



MARKETING MIX



Getting Your Message Out, Part 1 of 2

By Andy Holtmann

A new year is upon us! And that means new goals, new strategies and in some cases a whole new direction for you and your company. Of course, if you're smart, you've planned for 2009 long in advance and at this point are already well on your way toward defining your company's position and status for the remainder of the year.

Having an effective public relations plan is critical to your growth strategies for the year (or years) ahead. And it's a lot more than just crafting a handful of press releases or "handling" the media when it calls upon you. It means developing interactive, multi-functional lines of communication, not just with the press, but with the community, your customers and your employees.

Whether you're an operator of a gaming facility like a casino, racetrack, bingo hall or sports book; a manufacturer or vendor servicing the gaming industry; or an advisor, consultant or entrepreneur looking to do business with the industry, public relations can make or break your business.

Casinos, for instance, are among the most targeted businesses in the United States. Critics of casinos point repeatedly (and loudly) to moral and social ills like crime and problem gambling, to paint gaming with a negative brush. Too often, we as an industry simply "brush off" these comments as being those of a minority segment. However, ignoring criticism does damage. In the realm of public perception, ignoring something will often lead people to believe it must be true. Critics will spout facts and figures that have little to no basis in truth. If left unchecked, they can become "truth" in the public eye. Because of this, many states have turned to gaming as a "last resort" rather than welcoming it with open arms. The result? Sky-high tax rates and countless restrictions that make it harder to do business.

Casinos create millions of jobs nationwide; they provide millions of dollars to philanthropic causes; they bring those much-needed tax revenues to state coffers so that schools, hospitals, civic services etc. are properly funded; they provide entertainment and amenities; they enhance tourism and revenues of ancillary businesses; and yes, many casinos even dedicate significant time, manpower and financial resources to combating things like problem gambling and crime.

Yet, these efforts often slip under the radar of the public-at-large. Sure, one reason is because negative headlines grab more attention than positive ones. That's certainly true. But the other, more common reason is that gaming properties (and collectively as an industry) simply don't toot their own horn enough.

Nowhere is this more true than in Indian Country. Native American tribes that operate casino properties have used gambling revenues to rescue their severely impoverished sovereign nations. They've built schools, hospitals, homes and government centers. They've been able to provide good jobs, much-needed health insurance and scholarship opportunities for many tribal members. They've also done a lot for non-tribal communities as well, including building of infrastructure, the providing of good jobs and wages to their surrounding areas, support of civic and cultural programs, support and involvement with business communities and countless charitable efforts to the tune of tens of millions of dollars.



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Yet, tribal casinos still get a bad rep. They're often singled out in political squabbles. They're increasingly looked to for additional tax revenues via state compacts. They're an easy target for vocal gambling critics. Why? A big reason is that many tribal casinos (and commercial casinos as well) haven't done enough to promote their efforts and educate the general public. Some feel they shouldn't have to ... that their records speak for themselves. Others just aren't as familiar with or comfortable with dealing with the media, the public and the political spectrum. In most cases, however, current PR efforts are lacking the proper time, research and follow-through commitments to make a difference.

Here are some general questions to consider when evaluating your own public relations efforts:

What is your message? — This may sound simple enough, but crafting the story you want told can be just as hard (and as valuable) as creating a brand. Make sure the message is relevant to the people you want to receive it. Noting that your casino donated \$2 million to charities last year doesn't get a lot of ink. But if you can showcase where that money was spent, why the donations were important to your property and paint a real-world picture showing who it helped and the impact that money made, you have a much better chance of grabbing attention.

What is being said of your property or company now? — For better or worse, the things that have already been written, spoken or otherwise communicated by others are impacting your property today. Don't ignore this. Embrace it as a starting point that outlines your future messages and how they need to be delivered.

Who is your audience (and how can I expand it)? — Take the time to research new avenues for getting through to the public. This may be pitching your message to mediums beyond local and regional areas you're already established in. It could mean reconfiguring your message to be more meaningful to current targets. Find out what the public relates to and attempt to relate to on that level.

Who can help spread the story that needs to be told? — Don't be afraid to enlist the help of your valued customers, community leaders, your employees, other businesses and industries — anyone that has been supportive and can lend a fresh perspective. This can help build a united front that is very effective in setting the right tone or changing peoples' otherwise stubborn perceptions.

Are you prepared to interact and follow-up? — If you're not prepared to make your company accessible to the media, the public and the community at large, then your public relations efforts will fall flat. Make sure you respond to questions in a timely manner. Research and provide an answer to questions you can't answer immediately via proactive follow-up. And make it a point to sit down with the media and the public to find out what it is they're looking for ... and the best way to communicate directly with them.

Next month, I'll provide some effective tips to ensure that press releases and story pitches find their way to editors' desks rather than the garbage bin.