

## Myths about Public Relations

By Sherry Alpert

The longer I'm in PR, the more I realize what a fickle business it is.

First, let's talk about 'contacts'. Outsiders assume the major reason for media success is that you have contacts. Occasionally, contacts help, because these people take my phone calls and read my pitches. But having contacts has rarely resulted in a story that I otherwise would not have secured. Conversely, I've gotten some terrific placements with editors and reporters I had never contacted before, including the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *CNN*, the *CBS Early Show*, *CNBC's Power Lunch* and *Business Week*. Some took a couple of weeks, and some took many months. Stories in *Woman's World* and the *Robb Report* took a year and a half.

I look at PR similarly to a romantic relationship. Both are two thirds luck and timing. For a romantic relationship, the other third is chemistry, whereas in PR that final third is a combination of chutzpah, persistence and skill (which includes a well written pitch and an articulate, concise voicemail).

Strategy envelopes the entire process — we in PR are, first and foremost, strategists. We must think outside the box, figure out creative ways of pitching a client to a multitude of media markets, and target the pitch to the specific media. We uncover opportunities as we go along; sometimes these opportunities sprout during a conversation with an editor or reporter to whom we pitched a different client. We should turn on a dime at these unpredictable moments, or when a news story presents an opportunity to get a client quoted as an expert.

Nevertheless, we do a lot of guessing. That's right, guessing. PR is neither an art nor a science. In fact, it's a very strange animal with very few rules of engagement. For example, how often do you contact the same editor or reporter, if you've never received a response to an email or a voicemail? Do you email first or call first? Reporters and editors are individuals — whereas one is happy to speak to you live after four voicemails and emails within a month, another may tell you to cease and desist forever. I've been told, "I'm glad you were persistent — I've been swamped and keep meaning to get back to you." I've also been told, "If I were interested in this, you would have heard from me. You're a pain in the ass."

What is continually frustrating is that there is scarcely any correlation between the amount of work you put into pitching the media and the success that you have, whether it's local or national, broadcast or print. What I often think will be a slam dunk often fails, whereas what I consider a long shot often succeeds (like an article in the *New York Times* or a client interview on a network morning show). Sometimes you need to pitch the partnership between your client and the client's client — and the client's client gets the lion's share of the publicity which your client paid you for, while your client gets barely a mention. Even worse, the reporter likes your idea so much that he/she interviews a couple of your client's competitors, and your client is edited out of the article due to lack of space. Reporters don't always feel loyal to the source of the story, once they run with it. That's the way it goes. It's our job to figure out a way, a "hook" to get the client interviewed, quoted, mentioned, and the end result may not be what the client wants. There's very little fairness or justice in this business.

Which leads me to managing expectations. Promise a client NOTHING other than that you'll do your best. You don't know if you can get the client into the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* or *Business Week*. If the client expects less, he/she will love you more when you produce. Some clients' expectations are unmanageable — we PR people call them "clients from hell." At some point, one of us initiates a divorce. I've experienced a few divorces.

Come to think of it, the only rule that's sacred in PR is to learn from experience.

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