
How *Not* To Get 'Whacked' By Journalists

By Paramjit Mahli

Journalists have an online game called "Whack a Flack", where they get to pelt cartoon character public relations professionals with pointy paper airplanes made out of bad press releases. Having worked extensively on both sides of the communications "border" — print and broadcast journalism and then making the transition into financial public relations — I have experienced public relations professionals of all kinds, including the "whacked."

Some have helped me enormously, particularly when I was crashing with deadlines due to breaking news; others have provided me, in a timely manner, with much needed background information for interviews. Seasoned professionals have made themselves immediately available by acknowledging they were unable to help with a current story.

Then there are those in PR who are just plain annoying. I used to think — during my live TV days at CNN — What is their objective? Getting to speak to me, or pitching a story? I think for many, it was the former. If they didn't have their pitch down in 20 seconds, they lost me and got "whacked!" For many, I never returned calls. Nothing personal, I just didn't have time to return all of them; if I had, I would have missed my deadlines and been out of a job!

Here are some basic rules for how *not* to become a public relations flack that's whacked!

1. Reporter Calls. Always return them; if your firm or partners don't want to respond to the question, say so right away so that the reporter can move to his/her next source. As a rule of thumb, ask when the deadline is and if you have the information that they need, respond as soon as

possible. The sooner the better. Guaranteed, if you do this reporters will come back to you when working on other stories.

2. Familiarize yourself with the reporter's area of expertise. This is often the most annoying pet peeve for reporters. They expect you to do your homework. Find out what they cover, when their deadlines are and their contact details. Don't phone them to get their e-mail address or telephone number. If they work in broadcast, find out good times to phone. If you are in-house, Bacons, Vocus, Factivia, and Mediamap all have resources that will provide you with the answers.

3. Become a source for reporters. Help them with the stories that they are working on. They're always looking for the latest information. Stay up-to-date on industry/sector-related developments and provide articles, reports and access to sources. That way a relationship is built which will pay dividends in the long run.

4. Don't send reporters goodies that don't cut it. Making luncheon appointments for "getting to know you" won't do the trick, unless you're making the appointment for lawyers who are spokespersons for the firm or a big case that may be newsworthy. Better to attend trade-related events and introduce yourself. Alternatively, extend an invitation to an event your firm is putting together.

5. Reporters can be trusted. A large majority of them are trying to find all the facts of a story so that they present a balanced view. Your perspective may not be theirs, but with few exceptions all of them are working on tight deadlines trying to get all the facts. Reporters cover news; if your press release is timely and newsworthy, and sent to the appropriate reporter, chances are the reporter will contact you.

6. Mergers or changing offices is NOT news. Highlight events like these in your client newsletter but don't send a press release to a reporter. It will diminish the respect the reporter has for you as a professional.

7. Don't send releases to all the reporters at a media outlet. If more than one ends up working on

the story they'll be thoroughly annoyed! As a rule of thumb don't send the press release to more than one reporter or editor. For national television, send releases to the guest booker, producer and reporter who specialize in that area.

8. Don't get snotty just because a reporter that contacts you works for a daily with a small circulation. Remember, this person will be there tomorrow and could end up as the editor. It's all about relationship building. Also remember that in this day and age *nothing* is local! You really don't know who will research from where and what results will pop up. I have conducted several searches before interviews, and I've been "Googled" by interviewees.

9. If a reporter does catch you off-guard, don't become hostile. Ask for a half hour or so to prepare information and to get the appropriate lawyers to answer questions.

10. Finally, in a global economy make certain that you have an "online newsroom" on your Web site. Reporters will look your firm up on the Web; if there's no media relations contact person listed, it will turn them off. On a basic level, make sure you have complete contact details, current press releases (test to see that all the archived releases are available), the firm's profile, bios of executives and facts and figures (i.e., how many employees work for the firm).

Don't confuse public relations with advertising. For lawyers, this is definitely hard; they are creatures of habit and like to be in control. In media relations you don't control the story, or the interview and facts. If you did, that would be advertising. Still, with good media planning you can manage the message that is reaching your target constituents in a successful way.

Remember, good media relations isn't simply good for the media, it's good for you, too. A productive relationship with the news media means more free publicity for you and more even-handed reporting of the issues that directly affect the firm, and you'll avoid being "whacked."

