

SPECIAL REPORT: The Ultimate PR and Publicity Secret

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Are You Newsworthy?

What's the secret to getting free publicity? It's not a fancy press kit. It's not having a superstar spokesperson. It's not hiring the world's biggest PR firm. Actually, the ultimate insider secret is quite simple:

You need to think like a reporter.

That's it. Told you it was simple. Of course, this is the first-place winner in the "easier said than done" Olympics. Most of us are too tied-up in our own world to really look at our businesses objectively and come up with a newsworthy story angle that can lead to free publicity. Reporters have a special place in their circular file for puffery, fakery and hyperbole. If you want to avoid this fate, then you must learn to think like a reporter.

This means:

- Being able to separate real news about your company from promotional puffery.
- Being able to deliver a sharp story angle that will be of real interest to the news reading or viewing public.
- Being able to deliver this angle in a professional, courteous way.

Some Basic Truths

Here are some truths that you ignore only at your own risk:

- Reporters don't care about helping you.
- Reporters are hassled all day by PR people and they're pretty much sick of it.
- Reporters don't care about your website, your book, your products or your life story, unless you are providing something that helps make their job easier — that is, a really good story. In that case:
 - Reporters love you.
 - Reporters are happy to take your call.
 - Reporters are fascinated by your website, your book, your products and maybe even your life story.

So what's the bottom line here? When you design your public relations campaign, develop your angles, develop your media materials and begin contacting the press, always think: "What can I do at this step that will make this more useful to a journalist?"

That means:

- Develop story angles from a reporter's perspective, not a business owner's.
- Conduct yourself in a manner free of hype, clichés and puffery.
- Use proper etiquette when contacting a reporter or editor (we'll get to that in just a bit).

Developing an Angle

What does it mean to "develop a story angle from a reporter's perspective"?

Have you ever met someone who has gotten way too absorbed by his hobby? He can go on for hours about his model trains or his coin collection. He can't possibly imagine why you, or anyone else, wouldn't be riveted by his in-depth discussion of Peruvian 19th century coinage.

He's far too close to his hobby to be objective. As it turns out, most business owners are the same way about their company. If you spend all day absorbed in the world of synagogues — or golf clubs, or health insurance, or any other field — you can lose sight of the realization that most of the rest of the world doesn't really care.

Step away from your business. View it as a reporter looking for an interesting story. Remember, he's looking for a story that will satisfy his editor and his readers. He's not interested in promoting you, only in crafting a story that will make readers stop and say, "Hmmm, I never knew that. Now there's something I can use!"

With that in mind, let's look at the example of Tifereth Israel Synagogue.

Taking Stock of Your Attributes

There are probably hundreds of synagogues in California. So simply announcing that there's an event at TIS will get you nothing. You need to break down your current attributes, and determine if you have anything that's newsworthy. Here's a way of looking at it that may be useful: for every attribute, try to honestly rate its news value. Use these categories:

- **NO DICE**
Not newsworthy. Too common, too promotional, too boring.
- **INSIDE STUFF**
May be newsworthy within my own field (trade publications) or to current members but not attractive enough to the general population to build a story.
- **GETTING THERE**
Potentially of interest, but not quite meaty enough.
- **STOP THE PRESSES!**
Meaty, hearty news that journalists eat up.

OK, let's look at some of what you think makes TIS special. This is a very important step. When making a list of what makes you special, take the time to get it right. What you say here can be mined for gold, as you'll soon see:

- Having an important/fabulous/unique fundraiser.
NO DICE. Too common and will probably be viewed as promotional puffery.
- Great rabbi.
NO DICE. Ditto.
- Lots of activities.
NO DICE. Ditto, Ditto.
- TIS was established over 100 years ago.
INSIDE STUFF. Decent topic, but is there enough there to build a story?
- Rabbi celebrating 20th anniversary at TIS.
GETTING THERE. Now you're standing out a bit.

So, what have we got to work with? Three NO DICES, an INSIDE STUFF and a GETTING THERE. Not bad — we might just have enough to build a public relations campaign around. What can we combine to create a tighter, more specific angle? With this approach, you can develop a number of solid newsworthy topics to take to the press.

Your PR Campaign: Taking it to the Press

A story about the longevity of a rabbi in this day and age is a natural for the "Religion and Ethics" section of a newspaper. So, you want to get an article about it in a major paper (let's say the UT).

First, you've got to find out who the appropriate editor or writer is at the UT. Sandi Dolbee is the Religion and Ethics editor. But you might also consider "Passages" section and look up that editor as well.

Here are some "etiquette" secrets that can help you effectively work with journalists in generating bushels of free press...

- Don't call to "see if they got your release." Journalists hate this. Folks send out mass mailings and then call to see if the release made it there. If you really want to get a story in the Post, call first to pitch your story and then follow up with your release, photos, etc.
- Plan your call around their deadlines. Most papers are morning editions. Thus, journalists' deadlines range from 2 p.m. local time and on. Don't call during this time! The best time to reach a newspaper journalist: 10 a.m. to noon local time.
- Don't start pitching right away! If you get Joan Smith on the phone, don't just dive into your pitch. This is rude, as Joan may be on the other line, working on a story, entertaining guests or who knows what else. Start by saying something like, "Hi Ms. Smith, my name's Bill Jones and I have a story suggestion you might find interesting. Is this a good time for you?" Joan will reply "yes" — which is a green light to start your pitch, or "no" — to which you reply, "When would be a good time to call you back?" Your courtesy will be greatly appreciated by the journalist — which can only help your chances.
- Pitch to the voice mail. It's fine to pitch your story to the reporter's voice mail. Keep it very short and end the message with your phone number. If you don't hear back, try again until you get the actual reporter or editor on the phone.
- Don't read from a script! The bane of many journalists' existences is 22-year-olds sitting in cubicles in big PR firms reading pitches off a sheet of paper. If you've ever been called by a telemarketer doing the same thing, you know how annoying it can be. Practice your pitch so that it seems natural and spontaneous.
- Give them a story, not an advertisement. Newspapers do not exist to give you publicity. They exist to provide readers with interesting stories. Your job is to give the journalist what he or she wants, while getting the free exposure. Make your pitch newsy, exciting and relevant.
- Follow up immediately. If she's interested, Joan Smith will ask for more information. Be sure you have a press kit (including news release and photo) ready to send. Send it out via priority mail, and write "Requested Information" below the address.
- Call again. Now it's appropriate to call to see if Joan's received your stuff... after all, unlike a mass-mailed release, she asked for it! Ask if she's had a chance to look through it, and what she thinks. If she likes what she sees, you're about to get some very valuable free publicity!

Press Release Headline

Before you write a word, remember this:

The reporter isn't interested in helping you make money or driving visitors to your site. He's looking for a story that will be interesting to his readers and pleasing to his editor. He could care less about your great building, super schedule of events and active congregants. He wants to know only the info that will help him craft a good story about the rabbi. Take your ego out of it. Take your natural inclination to sell, sell, sell out of it. Look at your story with a cold, objective eye.

OK, let's get to our press release headline.

State your most exciting news, finding or announcement in as few words as possible. Emulate the headlines you see in the newspaper every day.

- Bad Press Release Headline:
LOCAL SYNAGOGUE PLANS FUNDRAISER TO HONOR RABBI
- Good Press Release Headline:
RABBI RECOGNIZED FOR LIFETIME OF SERVICE

Don't worry, you'll get to plug the synagogue soon enough. In the meantime, you've just thrown a meaty hook at the reporter.

The Press Release Subhead

Subheads are remarkably useful tools, yet usually overlooked by press release writers. Basically, the press release subhead gives you the opportunity to flesh out your angle and further hook the reporter, without stepping on the drama of the press release headline.

Here's a headline/subhead combo I might use for this press release:

RABBI RECOGNIZED FOR LIFETIME OF SERVICE
In an era of dramatic change, Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal leads with quiet assurance

The Press Release Lead

It's Journalism 101 — the lead paragraph includes *the who, what, when, where and how* of the story. If the reporter were only to read the lead of a good press release, he'd have everything he needed to get started. There's no room for BS, hype or sell. Just the facts.

- Bad Press Release Lead
Tifereth Israel Synagogue, the oldest conservative synagogue in San Diego, will be honoring their rabbi at a black tie affair on 01/01/08.
- Good Press Release Lead
In a time when Jewish community is facing the challenges of a changing world, Leonard Rosenthal has provided uniquely stable leadership to the century old Tifereth Israel Synagogue. When he brought his young family to San Diego in 1977, the odds were against him standing in the same pulpit after two decades. And yet he has remained and celebrated the life cycle events of generations of Tifereth Israel members. Rabbi Rosenthal's remarkable career is being recognized by JTSA at (whatever it is...)

The Rest of the Press Release

The balance of the press release serves to back up whatever claims were made in the lead and headline. Use enough supporting material to make your case, and to demonstrate that, whatever angle you're promoting, it wasn't something you slapped together carelessly.

Next, a quote will help put in some perspective:

"Blah blah blah," Marla Lobenstein, president of the congregation, said. "And more blah blah blah."

Or, you might ask an expert for a quote:

"What a remarkable thing," said Jane Doe, author of *Jewish Like Me*.

Finally, spend a sentence or two describing your synagogue and what you do:

Tifereth Israel Synagogue was founded in 1906 and has provided a spiritual home for six generations of San Diegans. It serves central and east county from its home in San Carlos.

This paragraph is known as the "boilerplate" — an old newspaper term meaning a block of standard text that's used over and over again. In this case, it's text that you might use at the bottom of all your releases.

Place your boilerplate right above the # # #'s.

One more trick: below the ###'s, add a line that says something like:

If you'd like more information about this topic, or to schedule an interview with John Smith, please call Pat Brown at 555/555-2222 or e-mail Pat at pr@tiferethisrael.com

Some Key Things to Remember

- Stay away from hype-bloated phrases like "breakthrough", "unique", "state-of-the-art", etc.
- Always write it from a journalist's perspective. Never use "I" or "we" unless it's in a quote.
- Read lots of good newspaper writing to get a feel for the style.
- Shorter is better. If you can say it in two pages, great. If you can say it in one page, better.