

Who cares? – Asking tough questions is key to taking your message to the nationals

by Anu Ramani

For any PR practitioner in a non-consumer space, the national media is something of a bugbear. The mainstay of our work is often the trade media, or other specialised branches of the media, who address clients' direct customers, and speak the same language. The trade press performs a very valuable role. On the other hand exposure in national and international titles gains CXO- and policymaker-level visibility. Hence it is common for technology, med-tech or business-to-business PR folks to be tasked with achieving 'nationals' level coverage for their stories. This applies regardless of sector – from camera lenses to surgical implements.

While that is a task PR firms are glad to take on, it's important to realise that you can't get nationals coverage with a trade message. Pity the poor PR executive who needs to call the technology editor at the Guardian or the Financial Times, with a story about version 345.1x of a software programme for data storage management. I can tell you from experience that it's not pleasant!

That's not to say that you can't ever hope for exposure in the nationals if you play in a business-to-business or deep-technology space. Far from it. However you will succeed only if you look hard at your own news and ask the "who cares" question - why should your announcement about a new widget be relevant to the broader readership of the Times or Wall Street Journal? What larger trends does it play into? What are the details that can be trimmed out to make it punchy, palatable and worth covering?

I remember a wise man telling me about when he called a journalist at the Economist with a story about a semiconductor company. "I had barely got past the word 'semiconductor' in my first sentence", he said, "when the editor stopped me with 'you've lost my interest already'. And it went downhill from there."

It's an interesting insight into the way editors at business publications receive these pitches. What the editor really wants to know is: it may be a semiconductor story, but why do its implications mean the end of the world as I know it? Take new steering technology for example. Talking to the editor about how a new approach to rear-wheel steering is enabling tighter turns than ever before and could mean a new style of car replacing the good old black cabs on the street in London, will unquestionably give you a better chance of getting coverage than a dry pitch on the engineering ins and outs of the technology.

A press release pitch is like a red flag to a bull. It reeks of PR laziness, something that journalists are vocal in condemning, and to an extent rightly so. Years in the industry have taught me that one cannot have as free a hand in the writing a press release as one might perhaps like. A press release has a number of constraints, not least of which are the dreaded "style guidelines". Legal sometimes needs to approve it. It is often not just used as a media document. It's a permanent record retained on a website, circulated to clients and so on. So it's worth thinking about how we can interest the national media in the "announcement", not the "press release". Rather than going in with a straight press-release pitch, can you offer an expert to comment on a related topic? What about a customer, perhaps a name familiar to the audience that might pique interest? Or a customer's customer?

Think proactively, as well. Engaging with the nationals is easiest when you're able to react quickly to a big buzz around some event with widespread impact. Snow day? A perfect time to call the nationals with stories on software to make mobile networks work better because they're struggling to cope with everyone calling work from Waterloo station to say they're going to be late, or can't get to the office today.

Sounds like hard work, doesn't it. And it is. Addressing the "who cares" question early on in the process through engagement with your PR agency inevitably receives initial pushback from those who have worked so hard on the development and understandably think it's the best thing since sliced bread. But they come round too, and the results are definitely worth it.