



Making Your Mark with the Media By *Andy Holtmann*

Last month, I outlined some general tips and practices to think about when formulating your casino's public relations efforts. These included figuring out the message you want to relay, knowing who your audience is and being prepared to follow up. Now it's time for a closer look at the processes behind effective media relations.

Even the most magnificently-penned press releases, impactful submitted articles and relevant story pitches or press conferences can all find their way into garbage bins or out boxes with no action. Why? Well, editors and reporters of the publications, Web sites, broadcast and radio news outlets you're relying on to get the message out all have one thing in common — they're swamped.

As a long-time editor of newspapers and magazines I can attest to this. In an average day, editors and reporters receive anywhere from 50 to 150 press releases, e-mails with article ideas, product features, event invites, etc. Only about 10 to 15 percent are followed up on and even less — somewhere between five and eight percent — actually find their way into publication.

For starters, reporters and editors are limited by time. They have to amass thousands of words of copy per day/week/month and they're always on deadline ... even when they sleep. Secondly, there's just not as much room to get everything in as there used to be. Print journalism has seen a significant decline in advertising revenues over the past few years. Thus magazines and newspapers, whether they're trade industry publications or consumer-based publications, have gotten smaller. Space is at a premium. Online sites are growing, but are still not seen as credible as print publications. And unless you're buying an advertisement, the chances of getting more than a 10-second sound bite on television or radio are often slim to none.

So how can you ensure that your property or company's message is getting the media attention it deserves? Here are some tips that should help:

Know the publication or media outlet you're pitching to — If you're a racino pitching a press release about your horse racing schedule for the remainder of the year to a magazine that only covers slot machines, you're probably barking up the wrong tree. Yet this happens all the time. It's also wise to know the angle that different publications or media companies take. For instance, in my previous position as editor of *Casino Journal*, we had positioned the magazine as a "how to" publication for the gaming industry, focusing on best practices and strategies. Yet I'd get calls and e-mails daily from casinos wanting their latest slot jackpot winners featured — something *Casino Journal* just didn't do. Those items are of far more interest to the consumer gaming press than to a trade industry publication which targets gaming executives.

Read the publications, watch the programs and listen to the radio shows that focus on gaming — It's hard to know how to pitch a story to individual media outlets if you're not familiar with how articles, releases, blurbs and stories are communicated. Review any editorial calendars. Learn who is writing or reporting on what pieces and why (what each reporter's or editor's specialty is). You'll stay ahead of the trends and be able to better communicate with your media contact when you need to.

Get to know reporters and editors — Sure, media professionals are busy. But if you exhibit a willingness to sit down with them and learn about their publications, Web sites or shows and more importantly, *how you*



MARKETING MIX

can help them, you'll establish a good rapport that will get you better — and more prominent – ink (or air time).

Keep it clean — Journalists are a particular bunch. If they receive a press release or copy from you that is riddled with spelling errors, poor punctuation or grammar and formatted with ridiculously small type or hard-to-read fonts, they won't take you or your company seriously. You'll also want to avoid loading press releases or submitted articles with buzz words better suited for advertising copy. Most journalists won't use adjectives like "fantastic," "stunning," "irresistible," etc. when writing objective pieces. So keep it clean, simple and to the point.

Make their jobs easier — Provide as much material as you can without droning on and on in your copy. Provide several follow-up contacts. Include pictures, video and any other information they might use to put together articles or new pieces. The more resources media professionals have at their fingertips, the more likely your message will get their attention.

Stay in contact, but don't bug reporters and editors — You'll want to stay on top of your media contacts to keep you and your property or company at the front of their minds. But there's a fine line between keeping in contact with them and bugging them. If you're calling them daily, you're calling them too often. The best approach is to follow up each press release or story idea with a more personable phone call or e-mail. Also remember that they can't run *everything* you send their way, so be prepared to graciously take "no" for an answer from time to time.

Respond in a timely manner and get journalists the additional information or quotes they need — If you're not responsive to the media's follow-up questions, can't get them an interview in a timely fashion or can't provide additional materials, it will negatively impact both the media professionals' opinions of you and your company and the end-message that's communicated. Also, remember that oftentimes the story being reported doesn't originate with you or your property. So if you're called for comment on something *they're* working on — whether it's good news or bad — be available, follow up and get back to them in a timely manner. These are often missed opportunities to craft a positive spin on even the worst of situations.

Compliment and correct appropriately — Too often, when a press release gets covered or an article appears that does reflect a powerful, positive message, PR professionals are content to "just move onto the next thing." It might be nice for that reporter or editor to hear his or her work lauded once in awhile. It also builds further rapport which will pay off the next time. Conversely, if something is reported inaccurately, make sure you follow up with a friendly approach. Understand that everyone makes mistakes and that with relaying any story, there will always be some misunderstandings. Be ready to correct and clarify in a manner that helps the reporter or editor truly *understand* the issue and what was incorrect. If something you felt was relevant was omitted, ask why it was cut and understand that media professionals can sometimes be limited by parameters like space, content or flow of a story.

Yes, journalists and media professionals can be quirky, eccentric and scatter-brained sometimes. Take it from me, I know! But that's even more reason why you should build strong relationships with them and help them help you. Keeping the media at arm's length rarely works in your favor. So try the above strategies and see how they work!
