

Media Darlings vs. Media Masochists

Having worked in corporate marketing and public relations for more than 25 years, I've heard my share of business executives make statements like, "you need to get our company featured on Oprah or in the Wall Street Journal". When that statement starts the public relations (PR) conversation, I know the relationship is going to be tough. More times than not, publicity demands reveal a serious lack of basic media knowledge.

Anyone from an entrepreneur to experienced business leaders can develop misguided media expectations and become a "media masochist". Perhaps they drank too much of the rah-rah company Kool-Aid, or see the competition get media attention and presume the same spotlight should shine their way. Other times misguided media expectations are perpetrated by unsavory PR flaks that make unrealistic claims just to get short term work. Either way, business leaders that fall prey to false media expectations or predatory PR types are at risk of derailing their company's media relations effort, risking the reputation of the business, and wasting money.

During the financial recovery of the past few years PR has become critically important for businesses that need the credible market awareness that a good PR program can provide. However, ensuring media success doesn't result from demanding certain types of publicity. Instead it requires a deep understanding of what the media want, and finding a way to intersect that need with a company's story.

Becoming a Media Darling

Any company, large or small can become a media darling if they understand the business of media. This requires knowing what reporters are hired to do. Ultimately, reporters write content that builds readership. Increased readership

helps to sell ads, keeping the media in business. A good PR person understands this relationship and in turn helps reporters by feeding them interesting story angles (pitches) that will be of

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interest to their readers (which sells ad space). Of course a good PR person also finds a way to tie the client's company to the story. This intersection of need, commerce and a good story forms the basis of becoming a "media darling"—someone who gives the media what they want. This starts by providing reporters story ideas that include:

- **Real news:** New technology; products; contracts; executive changes; finances; no fluff.
- **Timely angles:** Tie-ins to a current social issue, news story or even a holiday or event.
- **Trends:** Supported by facts, examples.
- **Innovation or novelty:** Nearly anything unique or different; a new take on an old idea or interesting products, technology, approaches, patents.
- **Expertise:** Knowledge provided in an educational context (not self promotional).
- **Prominence:** Story angles that leverage a high-profile client; ties to a celebrity or key event.
- **Real world results or how-to stories:** How to solve common problems others are facing; proof of concept, supported by research; statistics/polls; proof; facts.
- **Debunking common misperceptions:** Ideas that cause people to think differently.

- **Doom & Gloom:** Consequences of something; how to avoid a problem; often touches on a common fear; showcases potential change/impact.
- **Conflict:** a story angle that is contentious or that breeds debate or opinion.
- **Human interest:** Under dog, horse race, or David vs. Goliath-type stories.
- **Catchy headlines:** Reframe interesting information—Top 7 mistakes; XYZ isn't what it used to be.
- **Strong viewpoints / predictions:** especially something with shock value.

How this works: I've been advising a woman who just opened a new restaurant. It's nothing fancy. They sell soup. Literally, it's a soup kitchen called "The Soup". So how did The Soup get a full page feature in CNN/Money, TV interview and countless local news stories before completing the first year of operation? It wasn't the product, although delicious; nor was it the management philosophy, staffing approach, restaurant décor, or growing clientele. It wasn't even the organic, locally-sourced ingredients.

The media gold was mined on one simple premise: we intersected the story at the epicenter of a highly newsworthy, trending topic. The owner is a single, working mother of three who was downsized during the recession and created her own new career by reinventing herself as a restaurateur. Anyone who has been watching the news for the past couple years knows that this is a trending story that countless media have been covering. Her story was placed over other similar stories because we targeted media whose readers wanted to read this type of story. And we're not done yet.

A Media Masochist

Interestingly, not every business owner, even in the same position, would have been able to capitalize on all this coverage. Why? It usually comes down to ego. Too many business executives become blinded by what they view as news about their product, company or approach that others could care less about. Or, they never get a shot because

they demand only news coverage in certain media that isn't interested in the story they're telling. The lesson is simple. Stories can't be forced on the media. Smart company's understand the business of media and strategically develop story angles that will help reporters give their readers more of what they want. It's as simple as that.

The column is written by Cheryl Isen, founder of Isen & Company, a strategic marketing and public relations firm that helps companies increase visibility and brand awareness. Contact Cheryl at (425) 222-0779, Cheryl@IsenandCo.com. Visit www.IsenandCo.com to learn more.