

Spinning Out Of Control

When Bad Things Happen to Good Marketers

Every election campaign produces, among other things, media myths and bad language. During the elections of the last decade, the language was infected by a new myth called *spin control*. The phrase, which broke a speed record in becoming a cliché after the 1988 election, implies that a good media relations practitioner can control the nature and texture of a story in the press -- can put the right *spin* on it to get the journalist to tell it the spinner's way.

It's just not so. For all that the myth implies, when it comes to the media, we propose -- but others dispose. Thus it was, and thus it always shall be, so long as we have a free press.

But is the telling always accurate? No. Is it always fair? No. Sometimes, despite all of the public relations professionalism, and despite all the cooperation we may offer the press, the story comes out badly. Disaster, dispensed in the aura of a supposedly objective press, doesn't merely strike, it reverberates.

The picture you so carefully and accurately painted is distorted, the wrong people are quoted and the right people are not, the facts are warped and bent beyond recognition, and the whole piece reads as if it were written by your most malicious competitor. Certainly, it will be relished by your every detractor.

The Experts' Advice

Beyond the first scream of outrage, what can you do? Or more significantly, what has been done most effectively by others who have lived through it -- and survived?

Perhaps the hardest factor of a negative story to deal with is that most people who are not professional marketers tend to overreact. At one extreme is incredible upset and anger; at the other is casual disdain that says, "So what, no one will believe it." Neither extreme is warranted nor accurate.

The most useful course, then, is to do nothing until you've recovered from your anger. Even doing the right thing in the wrong frame of mind can perpetuate, not cure, the damage. So...

- Don't act precipitously. Think of every action in terms of possible reaction. What seems like a good idea at the moment may be a backfire next week.
- After you've gotten over the emotional impact and the anger, don't think vindictively. You may have to live with that publication again someday, and vindictiveness in any event is not profitable.
- Assess real -- not assumed or presumed -- damage. That's where you've got to focus your attention. Much assumed damage at first light disappears when the sun comes up. What's left is damage you can deal with.

It's this last point that's crucial to successfully limiting the damage of bad press. Too often, the defense is predicated on imagined damage, in which case the reaction is an overreaction, and causes more damage than the original article.

Experts rarely concern themselves with why it happened. Unless libel is involved, it doesn't really matter. The reporter could have functioned out of ignorance or laziness. Reporters are people, and are not immune to such foibles as preconceived notions that can subvert the professionalism of even the most experienced journalist. There may have been an adverse chemical reaction to somebody in your firm, or a fight at the journalist's home that morning. In fact, it really doesn't matter, because the reason for an adverse story is rarely an element that can be dealt with in damage control.

There are some specific questions to be addressed:

- What does the article really say? Is it bad because it's wrong -- or because it's right?
- Is the article distorted because the facts are wrong, or because they are put in a wrong context that distorts the facts?
- What is the real damage? Is it libelous? Misleading enough to cause real business damage? Or just embarrassing?
- Consider the publication. Is it widely read, or will people you care about never see it? (Consider that under certain circumstances, your competitor may want to make a point by sending a reprint of the article, along with a favorable one about himself from the same publication). What's the publication's reputation for credibility?
- Is the potential damage internal as well as external? Sometimes an unfavorable article can hurt internal morale more than it affects an external perception of the firm.

The Impact Fades Quickly

Staying power is an important consideration. How long after publication will the story, or at least its negative aura, linger? Depending upon the publication and the nature of the story, considerably less time than you think. As one experienced marketer put it, the impact fades quickly, but the impression can linger.

Some time ago, a major professional firm was savaged in the press for nepotism. The impact was shocking. In fact, the firm not only lost very little business, but continued to grow. Did the story, on the other hand, contribute to competitive defeats? Hard to say. An impression may have lingered in a prospective client's mind, and contributed to other negatives. But ultimately, the damage was nowhere equal to the impact and shock of the article's first appearance.

Responding To The Damage

Assessing the damage accurately allows you to choose the appropriate response. There are, in fact, a number of responses, some, unfortunately, inappropriate. You can:

- Sue, but only if there is real libel and real -- and demonstrable -- damage. There rarely is.
- Get on the phone and scream at the editor. Good for your spleen, lousy for your future with at least that segment of the press. And you'll never win.
- Write a nasty letter to the publisher. Only slightly better than screaming, but with the same results.

On the other hand, there are some positive things that can be done:

- Avoid defensiveness. Plan positively.
- Warn people. If you know an article is going to appear that might be unfavorable, alert your own people, so that it doesn't come as a surprise.
- Have a plan and a policy, preferably before you need it. This should cover how to deal with the press, who does it and who doesn't, how to deal with client reactions, how to deal with internal reactions. It should cover how calls are handled, who responds and who routes calls to whom, what to say to clients and who says it, and so forth.
- A letter to the editor is important, if only to go on record. But it should be positive, non-vitriolic, and deal only with the facts. It should not sound petulant or defensive.

- Deal with the real damage. If the real damage is in specific markets, mount a positive public relations campaign aimed specifically at those markets. If the damage is internal, try to assess the root causes for the negative reaction. It would take a powerful article in a powerful journal to demoralize a firm that's otherwise sound and comfortable with itself.
- Consider how a competitor might use the piece, even within the bounds of propriety. It could be, for example, reprints to a particular market. Offset this with positive publicity to the same market.

No story is so bad that it should warrant extreme reaction. No publication that's still publishing is so devoid of credibility that some readers won't accept what they read. The role of the professional trained and experienced marketer is to maintain perspective, to assess the damage appropriately, and to see that the response is equal to -- but does not exceed -- the damage.

If bad press meant nothing, then neither would good press, and we know that consistently good press means a great deal. But one story -- good or bad -- rarely has sufficient impact to seriously aid or damage a company (although a negative story is more titillating than a positive one). Most positive public relations is a consistent series of positive articles, interviews and news stories. If a negative press consists of more than one story, then the problem is usually not the press -- its the subject of the stories.

The perspective of the bad story, then, requires dealing with it as an anomaly. This means dealing with it as a calm and rational business decision. And no business decision, in any context, is ever a sound one if it isn't arrived at rationally and professionally.

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