

Three Key Tests for Earning Editorial Publicity

By Mark P. Buckshon

Are you guilty of mismanaging your relationships with the news media? I'm afraid you might be, based on my often-painful personal experiences as an editor. Fortunately, there are some simple steps you can take to earn positive publicity in relevant publications without paying to play. Consider the tests of readership value, editorial quality, and timing.

My business publishes regional architectural, engineering, and construction trade publications. We earn most of our revenue from advertising, often associated with sponsored (pay-to-play) editorial features. However, we are not purely a “you pay, we publish” organization, because that sort of media lacks credibility and, in any case, I am a journalist at heart.

In fact, my career spans three disciplines—working journalist, public/media relations specialist, and finally, for the past 25 years, architectural, engineering, and construction trade publisher. My career has allowed me to practice some real journalism, without being beholden to an impersonal media corporation hierarchy.

Nevertheless, we still need to pay the bills, while resolving a challenging business conflict, which can be expressed simply as:


We must give away our most valuable offering (independent editorial coverage) for free, while charging top dollar for much less effective advertising.

In my experience, far too few publicity-seekers appreciate the business news publishers' conflicts between editorial integrity and revenue requirements. Potential authors offer poorly written,

self-serving news releases and announcements, sometimes implying they are doing us a favor in providing hashed-over material. Then they hire a third party to follow up with insistent phone calls, saying, “I’m calling on behalf of (publicist) and am wondering if you’ve received our announcement.”

There are three pillars to the decision about whether your news releases will be accepted/adapted for free publicity or punted to the advertising sales department with a pay-to-play response.

While my observations below may not apply to every media organization, I’m confident that if you adhere to them, you will succeed with your media relations and achieve much more effective earned-publicity success.

1. How valuable is the news you are providing to the reader/community compared to its more limited relevance to your own business? If you have completed a project and wish to brag about it, my reaction is “so  who cares?” However, if you have just won a competition to design or build a major new development, the story is different — because subtrades and suppliers might be able to get in on the action. They care.

2. How easy do you make it for us to give you free publicity? Is your news release/announcement well-written, with factual details and without puffery? Do you include enticing images or videos to go with the story? Is it written in Associated Press style with clearly attributed quotes, with a captivating lede (introductory sentence)? Can the news release be turned into editorial content with minimal editing and without requiring full-scale interviews or editorial research?

3. How good is your timing? If you submit your announcement when we have dozens of others waiting for attention, you may find yours lands on the trash heap, when a week later we might

use it. Unfortunately, you can’t control this variable because the times when there is likely to be little competition (say between Christmas and New Year’s Day) are also likely to occur when few people will be reading your news.

If you think especially about the first two variables, you will increase your chances of success. Unless you pay for your publicity, there is no 100 percent certain thing, and efforts to push the issue—such as phoning the editor, or spamming with excessive emails—will disqualify you under the second criteria. Intrusive follow-up efforts cost us valuable time.

Of course, you can shortcut the rejection or timing risk and speed things up by opting for pay-for-play coverage. I’m working on one of these files now. The client, knowing our systems, agreed to purchase a substantial advertisement, but asked that his requested editorial content be published a month later. I’m willing to spend several hours conducting interviews and ensuring that the story is written to journalistic standards because we are being compensated. The fee-paid approach for editorial publicity (or what is called “native advertising” in social media) is often a worthwhile investment, especially in publications that include both earned editorial and fee-paid content. You have control over the timing and editorial focus, and still achieve editorial credibility.

However, it’s also okay to go the “free” route. Just remember that in aiming for independent editorial coverage, earned positive publicity isn’t really without cost, even if you don’t pay for advertising. You must take care to ensure the news you seek to promote meets the three criteria outlined above and retains realistic expectations. Respect the editors’ time and remember that there is no publicity guarantee unless you are willing to put your money to work in providing content that provides real value for your intended audience. ■