

The Media Supply Chain:

How to Increase Media Coverage for your Product or Service by Understanding and Meeting Shared Responsibilities with the Media

By David S. Brooks

In a 1999 e-mail survey of 2,500 business reporters and editors for the Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California, more than 65 percent said that PR people were the least likely to be considered a useful source for new story ideas. In fact, 60 percent said PR people never or rarely give insightful comments that contributed to story assignments.

What is behind the hostility and mistrust of PR people from the media? Quite bluntly, we have an image problem. As an industry, we often do not understand a reporter's needs. We are not very good at representing our services to our clients, and we have few ways to measure (or even quantify) our value. (Despite the fact that agencies average a mere three percent net margin, clients still think PR is expensive!)

At least political spin doctors are held in awe. Mainstream business journalists have sour opinions of publicists caused by the endless assault of extravagant promotions, vapid press releases, and the flood of e-mails, FAXes and voice mails in a constant "follow-up" mode.

Individually, we seem to know those aggressive techniques and silly promotions won't get marginal coverage in even a marginal newspaper or magazine. Yet collectively the assault continues, implying ignorance or disregard for the realities of journalism. Each bad experience further diminishes the good intentions of professional practitioners.

The current model is broken. How can PR professionals change the framework of media relations to encourage a more enlightened approach? One idea is to stop looking at the media as an adversary but as a partner (or perhaps a customer) in a larger process.

The Media Supply Chain

You can't pick up a business magazine today without hearing about "supply chain management," formal cooperation between customer and vendor

to facilitate commercial transactions and eliminate inefficiencies on both sides. Supply chain management is an enlightened view of a formerly adversarial relationship. Rather than bare-knuckled confrontation, supply chain management emphasizes shared goals, responsibilities and cooperation for mutual benefit...but only with the most trusted suppliers.

In a sense, the supply chain analogy can apply to the process of "making news." PR is an important part (but only one part) of the elaborate process of delivering accurate, unbiased and timely information to the general public on a continuous basis.

(Most journalists will recoil at this analogy, since news is reported, not manufactured. However, the chain of events and common interests make it true enough, and it is certainly a more noble description than the existing model.)

In the media supply chain, no money changes hands. The publicist provides excellent quality raw materials in the form of appropriate story ideas, press releases, fact sheets, executive interviews,



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product samples, B-roll, etc. In fact, sometimes just a good idea and a well-timed phone call is value enough!

The media's job is to transform these materials, gathered together with dozens of their own ideas and sources, into high-quality finished goods (The News) on a monthly, weekly, or daily basis. These stories attract and retain readers, which allow media owners to make money by selling advertising or subscriptions.

The entire news gathering process is designed to filter out "impurities" that detract from the value of the media's product: crass, overt commercialism, cloying, hackneyed, or vapid copy, factual errors, inconsequential observations, and other PR sins. Once quality is assured, the newsroom adds insight, objectivity and crisp writing, then sends it to their printing/broadcasting folks for timely, high-quality mass production and delivery.

So far, there are no bold new PR ideas here. Most PR professionals already know the process could be better. Better publicists instinctively know the rules and act accordingly. But the concept of a media supply chain ennobles the effort for the rest of the industry. It provides an easy-to-understand analogy to prevent shortcuts and transgressions.

Identifying PR as part of larger whole forces publicists to consider its responsibilities in a larger chain of events. When we understand the value of pitching good-quality stories, we take large steps to improving our overall media effectiveness.

Between the checks and balances, reporters and publicists have one powerful, shared goal: we both want to make the front page with colorful, interesting stories that are accurate, creative and effective. Most publicists get into trouble when they focus too much on their client obligations, and not enough on their responsibilities to journalists. That's a shame, since our relationships with the media are often the most valuable ones we have.

Finally, the supply chain analogy is more easily comprehended and respected by senior management. Any good executive instinctively grasps the importance of conforming to customers' requirements. (A process-oriented description gives the long-suffering product publicist a novel excuse why the president's portrait is not on the front cover of FORTUNE magazine this month!)

Improving Customer Service

Our primary function in the media supply chain is to give journalists terrific story ideas their publication or program can use to attract and retain an audience. However, we have hundreds of competitors, each of whom are equally helpful...or brutally persistent. In this buyer's market, what can we do

to endear ourselves to the media, to become a favored supplier?

First, like any customer-focused supplier, we must thoroughly understand our buyer's requirements. Each magazine, newspaper, or television and radio program has a unique and distinct voice and style. We should become expert on their needs, then suggest ideas that make sense in the context of the publication or show.

If we anticipate new story ideas and materials before our customers ask for them, and we deliver these ideas in a timely manner (ahead of our customers' competitors), we will be a favored, reliable vendor.

Second, our customers are busy. We should recognize that and do everything possible to reduce our customers' workload. All story pitches should include conveniently packaged information, credible, easily verifiable facts, authoritative and concise spokespeople, interesting visuals. Is the backgrounder written in a jargon-free language, understandable by the average reader? Did we make or beat the reporter's deadline?

Third, we should be pragmatic. We are selling a limited range of story ingredients at a time, our customers may need something else. If we get no reply or no interest, it is not personal. It probably means the answer was no. An aggressive salesperson may make an occasional sale through forceful persistence, but he or she will forever lose the opportunity to build a long-term relationship.

Finding Stories That Sell Themselves

The best benefit of looking at the bigger picture of a media supply chain is never having to "sell" another story. One of the most effective PR placement techniques is to understand the media's needs so well that the story sells itself, there is no need to push. A good reporter instinctively sees the essential elements of a good story, no matter how unknown the client.

Behind every tough reporter is a tougher editor. Before reading a single word of copy, any good editor will likely ask: "Is it news? Is it timely? Is it relevant? Is it of interest to our readers? Is the information complete? And most important of all, will it amuse me?" If you can not honestly answer yes to all these questions, then any reporter you work with is unlikely to defend your idea to his or her boss.

So what do you look for? Where do you extract the good raw materials for great stories, the ones that get approved by the editor? This question is especially important for your media relations effectiveness when your company's products aren't particularly familiar or important.

There are no easy answers, but I have found that a deliberate thinking process can often help uncover most of the important elements. Whether you're writing a pitch letter or press release, it is useful to review this list to make sure you give your clients (the media) the very best story you can find.

1. **Benefits:** Why would anyone want to buy your product, retain your services, or attend your event? What's in it for ME? This is the most important question to ask at the beginning of any publicity project, yet it is often taken for granted due to ignorance or arrogance.

Avoid being a tiresome cheerleader. Be an informed skeptic. Find the people in your organizations that really understand why customers buy from your company. More importantly, find out what makes your product, service, or client so special compared to everyone else's. Make it a point to know the competitive environment, so you'll emphasize the most important features, and why.

Talk to salespeople. Regularly. In fact, go on at least four sales calls a year with your salespeople. Understand the curmudgeonly, prospective customer at the business end of the supply chain. The one that wearily has read every trade magazine article, knows every player, and is numb to technobabble. Then write your release for him.

In fact, writing for prospective customers is much more important than writing for existing customers. The reason is simple: customers do not buy your products. *Prospective* customers buy your products. Therefore, product and service PR is effective when it attracts and persuades people who have never heard of your company, or never considered your products, and are too busy to care.

A product feature is merely a bullet point on a fact sheet. Finding out who shot the bullet — and what they were aiming at — often makes the story complete.

2. **Context:** A good story pitch starts with a solid connection (a hook) to a current or future event. What is going on in the world today? Where do you fit in? Mainstream editors grow weary of publicists that can't connect product pitches to the real world.

One good exercise is to read this morning's paper and try to find a way to relate a client's product to today's major headlines. Then do some in-depth research to confirm your hunches. You may wind up with a much more insightful, exciting media angle than you expected.

3. **Details:** Detailed explanations to a buyer's experiences in solving a problem are often the most effective elements in successful pitches, releases and case studies. Specifically, what are the details behind the buyer's motivation?

Most buying decisions are money-based: a calculated decision to invest money to save (or make) even more money. They should never be described with vague and amateurish (non-newsworthy) phrases such as "trust," "quality" and "leadership."

Buyers, however, are occasionally reluctant (or incapable) of revealing the extent of their savings, lest they create advantage for their competitors, inflated value for you, the vendor, or political embarrassment for themselves for missed opportunities. That creates a vacuum: how to document the basic point of the story with compelling facts.

When you hear a vacuous, empty phrase (left column), start digging through the story angles on the right column.

4. **Diligence:** Be relentless in your pursuit of newsworthy, underlying facts of your product's benefits and competitive environment. Why did the customer include your company on the short list? What are the intriguing features of your product that deliver the essential benefits?

For example, in making precision machine tools, exactly why is precision and accuracy important? A cliché like "quality" is an insufficient explanation. Any reputable magazine will reject it and the rest of your story. Often, the reasons why those standards were written reveal a much better story.

Clichéd Phrase	Potential Line of Questioning
Trusted Supplier	Did this enhanced feeling of trust lead to supply chain integration that improved asset turnover, or reduced inventories and working capital requirements? Did you trust the supplier enough to let them manage your inventory? Outsource some critical function like service or technical support?
Reliability	Was the system reliable enough to improve uptime, thereby increased effective capacity (more production/less downtime)? Did this higher uptime lead to higher return on assets? Avoided capital expenditures?
"Solutions"	Did the "one-stop" aspect help you avoid administrative costs (and potential glitches) of dealing with multiple vendors to solve problems? Did you avoid costs of staffing? Did your internal processes accelerate? Did you avoid unnecessary extras (that would have been present with a multi-vendor solution)?
Quality (raw materials)	Did the improved raw materials quality lower your cost of goods sold by eliminating pre-processing steps? Did you save money by eliminating incoming inspection? Were you able to eliminate/reduce waste disposal costs?
Quality (finished goods)	Did your improved quality translate into fewer warranty claims, improved market share, or a higher average selling price?
Flexibility	Were you able to adapt more quickly to market conditions? Did the inherent flexibility reduce the financial risk of your capital investment?

Since the late 1960s, machine tools have become 100 times more accurate and precise. What's driving this trend? During the same time, the U.S. Government began to institute new pollution standards for automobiles. Coincidence? In fact, numerous conversations with engineers revealed a causal relationship between higher machine tool precision and improved fuel economy, lower emissions standards...and, yes, even better quality — better engine reliability and less frequent tune ups.

Never be satisfied with a superficial explanation of a purchasing decision.

[Note: a graphic to illustrate this point can be found at <http://www.unova.com/cleanengines>]

If you want to find out why someone bought a

particular brand, don't just ask one person. Dig deeper. As it turns out, the basketball stadium at the University of North Carolina demanded a particular brand of insulation facing to enhance the crowd roar. The insulation company did not know this, nor did the builder, but the architect spent six months performing acoustical testing on dozens of insulation samples before choosing one brand.

Persistence pays off with better stories that convince prospects to become customers. Never be satisfied with a superficial explanation of a purchasing decision.

- Objectivity and skepticism:** Occasionally our heads nod when they should shake. Don't be persuaded simply because your boss or client signs your paycheck. If you can't convince an objective outsider of your story's news value, you will never convince a good reporter.

Communicators have an advantage in this area. We are the universal donors of business communications. We have an inalienable right to ask dumb questions. Use this right to your advantage. Seek sound explanations to tough questions. You can always write "up," but it is more time-consuming to have to go back and seek further explanation, or to pitch a story that can't be used.

- Jargon-less language:** Arno Penzias, the Nobel-laureate from Bell Labs, once remarked about the importance of using plain-English to help sell complicated technology: "If you can not explain why your technology is important to a waitress in an all-night diner, then you have big problems."

Be an advocate for free speech — copy that is free from complicated, technical terms, or cumbersome sentences. No one else in your organization will do it.

It is your responsibility to protect your company's reputation, both to the media and its customers. Each useless sentence, jargon-filled paragraph, or frivolous press release diminishes the media's opinion of your entire company, and erodes your professional credibility.

- Connect visions to reality:** Bridges stay up because scientists and engineers think in precise, definite terms. However, most PR people are abstract, clever thinkers that have trouble remembering where they parked their cars. We love to hunt for creative story ideas in unlikely places. To turn these ideas into real stories, however, we need the cooperation of subject matter experts. And often they have little time (or patience) for us "nontraditional" thinkers.

Behind the scientist's steep learning curve hides a kindly mentor who loves to talk and explain. You can reap the benefits of bringing out that side of them by showing them you respect their expertise and asking for their honest help. Together, you share a keen interest in accurately telling others who are not as familiar with it about their work and accomplishments.

To build a bridge, a good publicist should consider an interview plan to open folks up. Here is a suggested list of questions that are designed, at once, to flatter and elicit interesting details that may otherwise be hidden¹.

1. How did you ever come up with that concept?
2. How did you convince management to let you go ahead?
3. So, how does this differ from (name competitor's version of similar project)?
4. What was the worst problem you ran into?
5. Did it turn out how you expected?
6. But how does the thing work?
7. Did you find applications for it along the way that you didn't expect?
8. What other industries could you use that in?
9. How long did it take, from start to finish?
10. What would you change, if you could go back and start over again? What's next?

It is not possible to answer these questions in less than 50 words. In the process, the answers may reveal new threads and ideas that can be woven into more interesting story ingredients.

Be sure to include a "closer" question. If the interviewer has not yet spilled the story, these questions will be the cue to do so. "Who else should I talk to?" or "What have I forgotten to ask?" followed by "What haven't we talked about?" Be prepared for another whole side of the project/product to appear, enough for another release or two. This technique works especially well unlocking engineers who seem programmed to parse their answers to only the question asked.

Finally, cultivate internal credibility. Build a reputation for knowing your markets, technology, and industry almost as well as your internal experts. Good internal reporting depends upon earning the respect and active cooperation of knowledgeable peers.

Publicists create the most value for their paying clients by attending to the needs of the unpaid clients: reporters, editors and producers that use our stories. The concept behind the media supply chain reveals, and in fact, legitimizes the publicist's role in journalism. It reveals the futility of trying to push stories on customers that won't (and can't) use them, and moves public relations people toward more sophisticated, valuable roles.

As any good marketer will tell you, it is much easier to "sell" a product to a customer who already wants to buy. The most effective product publicists pursue interesting, topical and accurate story ideas with uncompromising zeal. In the essential link between our stories and our customers, we owe it to both clients and the media to practice this enlightened supply chain mentality to improve our individual effectiveness and the collective reputation of the industry.

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