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The Seven Habits Of Highly Unsuccessful Media Relations

From my vantage point of having 40 years in the public relations business, I note that some things never change. One constant is that for many public relations agencies and corporate public relations departments alike, the major cause of frustration is a lack of consistent, satisfactory print, broadcast and online media exposure.

The basic cause for this scenario is that during a time when generating media coverage is one of the most competitive communications tasks there is ... the people responsible for actually doing the media relations work .. or supervising it have developed some bad habits.

This isn't surprising. Professionals in virtually every field do the same thing. It's not that they don't know how to or want to do their jobs right. It's just that they have gotten lazy, or lost focus or maybe even lost interest all perfect breeding grounds for bad habits.

Take a look at the sports and entertainment world. Professional golfers, major league baseball players, singers and actors all learned their craft at an early age ... yet each of them relies on coaches at one time or another to spot their bad habits and strengthen their good ones.

In the media relations field, the bad habits usually start to surface after we've "picked the low hanging fruit." We've gotten coverage on story angles that were easy to identify ... new products, new markets, unique case histories etc. It's when we are faced with climbing higher up the tree to find fresh ideas that the bad habits start to show up. The overall symptom of this situation is often a lack of personal confidence in the stories we develop and the pitches we make. We don't approach a pitch knowing that we have a strong story suggestion that, while it might still not make the grade, won't fail because it was a weak effort in the first place.

When this happens, it's a sure bet that we are falling into at least one of what I call the Seven Habits of Highly Unsuccessful Media Relations.

Habit # 1. We start to lose sight of the importance of the most important tool in media relations a constantly growing body of knowledge. I'm referring to all kinds of knowledge including business, pop culture, science, sports, sociology etc. All good media pitches are drawn from facts, scenarios, trends, surveys and other insight which enable you to know the same things that a smart editor or reporter knows. It reduces the

opportunities for the media to reject a pitch on the basis of it not being relevant. As a by-product it allows you to send along “tidbits” of knowledge to your clients or your bosses to show them how smart you are!

But absorbing knowledge is very hard, time-consuming work. Being knowledgeable requires that we read, watch, listen and click onto an increasing large volume of information that is available to us. Not that long ago, gaining knowledge was more difficult and perhaps costly. Your agency or your company may have, and may still subscribe to a number of publications but it took forever for them to get routed to you. You always had the option of buying your own subscription but this could get expensive. Today, with the Internet and your cell phone delivering tons of low cost / no-cost information 24/7 all you have to spend is time.

Habit # 2 We slack off on studying our client or our company. We rely on our memory of years, months or weeks ago. New products, initiatives or problems slip by without notice. We don't "walk the halls" enough. We figure if it's important, someone will tell us. Certainly regular meetings with your client or the key department heads of your company will help prevent you from becoming blind sided by a news development you should have anticipated. Equally important, you can recognize story ideas that others fail to realize have news value.

When you're not “walking the halls” there are usually lots of other sources of company and client information available. Public companies issue annual and quarterly reports which contain enormous quantities of information as do corporate brochures and product brochures. If the company has a web site, a daily visit should be mandatory to see what's there. Are you on the distribution list for all corporate, department and divisional newsletters? Do company employees write their own blogs. Have client representatives been asked to testify before government agencies?

Not only does this allow you to craft better story ideas, but it enables you to spot a story opportunity by linking the world around you to the world of your client or employer.

Habit #3 We randomly, rather than regularly examine the daily flow of information and intelligence from key trade associations, professional organizations, academic institutions and research groups. There is literally a river of information about your client or company, its industry and its competitors published every day. Gathering and publishing this information is one of the key reasons these groups exist in the first place. You can be certain that the top editors covering your company follow these information sources closely. With the Internet, it's so easy to monitor this information flow. Ask key executives within the company what sources they follow and which ones they believe are the most influential. You can subscribe to many online newsletters for free. Frequent Google searches will reveal white papers that can be invaluable. Setting up several Google Alerts for your company, its products, its industries and its competitors can

serve up a buffet of fresh insight hourly.

Habit # 4 We only read and review the media serving our clients' or company's industries and usually ignore general news, media and pop culture media that report on or shape our clients' or employer's markets. Quite often we get very good at studying the media that cover our us. We know the editors, we review each issue online, we check out the web sites and editorial plans regularly. But we overlook the fact that our company or client does not do business in a vacuum. It's critical that we all have a sense of the complete world around us. Often the latest trend or the biggest news in the entertainment, academic, business or cultural world can trigger a story idea that is fresh and interesting. Knowing who the movers and shakers are in numerous fields, and why, can often lead to new story ideas positioning your own client or company executives as news sources for other media.

Habit # 5. We don't spend nearly enough time being students of the media. The media is changing rapidly. New web sites, e-zines, privately funded online sites and collaborative efforts between different print, broadcast and online news sources appear daily. Social networking sites and bloggers are earning a place in the media world along side the best-known mastheads. And some of the best-known mastheads have announced they will focus more on their online presence and less on their print presence. If we don't understand how, where and when this is taking place, we will miss numerous coverage opportunities for our clients.

Fortunately there are a growing number of news sources, mostly online, that devote their entire coverage to either the media in general or specific media categories. You can follow the worlds of television, magazines, newspapers, online and mobile media at the tap of your keyboard. You can be sure your competition is.

Habit # 6. We start pitching the wrong stories to the wrong reporters. This may be the oldest bad habit of all. Avoiding this sin was one of the first things we learned ... or were supposed to learn when we got into this business. But, with the prevalence of Habit 5 above, we frequently make an outstanding pitch to someone who isn't professionally interested ... even if he or she had been yesterday before they got a new assignment or beat to cover. It should be a cardinal rule in agencies or public relations departments that no story gets pitched until the target media has been researched thoroughly.

And here again, the Internet helps us avoid this habit so easily. When a check of the editorial plan reveals an upcoming story that seems to have relevance, it's so easy to call an editor and find out who is assigned to it. If the editorial plan holds out little hope, the archives are a wealth of information. Searching for past stories about your client, your industry, your competitors or the business strategy you think has news value will almost always serve up the names of a reporter for your pitch. Reporters respond warmly when you reference a story they have written before launching into your pitch about how your story idea relates to this past coverage. Even then, it's a great idea to call that reporter first to be certain he still has interest in the topic you want to pitch.

With media mergers, acquisitions and closings happening so quickly, a publication, a program or a reporter that you have had great success within the past may be gone tomorrow. A check of the web site may alert you to this change and help you avoid an embarrassing event

Habit #7 We get out of the habit of "leading" the client or our employers down the media relations path. We forget the importance of being perceived as the people whose "media counsel counts" because we are always "on top of what's going on." We forget that this part of our job description. We fail to realize that our job is not to get publicity for publicity's sake, but to help our clients or our employers achieve specific goals and convey specific messages to appropriate audiences. Once we've lost that leadership image, our value begins to wane.

None of these habits are all that hard to break. You don't need a support group or a 12-step program. Just review them, determine if you have them and start taking the obvious steps to break them and develop more productive media relations habits