

## Learning From Bad Press

Written by Business News

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Recently a friend of mine who owns a growing, service-oriented online business dropped me an exciting note.

“We’re going to be featured in [a major newspaper],” his note read.

He was clearly excited and so I was. I had given him PR-related advice and was happy to see it was paying off. Once the article was published, however, our excitement turned to despair.

The article woefully misrepresented the company. What should have been a positive article turned into a somewhat negative portrayal of my friend’s business. Although he was quoted accurately, a key piece of information – his customer count – was inaccurate. And instead of exposing the positive virtues of my friend’s business, the article lumped his company in with what most people would call “dubious” companies. We were both taken aback by the article and my friend quickly turned to damage control.



It’s important to understand that my friend’s business is a small one. He has about 3,000

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customers and his best marketing tool to date has been word of mouth. He runs a fine operation and deserves kudos, especially considering the area of business he operates in, which has more than its fair share of hucksters. His company's reputation means everything and being portrayed negatively — even if just by association — could be damaging. This is not Microsoft or United Airlines; this is a mom and pop shop that needs all the ink it can get, so it was important that we try to control the situation.

The first thing he did was reread the article a number of times and ask friends of his to read the article as well. When you're close to a situation, it's sometimes easy to misinterpret what others say or write, so my friend wanted to make sure that he wasn't being overly sensitive about the situation. Unfortunately, almost everyone agreed that the article portrayed the company negatively.

The next step was a simple one. My friend emailed the person who wrote the article. He was very pleasant and thanked the writer for the coverage and for taking the time. But he also said he was upset by the tone of the article and felt his company was being unfairly punished because other companies featured in the article had questionable business practices. It was a "one bad apple don't spoil the whole bunch" approach. His letter was well-written, light-hearted but serious and appreciative. I read the letter and thought it was solid.

Journalists have egos, as I've said many times. We certainly don't like getting things wrong and most of us will confess when we have screwed up. At the same time, we don't like being told that our "tone" was wrong or that we "missed the big picture." This is our job and we'll write as we please and as long as the facts are accurate, the reader is being served. At least, that's how it's supposed to go.

Anyway, the letter was sent and a P.S. mentioned the inaccurate number in passing. It was positioned as "maybe I said it by accident," which is good because it doesn't lay blame directly on the writer. The response was the best that we could hope for — the writer was congenial, apologetic where need be and suggested my friend write a letter to the editor of the paper. This is a good sign.

Writers do not often tell people to pen letters to the editor and there's a simple reason why — we don't want our editors to know that we may have screwed up or made someone mad. In every instance where I've suggested people write a letter to the editor it was because I felt they made a valid argument against my work. Or, and this is important, I didn't want to write the story

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— or write the story with the angle I used — and I was mad at my editors for making me do this. It's sort of a kiss off to the editors, saying, "see, you made me write this article" or "you made me take this angle on the story, so here's your reward." In this case, I think my friend just made a good argument. His letter to the writer was professional, intelligent and more importantly, lucid.

Yes, lucidity is important. If I can't understand your letter, are readers going to understand if it's printed? You would be surprised to see the kind of letters I get that people actually put their names on. If you're going to write a letter that you want published, you better know how to write. Back to our story.

My friend was pleased with the writer's response and decided to write to the editor of the paper. He kept the gist of the first letter, but depersonalized it. He also drew the paper into the letter by pointing out some facts about the paper itself as it pertained to the story. The message from this was simple — I know about you guys, I've done my research, don't try telling me you don't know better. The letter, to date, has not been published, but the editors did read his letter and responded by saying they understood his concerns.

My friend at one point wanted to put out a press release about the article and talking about how his company was portrayed. I suggested he not do that because I never feel it's a good idea to add fuel where there's no real fire and almost as important, to anger an important media outlet. You could bet had he issued a press release that the newspaper wouldn't be writing about his business anytime soon. So the press release idea was canned.

One thing my friend did do, which I think was a great idea, was to communicate with his customers. He sent out an email with a link to the article and not expressing his displeasure for it, but acknowledging something important, "Maybe we need to do a better of job of communicating our message." My friend's customers, many of whom had already seen the article, said they felt the company wasn't accurately portrayed, but luckily they knew the truth and thought it wasn't a big deal. I suggested he ask the customers to write letters to the paper offering up their own view of the company, but I'm not sure if he's done that.

What I'm most pleased about is that my friend recognized that, perhaps, he did something incorrect. Had he chosen his words better during the interview for the article or had he merely talked about why his company is different from others it may have all turned out differently. He knows now that in the future, he can do a better job of controlling how his company is portrayed.

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And although it took some less than stellar press to learn that lesson, it was worth it in the end.

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