Three Factors to Building Media Relations: Time, Timing, and Times to Remember

When contemplating how to improve media relations consider the three factors of time, timing, and times to remember. Time refers to the amount of time spent working on developing relationships. Timing pertains not only to the best time to communicate with media but the actual timing of activities during an event that will assist the media complete their work. And finally, Times to Remember involves any stunt or activity that will catch the attention of the media before, during, and after the event. For the purpose of this article, the term “event” refers to any sport activity or entity interested in securing media coverage including athletic teams. The term “media” refers to both print and electronic outlets.

Without question, there is no substitute for taking the time to get to know journalists and broadcasters on a personal level. Personal relationships are key to getting telephone calls accepted and to reaching a more receptive listener. It is therefore imperative that time be set aside to contact targeted media not just the day or two before the event but on a continuous basis year round. Basically, the media needs to be convinced or “worn down” over a period of time. All verbal communication should be followed-up with written documentation via fax, e-mail, express or regular postal delivery at the specific time requested by each media entity. The story also needs to be laid out so that the editor or reporter sees it as beneficial to their audience.

Time should also be taken to invite the media to non-event related activities (e.g. a concert, lecture) that may be of interest to them. This allows you the opportunity to demonstrate an interest in the “person” not just the “journalist.” Another way to develop relationships with the media is to attend events similar to yours and simply “hang out” with the writers and producers.

For columnists, relationship building requires the time to research the type of articles previously written by the journalists. This research helps to determine the columnist’s interests or “hot buttons” as well as the most appropriate angel to pitch. Columnists require a special approach different than the typical who, what, where, when, and why press release. To illustrate this point, Steve Griffith, director of public relations for the Nuveen Tour of Champions (a professional tennis circuit for men 35 years and older) and RHB Ventures, understood that a story about Jimmy Connors or Bjorn Bjorg, two of the more well known athletes on the tour, would be old news to Jim Murray a veteran columnist for the Los Angeles Times. Griffith therefore provided Murray information about Mansour Bahrami, an Iranian who lost the ten most productive years of his playing career due to the political situation in Iran. This research was time well spent as Murray ultimately wrote a column about Bahrami and the tour.

Personal relationships aside, the type and level of event as well as the content and twist of promotional materials will influence the media’s interest in a story. From a survey of over 20 sport editors across the United States, the following were ranked as the top 10
reasons for selecting stories:

1) News Worthiness (Is this an important event in which readers should be informed?)
2) Oddity (Is there something unusual about the event that would make interesting reading?)
3) Prominence (Will high profile celebrities attend or participate in the event and what are the financial stakes?)
4) Urgency (Is the story something that readers need to know immediately?)
5) Timely (Is this an “in” event or current “trend” of interest to readers?)
6) Relevance (Is there someone participating in this event from the local area or is a local business supporting the event?)
7) Conflict or Tension (Is there some scandal or heated rivalry that would spark the readers interest?)
8) Impact (Will this event personally effect readers or the community at large?)
9) Competition (Is it a slow news day? If yes, profiles and features are more likely to be run).
10) Instinct of Editors (Based on experience and knowledge of the readership, is this story appropriate for the newspaper?)

Unless your property is the Super Bowl or Olympic Games, one of the most difficult challenges for a publicist is obtaining pre-event editorial coverage. A fairly successful tactic is to sign-on a local television, radio or newspaper to be a sponsor or promotional partner. Even then, however, the media needs something “provocative” or “unique” about which to report (the oddity factor). For the Nuveen Tour of Champions, Steve Griffith worked with a local television station to promote the “Tweener” contest. A ‘tweener’ is when a tennis player returns a lob shot in between their legs. The contest challenged viewers to try and duplicate a “tweener” shot during breaks in the tournament. Each day of the tournament a different person was selected to try the “tweener” from those who entered the contest. This contest not only achieved great event exposure one month out but created tremendous media interest during the tournament as well.

Stunts involving athletes are another way to increase media attention and no one knew this better than the late Dan Duva, one of the world’s greatest boxing promoters through the 1980s and 90’s. It was his idea to build an easily implodable podium for the launch press conference of the 1995 World Heavyweight Championship and asked Michael Moorer to play along. Knowing the script, video cameras were perfectly positioned and when Moorer banged on the podium, pieces went flying startling everyone including Evander Hollyfield, Moorer’s opponent. Consequently the story of the podium exploding grew bigger than the event itself. Obviously some sports and athletes are more prone to stunts than others. In boxing, athletes know that there is a directly correlation between the amount of publicity and earnings received.

Championship Auto Racing Team (CART) is looking to gain attention from the public and media by sending a 70 foot travel trailer across the United States stopping at various festivals and sporting events along the way. When the trailer unfolds, an actual racing
Familiarization trips are also used to increase media attention and interest. This involves the invitation of selected media to visit the event’s location, tour the sport facilities, meet with athletes and dignitaries, and to take away numerous story ideas and photographs. Another purpose is to demonstrate that the organizing committee and community are ready to host the event. This message is then hopefully shared by the visiting journalists with colleagues around the world. Ed Hula, editor of Around the Rings, a bi-monthly newsletter on the business, politics, and events of world sport, was recently flown to Athens, Greece to meet with the organizers of the 1997 World Athletic Championships and the organizing committee for the Athens 2004 Olympic bid. He was joined by a dozen other international journalists with editorial control. Media familiarization trips to Atlanta for the 1996 Summer Olympic Games included an opportunity to visit with former President Jimmy Carter, Andrew Young, Billy Payne and other high profile individuals.

Along similar lines, some events like the Isuzu Celebrity Golf Championship invite radio stations from around the country to broadcast live from the tournament site the week before the actual competition. The remote broadcast booths are positioned on the driving range where all the celebrities practice. This coverage not only generates awareness about the event but promotes the tournament telecast and sponsors.

Media days are another way to have reporters experience a memorable time and view the event from a player’s perspective. For example, a media day for ice hockey may involve inviting journalists to skate on the ice with the players. To gain an appreciation for the ability of Master level competition, Sue Carpenter, Director of Communications for the 1998 Nike World Masters Games in Portland, Oregon is planning an event where a team of media personalities will play softball against a Master’s team. Further examples of media days are provided in the “Packing Them In” article in the March issue of Sport Travel.

For high profile events, credentialing is often based on the extent to which a media outlet covers an event or sport on a year-round basis. In this case an event credential serves as an incentive for the media to provide pre-event publicity. Other incentives, such as favored press seating and photograph positions can also be used.

Once you attract the media to the event, there is no substitute for servicing them to the highest degree. All their needs must be taken care of in a well equipped, comfortable environment. They should be provided both technical and personal support. Technical support includes the availability of telephones, computer hook-ups, copiers, and even closed circuit television. Personal support includes easy access to food and beverages, restroom facilities and hotel accommodations. This may require serving or having food service available for breakfast, lunch, dinner and late night meals depending on the schedule of events. Special bus shuttles to and from the media hotel to the event facility may also be required.
Furthermore, the press room should be open long before the event commences and should not close until all reporters have had sufficient time to file their stories. This means making certain arrangements for lights and air conditioning or heating systems to remain on in the building once the event is over. This also requires keeping certain gates open near media parking or shuttle pick-up so journalists do not have to walk half way around the building to exit.

Before the press room opens all equipment should be checked to assure it is in working order. This is especially true if a press conference is scheduled. Timely materials should also be ready as the media expects to receive current facts, quotes, and statistics pertinent to the day’s competition and activities. The more information that you can provide the better. The press guide for the New York Marathon includes every conceivable event fact from the number of participants broken down by nationality to the number of pounds of pasta consumed at the pre-race pasta party and the length of the outdoor urinal built specifically for the marathon.

The offering of media “goodie” bags is another common tactic to welcome the media to an event. To maintain the ethical integrity of journalists, no gifts of significant value are to be offered or accepted thus small items, often provided by sponsors, are included in the bags such as T-shirts, pens, lapel pins, and hats. The media bags issued for the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games were so well liked, some media continue to use them. This bag therefore serves an extended public relations tool providing a constant reminder of the Games not only for the journalist but to the general public wherever the journalist travels.

Another special touch is to provide a host or hostess on media busses who will serve as a tour guide identifying points of interesting along the different routes (e.g., from the airport to the media hotel or from the hotel to the sport venues and media center). This service could be provided by the local convention and visitors bureau or chamber of commerce as the ultimate purpose to the interest the media in writing about the local area as well as the competition.

For international events, some journalist will need to be educated as to the different media customs. During World Cup Soccer, for example, many American journalist were exposed for the first time to the “mixed zone” concept. This is an area between the field of play and the locker rooms where athletes pass and journalist are free to ask questions. The key, however, is to be aggressive and start shouting questions to players in hopes of attracting their attention. This “free for all” approach is as foreign to North American journalists as the traditional “press conference” is to other journalists.

For some events, post-event interviews are arranged by the director of public relations. This is when a close working relationship between event personnel, athletes, and officials becomes vital. Often times, the director of public relations must chase down athletes and convince them to speak to the media. Again, do whatever you have to do deliver news
and celebrities to the media.

Helping journalists get to where they need to get in a timely manner is also important. Although somewhat elementary, Sue Carpenter who previously worked for World Cup Soccer and Olympic Soccer, received great acclaim for placing duct tape along the different travel routes that media took during these international events. For the Olympic preliminary soccer matches in Birmingham, Alabama different color duct tape outlined the path from the press box to the photographers area, to the mixed-zone, and to the field of play. This not only reduced the number of questions asked but increased the comfort level of the media, especially the foreign journalists.

Basically whatever you can do to keep the media happy will be helpful in the long-run. You should also try to keep the media busy so that they do not have time to create their own stories. This is often the case in the first few days of the Olympic Games when the competition is slow and thousand of journalists are looking for stories. In Lillehammer, for example, the media started writing about the exorbitant cost of doing laundry in the press village which did not look good for the organizers of the 1994 Winter Olympic Games.

In conclusion, make a journalist or broadcaster’s work easy and enjoyable and you are likely to score more coverage. All things being equal, in the race for column inches and television exposure, it is the person that outworks the competition on the simple but time consuming tasks who comes out ahead. The key to contacting media is to be relentless and gregarious yet professionally considerate at all times. If nothing else, always remember the importance of time, timing, and times to remember.

(For additional information on maximizing media refer to Chapter 8 of The Ultimate Guide to Sport Event Management and Marketing).

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