

Have We Learned Anything?

Written by Business News

The year 2014 has ended but is still finding its way on my checks and emails. I usually get the hang of it by February. Here's a chance to review whether we've learned anything in 2014:

1. A Gift Is A Gift Except When It's A Bribe

Don't offer journalists gifts, discounts or money. Media outlets generally have ethics policies that prohibit journalists from accepting most types of gifts. Some outlets disallow any type of gift – even a PR person buying a journalist a drink. This doesn't apply to everyone though.

Movie reviewers are often given free promotional items and are wined, dined and even put up in hotels. Some companies pay for journalists to travel. A large tech company recently offered to send a car service to pick me up to attend an event. In the fashion business, companies often send scribes free clothes and samples. And tech reviewers get all kinds of stuff, which we unfortunately must return at some point. In the end, it's worth asking the individual journalist if they can accept a gift because it can't do you any harm. The best gift you can usually give a writer, if they can accept, is a good dinner. It works both ways – the writer gets fed for free and you get face time with them to pitch a story.

Need I say more? 2. It's Not Only White, Christian, Males That Read Newspapers And Watch Television

When you're building your media list, don't forget to include media outlets that target African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, Jews, women, retired people, the French and even a Canadian or two. The world is an amazingly diverse place, and America is still the melting pot, don't ignore that fact. Embrace it and when need be, yes, tweak the story to fit the need of someone who isn't a white, Christian male.

3. Use The Internet For PR, Or Don't And Suffer The Consequences

Spend some time reading different weblogs and it's not hard to figure out which ones are

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popular. You'll have to adjust your pitch because most bloggers are not media folks and they're weary of PR people. But a Hotmail address and a note, "Hey, love your website, thought you might dig this story about Grandma's Fried Apples Corp.'s new pie might make a cool link."



It's residual press – try to get the ink you've already gotten recycled through weblogs and newsletters. I read dozens of columns that are nothing more than someone recapping wire stories or press releases. The Washington Post, for example, has a tech blog that runs down the day's top stories and links to them. Think how happy your client would be if I had written about them!

4. I Don't Do Research, That Makes Me An Idiot

I do research, so I'm not an idiot. At least half of your job should be research and if you don't know how to do research, you're not doing your job well.

When you get on the phone with a journalist, you should know more than they do. Know everything about your company/client, know about the journalist's publication and the individual you're pitching, know about the market/topic you're pitching. If you're pitching a new type of airplane and can't tell me how it differs from a similar plane that Boeing makes, do I really want

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to talk to you? No, I'll go to someone at Boeing and ask them, then write what they tell me (which isn't going to make your plane look good).

If you do proper research, you'll save yourself time, money and heartache. You will be able to pare down your media list so you can concentrate your pitches and you will be armed to offer up ancillary story ideas. If you don't do proper research, you'll be looking for a new job soon.

5. Teach Your Children Well

PR people are a dime a dozen. Good PR people make six figures a year.

It doesn't matter if you work for a small firm or giant conglomerate, there's always going to be a rookie around at some point. It does no one any good if they don't know how to do their job. Pair the rookie up with a veteran and let them watch the vet in action. Let them go to meetings and do nothing but observe. Whatever you do, don't just stick a media list in front of them and ask them to start making calls.

Let the kids cut their teeth doing research and learning instead of throwing them to the wolves. Have them read good press releases written by the pros and have them write test releases. And most importantly, teach them how PR can be quantified. I've run into too many dead weight PR people this year and it's not doing anything to foster goodwill between the flacks and the quacks (my new name for journalists).

6. Don't Freak Out... You Freak

Take a deep breath and relax when the stuff hits the fan. If you freak out on the phone with a journalist, it sets off a giant light bulb over the head of the person on the other end of the phone. It doesn't do you any good to go "off the record" and rant and rave. It just makes matters worse.

7. I Ain't Gonna Win No Grammer Contests or Spelling Beas

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Yes, ladies and gentlemen, my grammar is atrocious and my word usage is pedestrian at best. I realize last week I used the term “peaks” instead of “piques”. It wasn’t hard to realize because about two dozen of you emailed me to let me know my error. I will do my best to avoid these errors in the future, but I ain’t promising nuttin’.

Ben Silverman was previously a business news columnist for The New York Post and the founder/publisher of DotcomScoop.com.

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