

A Hospitality and Leisure Public Relations Primer

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ABSTRACT. From an industry perspective, this paper offers a primer for hospitality organizations to help them maximize Return on Investment (ROI) from Public Relations. It provides anecdotal advice, wisdom, and experience, backed by a survey of more than 50 print journalists from trade, business, and consumer publications. Included are several strategies hospitality organizations should consider employing to earn publicity. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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The hospitality, travel, restaurant, and leisure industries are still experiencing economic pain, but instead of offering reasons for this turbulence, why not find a way to fly above the rest of the pack? Brands are built and market share can be established in a down economy.

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With the perception of a smaller market, and reduced revenue streams due to lower sales, occupancy rates and average daily rates, hotels, airlines, restaurants, and other organizations (especially those involved in business travel) have cut their advertising and marketing budgets. The ones who will recover fastest from this downturn, and who may even gain, are those who learn to effectively employ public relations management strategies to help create awareness and drive sales.

Productive hospitality and leisure public relations is not just mailing out a press release announcing a new chef or special Mother's Day getaway weekend. Just as the industry has experienced lean times, many top-tier publications have downsized or folded completely due to lost advertising revenue, resulting in less overall editorial space. Demand for media coverage has intensified while coverage opportunities have declined. It resembles trying to book a room for less than rack rate during a major convention in a city where several top hotels have either shut down or closed several floors for renovation work. Coverage is harder to get, and each hard-earned clip will carry that much more weight.

This paper offers some sound guidelines to help maximize ROI from public relations. The recommendations are supported by anecdotal advice, wisdom, and expertise, backed by a survey of more than 50 print journalists from trade, business, and consumer publications including *Yankee Magazine*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Nation's Restaurant News*, *Forbes.com*, *Gourmet*, *Travel Weekly*, *Meeting News*, *Bon Appetit Magazine*, and *Meetings & Conventions*, and more.

Public relations is truly more of an art than a science and, in tough times, it is going to be measured by the bottom line. Did it result in media coverage or not? So what must an organization do to earn that coverage?

Set Realistic Goals and Objectives. What are the goals of the public relations campaign? Is it to create additional awareness of a hotel or resort? Is it to drive new business by bringing in guests with a special offer? Is it to communicate with repeat customers? Is it to announce a new sales record to entice potential investors? Is it to take a stand on an issue? Is it to clear up a misperception or to squelch a false rumor? There are so many reasons to engage in public relations. The key is determining why it's being done, and what the objectives and measures of achievement will be.

Know Where to Find Your Audience. It's simple target marketing. This is the classic *Wall Street Journal* vs. trade journal dilemma. Many businesses mistakenly believe that their story belongs in the *Wall Street*

Journal. However, the *Wall Street Journal* might not be the best place for them to earn coverage. The best place for coverage is wherever your target audience is. Review your goals and objectives. What is the message you're trying to send, and to whom? What publications and journalists are most likely to reach that audience? Is your story, message, or position relevant to the journalist's audience?

"It takes more work, but learn a little about each magazine you pitch to and tailor the information to our market, and your chances of getting picked up will grow exponentially," says Sue Pelletier, Executive Editor of *Medical Meetings*.

It's often more beneficial to be featured in a large article in a targeted trade or local publication than to receive a one-line mention that will go unnoticed in a daily business monolith. "PR and marketing people should know our magazine's content and angle before they pitch us anything. Most pitches to us fail because they read like they could have been written for any travel publication," explains Jason Cochran, Senior Editor of Arthur Frommer's *Budget Travel Magazine*.

Know Your Company and Subject Matter. Develop a set of key message points that make your story relevant for each target audience. Know these message points, and make sure they are consistently included in conversations and media pitches whenever possible and appropriate. Be prepared to explain them in relation to the industry as a whole, and be ready for tough probing questions, especially those that address financial details.

If you don't know the answer to a question, don't bluff. Tell the reporter you'll have to find the answer and get back to him/her—and then do it! Never, never lie. Work with the journalist, and try to work without a script! Scripts make public relations practitioners sound like telemarketers, and that technique works against earning coverage. A public relations professional must think critically and quickly.

Pitch to the Right Reporter. Fewer journalists are being asked to cover more stories because publications have cut staff. Journalists are overloaded and have become less accessible, so it becomes tougher to quickly identify the right contact for the right pitch.

Toni Stroudt of the *Chicago Tribune* covers leisure travel. "The person reading the travel section on Sunday morning wearing her pajamas is whom you must keep in mind," she counsels. Stroudt's features include a "destination," and she will analyze the value of the trip for the consumer. A business hotel in Chicago is not usually part of her beat. Another *Tribune* writer covers business travel from a "getting business done" perspective.

It is time-consuming—but also critical—to identify the right reporter at the right publication to avoid a quick trip to the wastebasket. When you read a related article and want to contact the writer, it's still time-consuming to find a way to do so, as e-mail addresses and telephone numbers change often and are not always readily accessible. Do not cut corners here.

Make It Relevant—Make It Newsworthy. Is what you are pitching really news—or just news to you or your boss? Don't just think about what your organization will gain from the exposure—think about what the readers of the publication will gain from your information. Is your story a good fit with the types of issues that particular publication tends to cover?

"I can tell you we look for unusual, new, fresh angles in guest service as it pertains to families with young children," says Andrea Messina of *Parenting*. "We occasionally interview hotel directors, kids-club managers, and so on for their expert perspective."

Do you have something newsworthy to report, or are you really looking for free advertising? "Most people do not go to a hotel. They stay at a hotel because it suits their needs at a destination. Too many hoteliers are of the impression that travelers are falling over themselves to stay at their lodging. Nothing could be further from the truth unless the particular lodging is a famous 5-star operation," reminds Bob and Sandy Nesoff, Travel Editors/Columnists for Metro Publishing Group/Metro Features.

Avoid pitches and press releases for trivial things, and don't send one out every few weeks for the sake of keeping your hotel's name out there. Many reporters will treat your organization like a "spammer" and may ignore future emails, including those that may have been newsworthy.

Is your story compelling to the publication's audience? According to Elaine Richard of *Gourmet* magazine, "We get many pitches from people for whom the process of opening a restaurant was, for them, interesting, but in fact is pretty much just a variation on the same old story, especially in family situations. Someone starting out completely out of the blue or from some other background can be of interest."

Be Honest, Skip the Hype, and Avoid Embarrassing Oversights. Using jargon and buzzwords in press releases is taboo. The media has grown skeptical, cynical, and tired of hype-filled releases. Some have installed filters to screen and trash email press releases laden with buzzwords.

While hype and opinionated superlatives are appropriate for advertising, sales, and marketing materials, they are inappropriate for press

releases and media pitches. Make sure any photographs of guest rooms are “typical” of the property, rather than the one-of-a-kind “best room.” An accurate representation is imperative, under penalty of negative media backlash.

Make sure you avoid embarrassing oversights. If launching a national promotion, make sure the person answering the telephone at the local property is fully aware of any special codes and rates and can fully explain the terms and rules to customers. It’s not unusual for the public relations person to call a hotel to conduct a “spot check” to make sure that the promotion is being implemented smoothly and appropriately. This one extra measure of quality control can help avoid bad press.

Public vs. Private—Size Matters. It is a fact of the business world that larger chains and established properties are going to earn the lion’s share of coverage. According to Arnie Weissmann of *Travel Weekly*, “It has to do with the real estate of pages. We have a finite amount of room in an issue. If a hotel has an interesting story, but one reader in 10,000 will ever be able to take business action on the news, we have to really weigh whether it’s worth the space. If Starwood hiccoughs, everyone wonders what it means, and we try to find that out as well. Likewise, in the cruise arena, almost anything Carnival does will get reported. Small but interesting would probably have made it in more frequently in the heyday of trade advertising.”

If the story being pitched isn’t about a large hotel chain, some reporters just aren’t interested. But there are others who feel quite the opposite. “In some ways, being small and new is a stronger selling point than being just another big box hotel. So many press packets cross your desk, and many just blur together. We focus exclusively on New England, and what excites me these days are the places that don’t fit the cookie-cutter mold of the New England Inn or the Wanna-be New York Boutique Hotel,” says Amy Traverso, Food Editor of *Yankee: The Magazine of New England Living*. “Places with a quirky sense of style, a great background story, a solution to some of the hassles of traveling (i.e., B&Bs that let you have breakfast in your room rather than having to get dressed and make conversation with strangers at 8 a.m.), exceptional dining, a remarkable location . . . those will get more attention than anything else.”

Some journalists won’t cover a property or restaurant they have never heard of. Does this mean they’re willing to jump on the bandwagon and take their cues from better-informed competitors? In some way, yes. “The things I look for in a hotel or restaurant that does not yet have a high profile and wants to build one, are first and foremost, local re-

views of the place. Particularly with restaurants,” says Tanya Wenman Steel, New York Editor for *Bon Appetit* magazine. “If the local restaurant reviewer—one that I know has a solid reputation—is enthusiastic about the restaurant, then that is enough of an impetus for me to follow up, by sending a reviewer, editor or talking to the local reviewer.”

Public relations practitioners must walk a fine line of prodding reporters to ferret out the smaller, lesser-known properties, take some risks, and cover something readers don’t already know about, while having to explain to our hotels and other properties why reporters will resist such prodding.

Think Outside the Box. While that expression is about as cliché as the ideas it tries to surpass, a creative approach is one way to stand out from the pack.

Katherine Nichols, Hawaii Chief of *Travel Weekly*, looks for something unique. “Are they doing something nobody else is doing? Special location, new twist on an old idea (not the same menu restructured).” She offers examples: “A cultural tour, kids go to camp free, pack up your breakfast in a free cooler and send you off to the beach in the morning as part of your hotel stay. When I see 5th night free at a hotel I just delete it. Soooo stale.”

Creativity for creativity’s sake isn’t enough—the idea must still be suitable for the audience of a particular publication.

Last October, the Florida Marlins eliminated the Chicago Cubs en route to the World Series. In a critical inning with Chicago cruising toward victory, a Cubs fan at Wrigley Field touched a foul ball that a Cubs outfielder might have otherwise caught for a key out. The Marlins went on to have a big rally that inning, and the foul ball incident was considered by many to be the turning point in the series.

Figuring that the interfering Cubs fan would be blamed for the loss and made quite unwelcome in Chicago, a number of southern Florida businesses (in the heart of Marlins “territory”), including a five-star condominium hotel, immediately put out a press release offering that fan six months of free rent at properties offering incredible beach views, round trip airfare, and help finding a job should he decide to make his stay in Florida permanent.

While this was certainly a creative idea, its business value is questionable. What publications would pick up the story, and whom would it reach? Would it drive new business? Odds are pickup would be limited to local business writers, whose readers are already in the area, and therefore less likely to need five-star accommodations near home. Even if the offer received national attention, what could be the end result?

Was there really anything in the promotion for anyone other than the Cubs ran that ran afoul? It might have been humorous, but it also looked like an attempt at free advertising.

An outside-the-box idea with more “meat” enjoyed some coverage in Boston media a few weeks later. WCVB television reporter Heather Unrah filed a story on several area restaurants that started “serving up choices to satisfy Atkins dieters.” The story profiled several restaurants, their Atkins-friendly menus, and the chefs behind the dishes. Whether Unrah was pitched the idea by a savvy public relations practitioner or not is immaterial—it’s simply a fine example of a quirky, different type of story that impacts a particular audience and focuses on a very current trend. While it would not be reasonable to expect a stand-alone article or review, being included in a roundup story with other innovative or trendy dining spots certainly can’t hurt.

Respond to Issues and Trends. Look at issues being covered in the types of publications you want to earn coverage in. Are there any trends or topics you can comment on using your organization as an example? Current “hot buttons” for editors include health care, security, value, employment, and the down market for traveling. Don’t be afraid to offer the contrarian viewpoint. If you’re in a city that is trying to pass anti-smoking laws, be ahead of the trend and point out that rather than losing business, your lounge looks forward to an increase in business from new customers who don’t normally go see live entertainment because of the smoke-filled environment.

Make your organization stand apart from the pack by positioning your company as being on the leading edge, but think through the implications and potential reactions of the readers (and your customers) before you speak. It’s great to be first or at the forefront, but having other organizations starting to follow suit helps legitimize your claim. In this sense, you need your competitors, as it often helps to offer the media additional organizational contacts that are part of the trend you’re trying to pitch.

Check Editorial Calendars and Know Editorial Lead Times. Editorial Calendars are an important media relations tool, but they are not the be all and end all. Many offer a road map for upcoming stories, but others are the figment of the advertising department’s imagination. Sometimes they offer key contact information. Other times, the contact person has no idea about the article until a public relations person calls to pitch the story. Or, in some cases, the person listed has actually left the publication. Don’t let an obvious match slip by without an inquiry, but be proactive and create/find your own opportunities!

Weekly and daily publications, along with Internet and broadcast media, usually have short lead times. What you tell a reporter during a telephone call now could be public knowledge in as little as 15 minutes. On the other hand, monthly magazines and trade journals often have lead times as long as 6 months. Knowing the lead time for the media outlet you are contacting will enable you to properly pitch a story, and position that story within the timeframes and constraints that particular journalist faces. Many reporters have Thursday deadlines. Unless you have urgent, breaking hard news, never do media pitching on Thursday. And always ask if a reporter is on deadline before launching into a telephone pitch.

“We work at least two months ahead of publication date,” advises Karyn Strauss, Associate Editor of *Hotels* magazine. “If a particular hotel wants to talk about its innovative new breakfast program, and the editorial calendar says the April food and beverage story is on breakfast—the hotel/public relations person would have to contact our F&B editor by late January/early February for any possible expectation of inclusion in the article.”

Rapid Response. When the press calls for information, good, senior public relations practitioners know that they must return calls or respond to e-mails in a matter of minutes, not the next day. Reporters work on tight turn-around deadlines. You can bet that as soon as the reporter leaves a message, he/she is calling your competition. Whoever replies first gets in the story. This is not the time to worry about sounding too anxious—they are already interested in you.

Always Include Contact Information. Any pitch (especially via e-mail) should offer full contact information (name, title, location, phone number, and e-mail address). Never assume the media knows you or knows how to reach you. When you return a telephone call, make sure you leave your phone number, including area code. Speak slowly and clearly. PDA batteries can die. Don’t send out a press release or post one on your Web site without including current contact information.

Easy Online Access to Information. A hospitality or leisure organization that seeks to earn coverage should have a Web site with a user-friendly pressroom linked to the home page. All press materials should be available online electronically, within one mouse click from main pressroom. All materials should offer the public relations manager’s full contact information (name, title, location, phone number, and e-mail address). For details about the online pressroom, see www.techmarcom.com/pressroom.html