



Healthcare Marketing

Developing a media relations program aligned with your communication objectives

Whether you're promoting a new product, service or event, media relations can be extremely important to your marketing efforts. A feature story covering your organization and appearing on the front page of a major trade publication can go a long way toward furthering an organization's communication objectives.

Obtaining those stories that effectively and positively position your organization is where media relations comes in. However, reaching busy reporters deluged by e-mails, faxes, phone calls and mail from public relations and marketing executives, not to mention their own assignments, can be challenging.

To develop an effective media relations program, it is important to remember the function of the media - to deliver interesting, accurate, timely and engaging news stories. If the leaders of your organization can become a resource toward this end, journalists will seek you out as an opinion leader in the healthcare field.

The importance of media relations

The purpose of any media relations campaign should be to communicate important company information of interest to current and potential customers and/or investors and industry analysts, to position your company as leaders in your respective field, to build name awareness and of course, to further your overall marketing objectives. However, a good media relations program doesn't just happen. If you see your competitors featured in a media outlet, chances are at some point they engaged in an effective media relations program.

An established media relations program can also help your organization in the event of a crisis situation. Your spokespeople will be trained and relationships with key media forged, thus making the communication of information in a crisis more streamlined and effective. While there may be a separate department or agency that develops and implements your media relations program, executives and managers within an organization have an obligation to ensure the media relations campaign is on target.

Some points for marketing managers and executives to keep in mind include:

- Your media relations campaign must address a legitimate news issue. If you can tie your marketing objective into a hot headline item, you're likely to receive media interest. For instance, HIPAA compliance, patient privacy and medical errors continue to be key concerns. Upgrading software, adding a new customer service system or opening a new office are typically not newsworthy items.
- Make sure your announcement is real. During the dot-com era, many companies had the belief that "if we say we will build it, they will buy." The market was flooded with news of "revolutionary, new healthcare technologies"

- only to find out the product hadn't been developed or tested. Journalists, and customers, became wary. Many publications have a policy not to write about new products unless there is some kind of beta testing at the least, and preferably six months of use in the market.
- Provide complete and well-rounded stories. These are interesting and exciting times in healthcare. Some companies have developed legitimate groundbreaking products. If so, and if you want to say so in a news release, find an outside third party, perhaps an industry analyst, that will support your claim and be prepared to provide that name and number to the reporter.
 - Review your media lists. Whether it is an in-house PR department or an agency, ask to see the list of media who will be getting your news. Keep in mind most PR agencies will not provide the full proprietary list with names, phone numbers and addresses, but they should (and if they don't, look elsewhere), provide you with the specific media outlets that get your media. This is where executives, sales people and managers come into play. They, too, should review the list, and see if the publications they and their contemporaries read are on it.
 - If you aren't familiar with a publication or website, find out more. As the list is reviewed, there may be media outlets or websites you haven't seen listed. Ask why and if the reason is sound, key management personnel should commit to researching those outlets to find out more.
 - Share ideas. The best source for news releases and story ideas comes from within. Marketing and PR people cannot do it on their own and may have the wrong strategy if not given direction and guidance. There should be regular meetings between management, PR and marketing staff to make sure all your communication needs and objectives are aligned.
 - Become an expert resource. The story is told of a leading healthcare organization with a president who very much thought that all media interviews should take place with him. Unfortunately, this president often didn't have the detailed information that reporters wanted, and he also frequently would get off track. As a result, after a few interviews, he was rarely called upon to comment. With training, this president could well become an expert resource. However, there are often other individuals in an organization better prepared and suited to answer questions. Find those people and use them.
 - Be prepared. In an actual interview, reporters will not ask the questions your organization wants to answer. Therefore, prepare short phrases and clips that easily can be slipped into the conversation. This will help to guide the interview in the direction you want it to go and ensure that your organization's most important points are made.

Helping the media do their job

There is a common misconception that an adversarial relationship exists between an organization's marketing department and the media. This may be true in some cases and between certain individuals, but for the most part, journalists tend to view marketing people as resources that can provide story ideas and access to interview candidates. If you develop yourself as a good resource, your relationship with the media will most likely also be good.

Since journalists are very busy and work on tight deadlines, keep communication brief and simple. Before calling, develop the most important points you want to

address, and always ask if it's a good time to talk.

Remember that it is not a journalist's job to report on your organization, nor is it their job to decode your messages. Journalists are extremely knowledgeable about the industry they report on, but they want to know how your organization affects the big picture. Don't make them figure it out. It is your responsibility to clearly convey how your organization or product influences the healthcare field.

Breaking a story is one way journalists distinguish themselves in their profession. Offering your first-choice media contact an exclusive story can increase the likelihood that your story will be covered.

One last word, on one less word

The healthcare industry is overflowing with acronyms - HMO, MSO, IPA, and PPO are just a few. Most healthcare reporters and editors will understand these abbreviations, but other press contacts may need you to explain what the letters stand for, and to define what the entity is in the healthcare setting.

Even informed healthcare reporters want a simple language explanation of what your organization does. Not only should you cut down on the acronyms, but definitely eliminate the jargon. Today, reporters have automatic filters for email containing jargon such as "best of breed," "solution," "end-to-end," and "leading." If your release contains an overabundance of these terms, it may be automatically routed to the delete bin.

Develop the relationship

Many marketing professionals who attempt some form of media relations know that it is not a simple process. Experts must constantly network with media, many times knowing they will not be included in the story. For instance, some executives volunteer to give reporters background on an issue. The information they provide helps educate the reporter, but it will not be used in print or on the air. This type of media relations investment can pay off in the future. Since your expert was helpful, the reporter may use this person for a later story. If you link your marketing efforts closely to hot issues, however, your experts will be the first resource the media thinks to call when they write on those particular topics.

Scott Public Relations, in Woodland Hills, CA, specializes in healthcare, benefits, insurance and technology public relations. The company can be reached at **818-610-0270**.