



# 10 Things NOT To Do With the Media

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Your goal with the media is to get on their news, talk or variety shows; deliver message points; and, perhaps, even be asked back. So whatever you do, you don't want to make basic mistakes, annoy them, get in the way or get on their "black list". Here are the top ten things producers, editors, and show hosts dislike the most.

## 1) Don't be a pest.

Calling a producer, writer, or host when you want to pitch a story is a fine idea. Calling them several times just to stay "top-of-mind" crosses the line. Reporters and producers are VERY busy. Calling them every day with the same idea, or, worse yet, calling their boss, will get you black-listed.

I actually like to call or contact less than I think I should. First of all I don't like hearing "no", but I have also seen first-hand how producers start to disregard a guest that pesters them. Also, when I call a producer, I like to have something fresh or newsworthy — that is my reason for calling. They don't object to this at all. I can take this new opportunity to mention the last idea I called about (several times), and ask how the news committee liked that idea. Often you will learn that your idea was not deemed newsworthy. It may be that the producer did not even pitch the idea to the group. Consequently this friendly nudge could do the trick and give the producer TWO story ideas to pitch.

### Case Example:

A local businessman had worked hard to understand the media and achieve a level of success with the local papers and even the television station. He had seen the

dramatic results such high visibility can bring. He became overly focused on achieving more. As a guest on a Saturday afternoon talk show, he did a good job. However, he went from good guest to completely annoying in a matter of weeks. He called the host, the producer, the board operator and the station manager almost every day. Soon, no one would take his calls and he was never again asked to be a guest.

While this may seem an extreme example, it is one that is played out to some degree every week in a newsroom somewhere. Strive to be gracious, courteous and helpful. If opportunity comes your way, jump on it. It is good to do your best to provide news stories and general interest topics, but if you begin to get a sense of entitlement or simply become annoying to the gatekeepers, you will spoil your future at that station.

## **2) Do not exaggerate or misrepresent your story.**

Many PR firms feel the need to over-exaggerate the news value of their story just to get it on the air. Clearly, you are excited about your story, but 99% of what you say had better be true, with no more than 1% bordering on hype. Most producers are okay with that. If you don't have a newsworthy story idea hidden in your message points, go back into a creative meeting and find one. With some thought, you can make almost any subject newsworthy. A dramatic case example, a great visual, a poll or survey of clients, or statistics from your national association can make a mundane subject or product newsworthy.

### **Case Example:**

A national media tour was planned for a new heartworm preventive drug for dogs. This drug also prevented a type

of worm that could possibly be transmitted to humans. If those humans were children, and the worm eggs were consumed in sufficient amounts, a child could possibly develop problems with the retina resulting in vision loss or blindness.

Knowing that the media would probably not do a story on a new heartworm drug alone, the media company pitched the story as a human medical story, where *children across the nation were going blind because of this worm!* In truth, such occurrences were extremely rare. While the PR firm achieved many interviews, the media were NOT happy to find that the risk was vastly exaggerated, the story was really about a new heartworm pill and that a drug company was funding the tour.

While what the PR firm said was true, it was way over-hyped. You have to deliver what you promise or you won't be asked back. Worse yet, a reporter might even nail you in the article or on the air! Be honest and keep the hype to a minimum.

### **3) Don't waste their time.**

Layoffs in both local news and major networks have caused television stations to squeeze more work out of each producer. The conglomeration of networks is also requiring fewer and fewer people to do the same or increased workload.

If, when you call a producer, you chitchat or try to become her best friend, she will resent the waste of her time. She may not take your calls in the future. Make it your object to get to the point, within about 10 seconds.

Think headlines! State the problem and get to the solution. Once you present a synopsis of your idea, it all

boils down to whether or not they want your story. If you are having a problem getting to the exciting essentials, use an old writer's trick. Say to yourself, "*Guess what?*" like you do when you have some exciting piece of news for a friend. Then, fill in the blank. After the producer has made a quick assessment of the story and shows some interest, you will have plenty of time to give all the detail they want.

#### **4) Don't send the media too much stuff.**

This is the same principle as not wasting the media's time over the phone. Many people are in love with what they do; their product, their book, or their mission in life. They mistakenly believe that media producers will have the same level of interest. Consequently, they stuff reams of press clippings, pictures, testimonials, articles and samples into their press kits. Producers and editors simply don't have the time to wade through it all. If a producer or editor can't find what they are looking for quickly, it becomes confusing and a waste of time. This will result in your press kit going straight into the circular file.

Press kits should be short, concise, powerful, and to the point. Kits should include a picture, a press release, a one-page resume, a one-page tip-sheet, one or two previous press articles, and perhaps a sheet of media producers' comments about you or your topic. That's it. Anything beyond that will be a waste of time for you and the producer.

IF the producer is interested in your subject, there are plenty of ways you can get them all the material they want later. Just don't destroy your door opening chance with too much stuff right up front.

## **5) Don't call radio or television right before or during a show.**

The worst thing you can do is to call a television producer an hour to 30 minutes before their show goes on the air. They are truly “nuts” at that point and — even if you **do** get them on the phone — you won't have their full attention.

The best time to call is about 30-60 minutes after their show has aired. By then, they have cut all the promos for the next day and handled any urgent after-show issues. They are already thinking about the next day and — if you are lucky — a few days down the road. This is the time to introduce your new idea. If you do not know when a good time to call a particular producer is, simply ask them. They will appreciate the consideration.

## **6) Don't pitch stories that lack focus or are too commercial.**

Remember that your first job is to meet the needs of the reporter or producer — that means viewer service. Some call it; WIFM (what's in it for me)! The "me" in this case is the reporter's view of their audience. Producers are very good gatekeepers at the door of WIFM. You must convince the producer — within seconds — that your story is news, is personal to the audience, and that you're the best person to tell it. Plus, it must make viewers feel like they've learned something. That's a tall order and takes preparation on your part.

Think of it this way. When you tell your story on radio, you want to tell it in such a way that it makes the listener lean towards the radio. On television, you want the viewer to turn up the volume and focus. That kind of compelling nature will satisfy the listener or viewer service criteria most producers are looking for.

If your story has a commercial bent — as many of them do — go easy with it. Remember, news people are not interested in the commercial aspects of a story. In fact, news producers hate commercialism of their news program. If you are too brash or act like a salesman, you will get rejected. You may simply get sent over to the sales department so you can buy advertising time. Craft your pitch so that your commercial story sounds like interesting and compelling news, and not like a commercial.

### **7) Don't take offense if they reject your idea.**

The producer's entire job is to put on good stories each and every show. It is not their job to produce your story. If they don't like your idea, don't take it personally. You should have a secondary story idea ready to pitch very quickly. If both are rejected, try again in a week or two with another, more compelling story. This rejection is frankly hard to take because we become so involved with our stories and our information. But it is the real world of getting stories on the air.

The media business is a tough, cold business and if you take rejection personally you will either have to learn to get over it or become satisfied with sending out newsletters. Even though you believe your story is newsworthy, informative and just plain GREAT, remember, it is not the producer's job to satisfy you and accept your story. If they don't accept your story idea, you should move on to providing another great idea in the future.

### **8) Don't forget to follow-up.**

Every producer I've ever met can "multi-multi-task" extremely well. In the middle of that mental mess your information might get lost. Therefore, it is your responsibility to follow up properly. While pestering

phone calls will get you dumped, gentle faxed or emailed reminders may help focus the “attention-deficit-disordered” producer back on your story.

This is especially true if you tell a reporter you will supply him with follow-up material. Do so within one day, then follow-up with a fax, email or even a quick phone call at the proper time of day (see #5 above). Producers generally appreciate this type of “assistance” and few take offense. However, know how much is too much.

### **9) Don't go over their head.**

If you get frustrated when you cannot get a story aired, do not go over the reporter's or producer's head to the Executive Producer of the show. Executive Producers are usually only interested to hear if their producers make a major mistake in facts, legal issues, political issues; or a production foul-up.

The fact that you felt that your story was better than another is not of interest to the “boss”. Such a call will no doubt get you on the “black-list” with that producer. If you ever want back on that show, you'll have to wait for that producer to be moved up, down, or out to start over again with a new producer. That can take months or years.

### **10) Don't be a “Dr. Jeckle / Mr. Hyde.”**

You will get a producer in hot water and yourself on the “black-list” if you pitch a story one way, then show up and do the segment in another way. Perhaps you've decided that you can tie your product or service to a breaking national news story. You cleverly crafted the pitch and convinced the producer that you have a good story idea. Great work! But if you show up on the set and try to turn your interview into an infomercial; or take a different angle with the story than you pitched, you'll never be asked to come back. Some producers may even seek out your



competition and produce a story or news segment that they feel balances what you said.

Be honest with producers; in the pitch, the story concept and the actual story as delivered. This way you will become a good source for future stories and can enjoy a great relationship with the producer.

Radio and television producers ARE the gatekeepers of their media. They are the ones you want to develop the best relationship with, and the ones with which you do not want to make these mistakes. Remember these important things NOT to do with the media and focus on being a positive, valuable source of information for them. This way you will be a trusted assistant to them – and that's a powerful person to be.