it to somebody before it comes out, nine times out of 10 they are going to say, "Can you change that word?" Or "Can you change the quote I gave you?" and then it's a slippery slope towards not being an independent publication.

HOW USEFUL, HELPFUL OR NECESSARY ARE PRINT NEWS RELEASES?

They are necessary. Obviously every news release is only going to be interesting to a minority of people who'll read it, but they're very important. Obviously when you're releasing corporate information it's almost required nowadays. So I think they're useful but they are only a first step. I think sometimes companies, authorities or governments, will issue a press release and think that's it and they're no longer under any obligation to speak further. They use it as a shield to hide behind. Especially if they are releasing something that is fairly newsworthy. They have to realize that people are going to follow up with much more detailed questions. So I think they are important, but only part of the equation.

HOW IMPORTANT IS DETAIL IN A NEWS RELEASE?

You don't have to tell the whole story or give the whole context in a news release, but obviously when you're writing a news release, the job in writing them is to draw the reporters or editors in, to be interested in the press release. Let's face it, nine times out of 10 you're not going to be interested unless something piques your interest. They have to be written creatively and with an eye towards a news story. But they are just a starting off point and as long as the company issuing the press release is prepared to discuss it further, that's fine.

HOW MUCH DO YOU RELY ON BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS WHEN YOU DEVELOP A STORY?

Oh, an awful lot. If I see some kind of news release or I get a story idea, I'll check out the company or industry involved first. The first source for us is always what we've written before and what other

newspapers have written. We know the background we know whether it's already been covered or not covered, and then we use the Internet to check out corporate sites or organizations. I do a lot of background checking on a story or a topic before I even assign it, but then when a writer has a story, it's very important for them to use a lot of background information, whether it's talking to people related to the story or checking out background documents from industry groups or organizations. So yes, it's very very important. Nowadays with the internet, the problem can almost be — there's too much information and you don't always know what's relevant or what isn't or what's right. So checking documents is important, and because of the internet, now you have to do a lot more due diligence that what you're reading and getting information from is correct.

WHAT'S THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A NEWS SOURCE AVAILABLE TO SPEAK TO THE MEDIA?

It is very important. If you are putting out a news release regarding some newsworthy event you know is going to take place, it's really important you have your media professionals and executives available to talk to the media and not hide away or say I'm too busy. It's really important to make yourselves available at crucial times. Let's face it. You can use the news cycles as an advantage to get what you want out there. Being savvy and being available is important.

DO YOU EVER USE VIDEO NEWS RELEASES?

Video news releases? Myself? No, I don't.

WHAT ARE YOUR COMMENTS ABOUT CORPORATE WEBSITES? HOW MUCH INFORMATION DO THEY HAVE THAT'S USEFUL TO YOU?

I find a lot of corporate websites now are increasingly getting very well organized. The most important thing is to have a good navigation design. It's very annoying if something's buried away and you can't find it. The other thing that's helpful is that most good companies, either big or small, will have buttons you can press that take you to the media contact immediately and where you can call up former press releases or background documents. If you can't find the media spokesman quickly on a website — that's incredibly annoying. I find most companies have got that right. It's also good to have the corporate

executives listed. It's important to have a really good overview of what the company does. But I usually find they're doing incredibly well.

CAN YOU NAME A COUPLE OF WEBSITES THAT YOU PARTICULARLY LIKE?

Not really, off the top of my head. I'd have to think about that. I'll tell you who don't do a particularly good job yet are the university websites. They are almost uniformly impossible to navigate because they're trying to obviously please students. The students have to find information but it's sometimes darn near impossible to find out who it is you're trying to speak to or to try and understand how their course programs work. So educational institutions need to do better with their websites. Governmental institutions aren't at the forefront of good websites, but I would say most corporations now, and the bigger they are, they're usually packed with information.

WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON NEWS CONFERENCES? ARE THEY VERY USEFUL OR NECESSARY?

It depends really on what it is. In terms of time efficiency for the person who's giving the press conference, they're very important because you get the chance for the press to meet the person face to face and ask questions at the same time. It's good for a reporter to know that he can actually get a question in and hear what other people are saying, rather than spending a whole day on the phone trying to chase a person who may or may not call back. So I think news conferences are very important as long as the PR controller who's sitting there doesn't manipulate it and steer the person who's giving the press conference away from the difficult questions. If you're giving a press conference, let the person who's giving it say what they need to say. And don't cut it short, either. It could be corporate or a police press conference. They allow five questions and then they shut it down. It's very frustrating. If you're going to have it, give everybody who's there a chance to ask the questions they need. It's better to do that than to have a reporter (have to) call back. And there's nothing more frustrating to a reporter than to not know whether a company's going to call back or not. Obviously if it's a really, really controversial subject, there's a chance they just don't want to talk to the media. Fine. Just make it clear. If someone doesn't call you back in

business, it's irritating and seen as impolite. Reporters are the same. It's always better to give them some kind of information, even if it's not all that they need. Otherwise, the risk of a story being partially wrong or incorrect is always there. Just to ignore a reporter is courting problems because they're going to rely on other people to tell your story. So that's important to know. I think press conferences are very important, as long as you manage them openly and don't make it look like you're doing it for face value or you're not really giving out important information.

WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS... YOU KNOW LIKE AN INDUSTRY BRIEFING?

They're very useful. It gives you good face time. Whether it's just for one organization or several at the same time, I think it's useful. Or conference calls are also useful.

WHICH CORPORATE EXECUTIVES DO YOU PREFER TO SPEAK WITH FOR CORPORATE NEWS?

I think it would depend on what the subject is. Those in the financial side would like to speak with CFO's. Obviously everybody prefers to speak to CEO's, but sometimes speaking to a CEO is not always best because often CEO's are very guarded, whereas somebody further down the chain actually might be more honest. It's hard to answer in general, but I will say we clearly prefer to speak to a real live executive rather than a media communications person. At least they're talking to you and you know that you're from the source and if they don't want to answer a question, they can say: "No I don't want to talk to you about it". At least you're through to them. Whenever you speak to the media officer or PR officer, you always feel like they're just deflecting — that you're not getting the full story.

HOW WELL DO YOU THINK THE NEWS SOURCES YOU DEAL WITH UNDERSTAND YOUR JOB AND YOUR REQUIREMENTS?

I think they have to understand that we're not always out to get them and that we're not liable to make mistakes. Our job is to do things right and get it correct. I think they just have to understand we're under deadline pressures and that it's in their best interests to steer us in the right direction, to be honest

and to be friendly. Let's face it, the friendlier you are and the warmer and the more open you are, the better chance you have of having a good relationship with a reporter and at least of being able to manage your message. So I think it's in any executive's or news source's interest to understand that journalists are human beings and they have a job to do as well, and that they're not your enemy necessarily — they can be your best friend if you play it right.

CAN YOU SAY SOMETHING ABOUT DEADLINES?

If we're talking about a daily newspaper and a reporter at the Globe, especially in the business section, they really have to have their story filed by five in the afternoon or, if it's a really late-breaking story, by six. So if a reporter calls at eleven in the morning asking for information and he doesn't get a call back 'til five thirty, it's often too late and they'll have had to go somewhere else to get that information or they might get it wrong or there might be an omission. So obviously, I know you can't always call back straight away but there comes a point late in the afternoon where it gets very stressful for a reporter, so you have to respect those deadlines.

SO WOULD YOU ACCEPT A LOWER-LEVEL SPOKESPERSON JUST TO GET A COMMENT?

Oh yes. Some comment is better than nothing and as long as the person speaking knows their topic, it doesn't have to be a CEO. We don't expect to speak to CEO's usually, unless we're interviewing them or unless it's a regular profile or a very friendly profile with their company. In a smaller business, it's usually a CEO. But in a big company, we don't usually expect to speak with a CEO unless we know that CEO very well and we're friendly with them and they can talk to us off the record. But generally speaking, we're happy enough with a senior person who knows their stuff. It's probably just as good.

WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON PR REPRESENTATIVES?

I like them. I think they do a good job. But especially at the entrance level, the younger people are a bit green and could be better trained in knowing who

they're talking to. We get an awful lot of calls from PR reps who really don't know what I do and don't know that what they're pitching to me is a complete waste of my time, so it's just a time thing. Know who you're targeting your message to, rather than sending out blanket information hoping somebody picks it up. Another peeve I have is constantly being called or emailed to ask me if I got the press release and am I interested because, believe me, if I am interested, you'll hear from me straight away. I think that it's important to know who you're dealing with and make an effort to cultivate the acquaintance. If I know a PR person — I've met them or spoken to them numerous times — I am much more open to hearing why I should be interested in a story. I get a lot of really good story ideas from companies pitching a product or service. So I definitely rely on them a lot of the time. We need each other. If they do a bit more background research, due diligence in terms of what they're pitching and to whom, go ahead and pick up the phone. With the internet, deadlines are even more important because we don't just have the deadline for print, we sometimes want to get things up on the web as quickly as possible, so that increases the importance of deadlines for us.



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He moved on to other publications, including the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong in 1988 and then became that paper's Washington correspondent. In nearly nine years at the Globe he has served as the Review Editor and Toronto news editor, and was appointed Special Reports Editor three years ago. In this capacity, he oversees all editorial special reports, plus GlobeAuto and Real Estate sections.



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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