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How to interact professionally with journalists



For successful public relations, professional interaction with media professionals is the be-all and end-all. For this, communication professionals need to know how editorial offices work, how journalists work and, above all, what journalists value when working with PR professionals – from the right communication content to the right press material to establishing and maintaining contact. In this blog post, we would like to give you some dos and don'ts to help you build a successful collaboration with your media contacts. In addition, you will learn the best way to deal with journalists and how your story can get media attention despite the large number of news out there.

We explain step by step below how you can identify your target media for the first time, outline the ideal way to prepare PR material and provide helpful tips on how to build and maintain a positive relationship with your key media over the long term.

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1. Why professional interaction with media representatives is so important

You have started up a new company, an innovative product is waiting in the wings or you are taking your first steps into professional public relations – so where do you start?

Media work always involves providing information and telling the public about yourself, so that in the minds of media representatives you are the one they should be contacting. But the key to getting yourself into the heads of relevant media makers in the first place is to understand what they value.

Each day editorial offices are inundated with different pitches and new products: emails, queries, phone calls and press releases,... From this multitude of news and information they have to filter the content relevant for their readers, which ideally has been already prepared in an accurate and professional manner. Why? Because time is not an insignificant factor in routine editorial work.

You should always remember that journalists are also professional communicators who expect to be treated with respect, and it is best when you come to them well prepared and both they and you can work together effectively. Particularly in industries with a plethora of deadlines, it is crucial to make interaction count so that both sides achieve the best results.

So don't be afraid to get in touch with them! Media representatives are quite willing to work with PR officers and also interested in

building good relationships with them. A well-running symbiosis and constant, regular contact can provide both you and media professionals with great opportunities and advantages.

Translated, for you this means: the better you understand how editorial offices work and how to prepare your PR material in the best possible way, the more likely your news and your company will be reflected in the media.

2. Get to know what journalists are doing every day

Every day journalists decide what stories to report and which news and events actually get attention. And they often have to do this quite quickly.

The first prerequisite for successful media work and professional relationships with the media: Get to know what media representatives are doing every day. Find out who the right contacts are, their daily schedules, their editorial conferences, deadlines and how their stories get published. Get a picture of the main topics your contact people are covering, the media for which they usually write their stories and what the editors feel is important.

Remember: Editors have quite a heavy workload and often no longer work in just one medium. Therefore, it helps them a lot if you give them clear information that is relevant to them. Never create more work – prepare very specifically for contacting and addressing your journalists.

3. Customise your public relations to achieve effective collaboration

In order to collaborate in the most effective way, it is crucial for you to understand the tight schedules media professionals have. Think first about how you can help them, expand your network and target your content.

It is best at this point to proceed step by step:

1. Define your target groups in concrete terms and communicate the content relevant to them to media representatives
2. Prepare your PR material in a professional manner
3. Research the media and create your own personal press distribution list
4. Look ahead at how to approach the media and keep your media contacts continuously up-to-date

3.1 Define communication content relevant to media professionals

There is more to do than just developing an understanding of your media contacts' daily work routines. Before you address the media, you should be thinking: What do I want to communicate and what objectives do I want to achieve? Always keep in mind: It is your preparation and stories which will be drawing media and subsequent public attention to your company – or not.

These are the general rules for creating relevant communication content:

- News factors and news values are the first indicators telling you whether a story has a reason for reporting it. At least one of these factors (topicality, proximity, novelty, public importance, or drama/conflict) should be present before sending your proposed story to a medium. Ask yourself critically: Does my topic have news value?
- If not: What current reference can you create and what current story can you identify as a hook for communicating what you have written? Or is there another hook that makes it worthwhile?
- Pay attention to each medium's lead times. Never wait until the last minute, but learn ahead of time about deadlines and publications dates. This information can be found online in media databases.
- Define your key message and have a clear goal of you want to achieve
- When you are preparing your communication content, always think of: who your target group is and how they work.

3.2 Professionally edit your public relations material

Editorial offices usually operate under very tight deadlines and frequently make use of other factors besides newsworthiness, such as how professionally the PR material was prepared, to classify a topic as relevant. So give yourself a head start with PR material optimally prepared for what editorial offices need and provide editors with support in their research.

With these tips, you can adapt your press material to the requirements of media professionals and make journalists' work easier:

Provide only relevant PR material

Check whether your press release would really interest the media you are addressing and has added value for them. Does it meet at least one of the criteria for news?

Pay attention to the press release's language and whether it is professionally structured

Does your press release meet the requirements of a professional press release in terms of structure and language or form and content? Does it include contact details for queries? Have you adapted your press release to the language of the medium you are targeting? Does its topic fit the medium's own target group? Tip: Your press release should not only be attached to what you are emailing, but should be directly visible in the email itself. If you are having difficulties finding the appropriate hook for your press release, my colleague Beatrix Ta has posted details on [how to write a press release](#).

Offer multimedia material in addition to text

Any multimedia material you supply enhances every press release and has now become indispensable because it increases the

probability of your story getting published, especially in online media. A press release with no pictures or graphics will have a hard time getting any attention. Therefore, yours should include images, videos, infographics and additional links to more information.

Look for professionally prepared images and videos

Make sure your material meets journalistic criteria and you have the appropriate image rights. The motifs should be professionally photographed or filmed using current imagery and not appear too promotional. Images should be of sufficient resolution (300 dpi for print, 72 dpi online). Ideally, both portrait and landscape formats should be supplied. You should also clarify the rights of use to the images and videos appearing in your press releases and your references need to be legally impeccable. Remember to include IPTC data (such as information in the image or video file about the photographer, who and/or what are depicted, where and when the image was shot).

Be prepared beforehand and respond quickly to inquiries from the media

Editors frequently have last-minute requests where, in the best-case scenario, they need input within a few hours. It is always advisable to have a pool of prepared PR material on hand that covers various company-related topics and is ready for fast delivery. This lets you not only establish yourself as a reliable contact, but also puts you in a better standing among media professionals.

4. Build sustainable relationships with media professionals

Because media contacts, press distribution lists and a good network lie at the heart of any successful PR, they should be built up over the long term and professionally cultivated. Unless you have this key element, your carefully prepared PR material will get lost in the mass of topic pitches and never reach your desired target media.

4.1 Building a successful press distribution list

When you start external public relations, the first step should always be media research, along with defining your target group.

Ask yourself: Who do you want to reach with your news? Which media and market could find your message interesting? And finally: How can I reach the editors behind it and who might have already reported on the topic? Because only after you have identified the appropriate media and editorial offices responsible for your topic and know how to approach them specifically in the next step, will you be able to build high-quality relationships with major multipliers. These valuable relationships often yield useful insights to help you raise your brand's media presence. So don't be shy!

Your media research should now have resulted in a press distribution list. This can be very pointedly adapted to whatever topic is current or contain, for example, a number of contacts tailored to your sector or target region. The most important tips on how you can [successfully build a press distribution list](#) can be found in our news aktuell blog.

4.2 Reach out professionally to media representatives

Basically, it is not so important whether you establish the first contact with a key contact person via email or telephone. What matters is your story and a successful reworking of your content. Nevertheless, you essentially have to come prepared when you are contacting an editorial office for the first time, or even when introducing a specific topic for the first time:

- Do your research: Check what topics the medium is covering and see where yours could fit. Such starting points are able to move a conversation forward. Likewise, be sure to get an overview of how and when it is going to appear.
- This results in so-called lead times: Keep them in mind and avoid pitching your topic at the very last minute. But do not pitch it too far ahead of time either.
- Short and to the point: Since media representatives have very little time on their hands, get to the point quickly, avoid sprawling speeches that stray away from the message, pay attention to clarity, and keep your pitch structured. Your email might mention that they can always call you back if the topic interests them.
- Follow a pattern: Recurring keywords you define in advance for your communications help you establish contacts and enable you to pitch your story. This also makes it easier for media professionals to put you on their own list of contacts and to link content quicker.

In particular, many find emails and phone calls barriers to establishing contact. Some are afraid to pick up the phone, while others are scared of writing things down. Here are four tips that can be helpful if you are still a little unsure of yourself and have been putting off sending out anything for a few days.

1. When first making contact, a preliminary discussion by phone can be quite helpful, providing time allows on both sides. Clarify in advance whether the person you have reached is the right contact for the topic. If not, ask for the relevant contact person. Then find out whether they have five minutes or are just on the way to their next appointment. Sending a summary email afterwards consolidates what has been said in conversation and gets your PR material to the right place.
2. For emails: A catchy subject that gets straight to the point and clearly states the topic will help your email to be read.
3. Keep your teaser as short as possible and yet create enough buzz from it to spark a desire for more information. Explain why the topic is relevant to the editor or your contact person. Consider the medium's readership and see them as your ultimate target group.
4. Personalise and individualise your emails as much as possible: Address, name, medium and categories. Every medium has its own different categories – at the most, suggest where your topic could fit and outline the time frame in which you see your story.

4.3 More tips for successfully working with media professionals

Once you have established a few important media contacts, make a point of maintaining and expanding them. If you only call or write your contacts a short email when you are trying to place topics and they hardly know you personally, it will become more difficult for you in the long run. Therefore, you should be building up contacts in your key media and fostering them over the long term. Such effort will pay dividends. Media professionals also attach great importance to these aspects of cooperation:

Make sure that there is always someone available and respond promptly to enquires

Nothing annoys media professionals more than when no one responds when they contact a press office. Make sure that there is always someone available. If the person authorised to speak is not available, a prompt call-back or email should be promised and then followed up. Also ask about specific deadlines. Always remember to offer suitable alternatives should you be unable to supply the desired press material. Who knows, maybe your company will fit into the coverage elsewhere.

Always communicate in a genuine, honest and plausible manner

Openness, along with a willingness to engage in dialogue, creates trust and strengthens your credibility. Such an approach is the most crucial prerequisite for a good relationship with journalists, especially during a crisis. Address all questions and justify any decision not to reply. Refusing dialogue invites speculation.

Stay current

Keep yourself informed about changes in a medium and in publishing, whether structural adjustments or staff turnover. The same applies to exciting articles that fit your sector or are published about the competition. The more informed you are about what is currently taking place in a key medium, the easier it will be for you to create points of contact.

Stick to the facts and avoid adulation

Make sure that your information policies are factual and credible. Check your outside communications – from your press releases to your social media posts – for correct facts and figures. This principle should have top priority, especially when you are communicating in a crisis. Staying exclusively positive, uncritical or providing half-true information only undermines your credibility.

Proactively assist in research

Be available to the press with your industry expertise and don't just think about your own company. Especially in times when editorial teams are becoming ever smaller and there is increased pressure put on journalists to deliver, you can continually position yourself as a valuable contact person, which will reflect well on your company and brand in the medium term. Make yourself a sought-after expert with editors and make sure to also build professional trust between yourself and your contact person.

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