

Top 10 tips for spreading good news about your company

Created by: Rusty Cunningham, Publish of Portage Daily Register/Capitol Newspapers

Tip No. 1: Don't make this too difficult.

People write books about how to write a press release. Well, save a tree and don't bother. For the most part, you'll have better results by calling the newspaper or radio station and discussing your idea.

Tip No. 2: Talk to a real person.

It's tempting to send a fax, a letter or a voice mail, but if you want your message heard, chat with a real person. Honest to goodness, there are real people who work for newspapers and radio stations. They have deadlines. They have needs. They have phone numbers. They have questions. They want to fairly and accurately tell their readers and listeners about your business.

Tip No. 3: If you really want to send a press release, how do you write it?

If you send correspondence, make sure it hits the mark. First, always make sure to list the name and number of the person at your business who can provide additional information or answer questions. Next, did the newsroom receive your material? Did it provide the information needed? We all want to be Hemingway, but remember that information is more important than prose.

Tip No. 4: So, just what kind of information do reporters look for?

Again, vital stats are more important than flowing prose. What do you produce, how many do you employ, where are you located, is this an anniversary, what are you proud of, how much have you grown in sales or employment or equipment, etc. In short, what makes you unique.

Tip No. 5: Would the newspaper be interested in a photo, or would the radio station be interested in a sound bite?

The answer to both is, in most cases, yes. But, avoid staging something. Don't read from a press release. And, try to come up with a better idea than a check-passing photo. (You know: Charles Manson, left, presents a check to...) Try to find a photo idea that really shows what the money will fund, for instance. The fewer folks in the photo, the better the quality.

Tip No. 6: If the CEO wants to avoid 17 phone calls, can we call a press conference?

Of course. It doesn't mean you won't get 17 phone calls anyway, but that's one good way of getting your message out all at once. What's a good way to assure attendance? You can always send a note the day before, follow up with a phone call and promise to serve food at the press conference (this is the most important tip you'll receive all day.) Donuts are good – but no jelly-filled. That stuff is hell on digital cameras.

Tip No. 7: If there's an error, what should you do?

Call the editor or news director immediately. Editors hate errors. If news organizations lose credibility, they lose everything. How many other organizations would prominently display a correction? Newspapers do, because our credibility is so important. Please, let us know about any error as soon as possible. Besides, errors have a way of getting repeated if we don't know the error of our ways. Here's a plea: Please spend a few moments with the reporter to explain your business. As the statue at Faber College in "Animal House" proclaimed, Knowledge Is Good. Be patient: You may not be dealing with a 20-year business reporter. Better to explain up front than worry about damage control afterward.

Tip No. 8: What if you're still not happy?

Call the publisher or the station manager. They want to know. They may not agree, but they want to know – especially in the case of an error.

Keep in mind there's a difference between advertising and PR. (You pay for – and control – advertising. You don't pay for – but often help guide – public relations.) Here are other things to consider: First, if you don't want something to appear in print or be broadcast, don't say it – even off the record. Clearly, you may develop a good working relationship with a reporter that allows that type of conversation. Also, you may wish to chat with an editorial board. What's an editorial board? An editorial board sets the editorial policy for the Opinion page of the newspaper. It consists of the publisher, editor, other journalists and, in the case of the Portage Daily Register, an at-large community member. We often meet with groups to learn more background on an issue before planning coverage or writing an editorial.

Tip No. 9: Reporters don't want to know good news, do they?

Of course we do. Don't assume your newspaper or radio station know about your good news. (In fact, don't assume they know about your business.) Better to be told that a reporter isn't interested than to find out you've missed an opportunity.

Tip No. 10: What if bad news brings a reporter to your door?

Chances are, Mike Wallace isn't lurking in the parking lot. But, there may be times when a reporter asks about something you consider bad news – a layoff, a fire, an injury. Some of you have company policy that you'll need to follow, of course. Beyond that, please consider being honest and straightforward – and share all the information you feel comfortable sharing. In small towns, rumors often fill the void. It's better to get out front with accurate information, believe me.