

USING THE MEDIA TO MARKET YOUR ASSOCIATION

By John Van Gieson, Van Gieson Media

Just as you wouldn't play a round of golf without a putter in your golf bag, you shouldn't promote your association without putting a plan to take advantage of the media in your marketing tool box.

You could play a round of golf without a putter, but it would be much harder to put the ball in the hole. You could market your association without involving the media but, like a poorly hit golf ball, your message may not go where you want it to.

Why should your association work media coverage into its marketing? Because the media offer you unique opportunities to get your message where you want it at low cost and in a way that will enhance your standing with your members.

Before moving on to my advice on getting your information into the media, let's define what I mean by media. I like to divide the media into two categories: Traditional and New. Traditional Media starts with newspapers, which have been around in one form or another since old Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1447, and radio and television, which radically changed the way we get information in the last century.

New Media burst out of the latest explosion in communications technology, personal computers and the Internet. Large and growing numbers of people, typically young ones, like to get the information they want from websites, blogs, emails, podcasts and so on. They don't read newspapers or watch the Evening News.

If there ever was a clear distinction between Traditional and New Media, it's been blurred by the investment newspapers have made in developing their websites. Websites enhance their

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ability to recruit and retain readers who would rather use their fingers to tap a keyboard than collect ink stains and—more importantly—keep the papers in the hunt for the advertising dollars they need to stay in business. Newspaper websites play a crucial role in suppressing competition in the local news market, which protects those all-important ad revenues.

Political consultants, those public-spirited citizens who filled the airwaves and your mailbox this fall with campaign ads extolling the virtues of their candidates and sliming their opponents, divide media into two categories: Earned (which means free) and paid.

There are many good reasons to buy ads, but that's not what we're here to talk about. We're here to talk about earned media, which is a lot easier on your budget and has the power to work wonders for your association.

When Elvis was a sexy young hip-shaking rocker, he was reportedly asked by an interviewer if he planned to get married. "Why buy a cow when you can get the milk for free?" the King supposedly snarled.

You can see where this is going. Why buy an ad when you can get coverage for free?

Whether they appear in print, on the air, or on somebody's monitor, friendly feature stories on your association, news stories reporting your message and editorials supporting your position on important issues are the marketing equivalent of birdies.

You probably devote a large part of your time to informing your members how wonderful and smart you are, but it means a lot more if the media do it for you. Wouldn't a positive article from, say, the *Orlando Sentinel* or the *Miami Herald* look good on your website? Think of the media as a way to verify your performance to the people you want to impress.

Dealing with reporters and editors can be intimidating if you don't have a media background, but a few simple rules can help you get your message into the media.

Let's start with the "Three Know's":

- Know what your message is
- Know who to deliver your message to
- Know how to deliver it

A good starting point when you develop your message is the

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old KISS Formula, which, because you are nice people, I'll identify as Keep It Simple Sweetheart. Your message needs to be concise, clear, informative, and interesting. Media honchos are busy people; if you don't hook them right away, they'll move on to the next group that's courting them.

Before you approach the media, or your golf ball, line up your shot. Blindly sending your message to some media outlet somewhere is like trying to drive a golf ball while wearing a blindfold: You're not likely to make contact and, even if you do, you probably won't like the result.

If you're targeting daily newspapers, you should deliver your message to the reporter who covers your area. If you represent a health care association, you'll want to target the reporter who covers health care issues and so on.

For television coverage, the person to contact is the assignment editor, the person who decides what the reporters are going to cover on a given day. Larger stations may have several assignment editors.

Radio news is becoming an oxymoron. If you're interested in a station that does cover the news, the person you need to talk to is the news editor.

The Wonderful World of the Web is evolving media websites that differ widely in user friendliness and in the degree to which they encourage reader participation. You'll just have to explore the Web to see what's available as a tool that your association can use. You probably have a techie on board who would love that assignment.

When it comes to contacting the media with the message you have carefully crafted, remember that the personal touch works best. Visit or call the reporter or editor who is responsible for the area you want to penetrate. **DO NOT** rely on written communications. Press releases usually get lost in a stack of paper or tossed into the wastebasket. Emails are likely to be ignored if your name doesn't ring a bell or sent into electronic limbo by an overeager spam filter.

These are a few simple rules that will help you avoid double bogies when you're using the media to market your association. As the golfers like to say, hit 'em straight. ■