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Help Reporters to See the News in Your Story

By Rusty Cawley

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At the core of PR Rainmaking is the question: "What makes a story newsworthy?" If we cannot answer this question, then we have nothing to guide us in the selection of story ideas.

At first, the concept of "newsworthiness" may appear both abstract and subjective. Fortunately, in the century since Joseph Pulitzer began to define journalism as we know it today, patterns have emerged in how the news media define "newsworthiness."

We may disagree with these patterns. We may find them trivial, irrational and even offensive. But they exist nonetheless and we ignore them at our peril.

These patterns fall into three basic categories: identification, significance and fascination. The more of these patterns that appear in your story, the more likely the media are to recognize your story as newsworthy.

1. Identification: Will the public you are targeting recognize at least one major element of your story? (Now the word "public" will change meaning with context. For example, "ABC World News Tonight" targets a very broad general public, while "Field & Stream" targets a very narrowly defined public.)

a. Awareness: Does the public possess a basic understanding of the issue around which your story revolves?

b. Celebrity: Does the public recognize the spokesperson delivers your message?

c. Fashion: Does your story fit in with a recognized trend that is rising or peaking?

d. Proximity: What is the geographical reach of your story? Exactly whom does it affect in an immediate, tangible way?

2. Significance: Does your story's central issue threaten to have a real effect on the public?

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- a. Conflict: Does your story feature a struggle between two or more easily defined groups?
 - b. Impact: Will the central issue of your story change the public in any measurable way?
 - c. Immediacy: Is your issue timely? Is it happening now?
3. Fascination: Will your story appeal to the public at a primal level? In other words, is your story interesting?
- a. Drama: Does your story offer the trappings of dramatic works, such as plot, characters, suspense, setting and the like?
 - b. Human interest: Can the public relate to the characters in your news story?
 - c. Emotion: Will your story touch the public's heart?
 - d. Images: Will your story naturally supply or suggest powerful video, photos or other graphics that will help tell the story? (This is especially important for TV, but is equally important for print if you want to receive a primary position in a newspaper or magazine.)
 - e. Myth: Does your story tap into the stereotypes of the mass media? For example, the powerbroker, the underdog, the workaholic, the iconoclast, the eccentric, the selfless advocate and so on.
 - f. Surprise: Does your story offer an unexpected twist? For example, "man bites dog." PR Rainmakers look for these patterns in the stories they sell to the news media. If the patterns don't emerge naturally, then PR Rainmakers search for ways to inject the patterns into their stories.

Without the patterns of newsworthiness, the media simply will not recognize your story as news.

Four Secrets to Energizing Your News Story

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Every news story must have a FACE. If you forget to put a FACE on your story proposal, your chances of interesting a reporter are nil.

All true PR Rainmakers faithfully practice this fundamental every time they design a story proposal for the news media.

By FACE, the PR Rainmaker means:

- F: Feelings

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- A: Analysis
- C: Crisis
- E: Energy

These are the elements of a well-crafted story proposal. Let's look at each part one by one.

1. Feelings are the emotions that your story stirs within the reporter, and thus the reader.

The seven basic emotions are love, hate, anger, fear, sorrow, envy and greed.

There are endless degrees, combinations and variations on these seven. (For example, "pity" is fear blended with sorrow.

"Rage" is an extreme form of "anger."). Your story must strongly arouse one, and only one, of these basic emotions. (Note that only one of these emotions, "love," is positive. This is one reason why news is almost always negative.)

2. Analysis provides the logic that sells the story. Feelings open the door with a reporter, but logic closes the sale.

Analysis may come in the form of numbers, statistics, data, studies, surveys or expert commentary.

The key is that the analysis must at least appear to be objective and accurate.

The analysis allows reporters to take your story seriously. It also gives reporters a subconscious excuse to listen to their feelings.

3. Crisis is the inherent conflict within the story. Without conflict, there is no news. This is what reporters mean when they talk about getting "both sides of the story."

Every story must have at least two sides. Ideally, for the news media, the story has a hero on one side and a villain on the other.

You want portray your company as a hero that is solving a problem.

4. Energy is what results from mixing feelings, analysis and crisis in the right proportions.

Energy is what drives the story.

It is what compels the reporter to want to write the story. It is what compels the editor to give the story good play.

It is what compels the reader to finish the story, to remember your story, to pass it along to friends.

The PR Rainmaker knows: You never take on the media without putting on your game FACE.

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