

Effective media publicity by business organisations

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Introduction

The media plays its own specific role in each country. That role is linked to the design and ground rules of the democratic process, history, culture and forms of association, diversity within the media and a range of other factors in a country. The recommendations in this text, designed to show how to deal with the media adequately, must always be considered in the light of the background situation. What works in one country may not work in another. Nevertheless, the recommendations and tips are based on years of experience and successful dealings with the media built up by a central business organisation in a Western European country. They encourage you to reflect on why one approach will succeed and another will not. It prompts you to make choices. And that is a gain for effective representation of interests.

Purpose of media publicity

The purpose of media publicity is to strengthen the position of business organisations as an advocate for the interests of businesses.

Media publicity

- increases the visibility of the organisation to its constituency, bringing in new members and tightens bonds with existing members,
- increases the general public's familiarity with the organisation, strengthening the organisation's prestige and reputation in the public mind, and
- clarifies the organisation's positions and opinions to policy-makers and political decision-makers. That means more influence and hence more effective representation of interests.

Business organisations which deal successfully with media publicity

- give media publicity a prominent position among their activities,
- have channels for access to the media in their country, and
- manage their relations with journalists.

This does not happen without effort. It requires organisation, action and selection of instruments.

Organisation:

Publicity can be regarded as a form of marketing. It involves public dissemination of opinions, analyses and positions, as a component of representation of interests. Just as marketing is very important for every business, media publicity is equally important for business organisations which represent interests. It is therefore essential to put the right organisation in place. That requires clarity about responsibilities and good management.

1. In principal the president should be the main mouthpiece, but also the Secretary General can be a key interface with the media. This of course depends on the set up in the organisation. He/she must be the face of the collective interests of businesses to the outside world. This aspect should also play an important role in the choice of president.
2. Anchor responsibility for publicity policy at the top of the organisation. That is necessary for coordination, management and communication.
3. Designate an official who is responsible for maintaining contacts with the media on the “shop floor”. Journalists must have access to somebody who understands what the media needs and can put journalists in contact with the right people. But it must be clear that his/her loyalty remains with the business organisation.
4. Analyse reports, articles and comments in the media regularly. This should be an ongoing topic of discussion. In addition, look at more far-reaching changes in the media periodically. Journalists come and journalists go, written columns change their content and importance, radio and television programmes are given a different format and impact, etc. The media is a very fast-moving world, and a business representative can quickly find that he or she is in the wrong column or on the wrong programme.

5. Identify the target groups and the associated media. Make a selection among the publications and programmes in which you want to appear, and those in which you do not. Which programmes are an interesting sales channel for business interests, and which are not.
6. Bring in professionals as copywriters and trainers (for television/radio) but keep the ultimate content at the highest level within the organisation. No text should leave the organisation without the approval of top management.

Action:

Media policy can only be successful with a pro-active approach. There is no point in being passive and waiting for others to act. Here, too, we see a comparison with marketing: you will not sell any product if you do not market it actively. But action must fit in with the organisation's media policy and media agenda.

Action to be taken and the associated mindset include:

1. Make news
Events such as meetings, general assemblies, conferences, visits, receptions, etc., lend themselves to this (work with an updated events calendar). Invite newspapers, television and radio to be present. Provide their representatives with good information. Receive them properly as guests. Organise surveys on topics where you want to see policy action. Produce a press release. Present the results at a press conference. Inform members of the board beforehand if you intend to issue important news. It is quite frustrating to them if they hear or read this news for the first time in the press.
2. Be open for the media and try to build up a good relationship
Whenever possible, avoid "no comment". Reporting in newspaper columns is free publicity, which has the advantage of greater credibility to readers than brochures. A good relationship with a journalist is often a prerequisite, but you must remember that he/she will always be a journalist.
3. Let the media know when you want to issue a comment. Go for it!

4. Personify news

News needs a face. That applies for television, but also for newspapers and radio.

Show who you are. The president is the organisation's face and voice. Anybody who makes an appearance must be aware what impression he/she is giving. Therefore, practice in advance. Be prepared. Collect information about those asking the questions.

5. Take clear positions

It is easy to use fighting talk and seek conflict ("unacceptable") but this is not always the most sensible route. Weak texts do not deliver results either. Keep your messages short and to the point. Prepare yourself with sound bites, visual language. Translate macro into micro. Have examples at hand.

Instruments:

Media publicity has many instruments. Make a choice for each issue. But orchestrate the use of instruments.

Instruments include:

1. Comments: regard a request from the press for comments as an opportunity to be brought into the picture. Seize this opportunity.
2. Press release: a home-made text prompted by an event. Keep the text short and to the point.
3. Press briefing: an informal meeting with a small number of media representatives. This offers the invitees a bit more exclusivity and is therefore attractive for them.
4. Press conference: an official event to which all media representatives are invited. Prepare statements carefully in advance. The conference should generally be headed by the organisation's in-house publicity officer.
5. Interview: prepare in advance. Decide who gives the interview, and at what level. Ensure that somebody from the organisation is also present, preferably the person who is responsible for contacts with the media. Learn about the journalist conducting the interview and where his/her interests lie.

6. Letter to the editor/article: a piece drafted by the organisation for publication on a newspaper's opinion pages. The text must always be structured and formulated with care. There should always be a mixture of clear language and sufficient depth. Reflect on the signatory: the greater the interest for businesses, the more important the signatory.
7. Infotorial: bought space in newspapers with the organisation's own text, a combination of information and advertising space. The text appears on the newspaper's advertising pages or on the editorial page under the heading of "Advertising feature". The text should immediately make it clear what the piece is about. It is an expensive instrument and should only be used in very exceptional cases. It also implies criticism of newspapers which are not deemed to be devoting enough attention to issues which the business organisation finds important.
8. Spinning and off-the-record actions: speaking with media representatives in order to pass on text and explanations without a view to direct publicity. Explanation of reasons and backgrounds from the angle of business. The aim is to generate understanding for business visions and interests.

Things to avoid:

In addition to recommendations and tips for positive actions, there are also matters that must be avoided in relations with the media.

1. *Hostile image* of the media or individual journalists
Disagreements must be dealt with in a businesslike manner.
2. *Paternalism*
If journalists are sensitive about anything, it is the thought that they are being talked down to. That will be reflected in the way they formulate their reports.
3. *Appearances*
In the case of photographs and television appearances, ensure that clothing sends out the desired message and is appropriate for the organisation you represent. Pay attention to details, because cameras can be merciless. Your organisation's press official must take care of this aspect. Including the images that can be seen in the background. For photographs, choose a suitable decor.

4. *Carelessness* in the presence of the media

Say nothing in the presence of journalists that you do not want to be broadcast in the media. Remain alert to the presence of cameras and microphones.

5. *Payments* to the press

Do not give presents to journalists in order to get a good publicity and needless to say that payments are unacceptable.

Checkpoints:

Is the organisation *well organised* for media policy?

Some elements:

- Does the president have the ambitions and qualities for a public profile
- Is responsibility for media publicity anchored at the top of the organisation
- Does the organisation have an in-house media function
- Does the organisation evaluate the results of publicity on a regular basis: how and when are you appearing in the media?

Is media policy *pro-active*?

A successful media policy needs “eagerness”. In sport terms: play an attacking game.

What you need to score are :

- good access to the media
- an events calendar including the associated media actions
- creation of new facts through presentation of surveys or opinion polls (among members)

Manage *publicity instruments* as much as possible

with specific elements of expertise regarding:

- sufficient writing talent
- training for public appearances (television, public addresses)
- understanding of the impact of each instrument on the target group (readers, viewers) and policy-makers.