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How to Win a Reporter's Heart

By Rusty Cawley

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Like all other humans, reporters are subject to the Law of Reciprocity. When they receive cooperation, they will give cooperation. When they receive loyalty, they will give loyalty. When they receive gifts, they will give gifts.

This is a very human norm that is rooted in our collective past, when reciprocity was a tool of survival.

And this is why most media outlets forbid their reporters from accepting gifts from the public, especially from news sources. The majority of media ban gifts that are valued over a certain limit, generally \$25 or so. Almost all news media forbid travel junkets as well.

Editors and producers want no questions to arise concerning any reporter's fairness and accuracy. Thus, the ban on gifts.

But there remains one gift that reporters will gladly accept and the Boss will gladly encourage.

That gift is "the scoop."

The scoop is an exclusive, important story. It is a news item that the reporter to beat the competition. It can be anything from a tip that the city council may change the town charter to a document that shows a local CEO is engaged in illegal insider trading.

Any tidbit of information that leads to a scoop is always welcome in a newsroom. Indeed, providing a steady supply of scoops is the only way to win a reporter's heart.

Scoops are what allow reporters to move up in the ranks. Scoops are what allow newspaper editors and TV producers to keep their jobs. Scoops are what allow newspapers to attract more readers, TV stations to attract more viewers, radio stations to attract more listeners and Web sites to attract more hits.

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The PR Rainmaker knows: Scoops allow us to bypass the media's ban on gifts and to tap into the reporter's natural desire to observe the Law of Reciprocity.

Become a valuable source, provide access to a steady stream of scoops, and you will receive more favorable coverage. It's human nature.

Reporters will succumb to the Law of Reciprocity. They will turn to you more often for expert commentary. They will look more favorably upon your story proposals.

In addition, reporters will succumb to the Law of Self-Interest. If you are providing scoops on a regular basis, a reporter is going to resist doing anything that might cause you to turn off the tap.

How frequent is a "steady" stream? One good tip per month is plenty.

If you are at all plugged into your industry or profession or community, you will hear plenty of good information to send along to the reporter.

Get in the habit of passing news along to the reporter just as soon as you hear it. Also, take the reporter to lunch once a month to exchange information. Always take along plenty of potential scoops, even if they are nothing more than tidbits or rumors that you have heard.

Every reporter wants an inside source, a "Deep Throat." It's all part of the romantic image that most reporters have about their jobs.

Two cautions about reporters and reciprocation:

1. Never expect immediate quid pro quo. Understand that your relationship with a reporter will grow over time. Don't rush the process. Accept that you will always put more into the relationship than you will get out. If the reporter suspects that you think he owes you something, your relationship will sour fast.
2. Reciprocation only goes so far. If you're a valuable source, and the reporter has the story that your company is a front for the Mob, don't expect a pass. It won't happen. Because of your relationship, you'll probably receive more courtesy than will the usual subject of a tough story. But that's all.

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How to Sell Your News to Reporters

By Rusty Cawley

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If you want create a PR campaign that is effective and consistent, you must learn to market your story to the news media. You must learn to treat reporters as the customers who will either buy or reject your product: raw news.

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You should apply the techniques of PR Rainmaking, which is the practice of using the news media to attract customers and clients to your enterprise.

Any effective campaign of PR Rainmaking is grounded in three fundamental ideas:

- a) The reporter is the consumer.
- b) The story is the product that must be tailored for and sold to that consumer.
- c) Reporters will buy your story for their reasons, not yours.

First, the reporter is the consumer

Today's PR specialists often forget this basic principle. The bad ones - the ones that reporters ridicule as mere "flacks" - never learn it.

To some of these folks, the reader or the viewer is their primary consumer. Others consider their client or their CEO to be the consumer of their work.

Wrong.

The PR Rainmaker knows: When it comes to getting your story into the media, you must look upon the reporter as your consumer.

Without the reporter, nothing happens. There is no story for your target audience to view or to read. There is nothing for your CEO to show his directors. There is nothing for your sales team to hand out to prospects.

Without the reporter, all you have is a story idea.

The reporter is the consumer. The reporter is the customer. And you must act accordingly.

Second, the story is the product

It is not enough that you want to sell something. Countless enterprises have lost money trying to sell a product they wanted to sell and no one wanted to buy.

No matter what you produce, you must find a market that wants to purchase your product.

The same holds true when placing your story in the news media. The PR Rainmaker knows that the story is the product. The story must be tailored for the consumer, who is the reporter. Then it must be sold to that reporter.

This is where PR flacks lose their direction. They look upon media relations as mass production. They want to build an assembly line. They want to crank out one press release after another, send out a

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blast fax, and read their story in the newspapers the next day.

By using these "spray and pray" techniques, a company may well generate media coverage. But that coverage is likely to be ineffective. The key messages will be distorted. The story will go to the wrong audiences. The company will receive no return on its investment other than some newspaper clippings and perhaps some videotape.

The PR Rainmaker knows: The best news stories are earned one by one.

The assembly–line approach rarely works well in media relations. Reporters do not like to buy "off the rack." Each wants a story of his own. Each demands a custom fit.

So it becomes the PR Rainmaker's job to take stock of a reporter's needs and wants. We must tailor the story to fit that reporter. Then we must take that product and sell it to the reporter. We must convince the reporter that our story solves the reporter's problems.

We must keep in mind during every step of developing the campaign: The reporter is the consumer and the story is the product.

Third, reporters buy for their reasons, not ours

It is not unusual to spend hours designing a story for a specific reporter, only to have the reporter reject the idea. This can become incredibly frustrating.

This is one reason why so many flacks resort to assembly–line, blast–fax methods. "Why should I bother?" they say. "Why not just send out a thousand press releases and hope someone somewhere picks up the story?"

But PR Rainmakers understand and accept the challenge of executing an effective campaign. They know that, when it comes to convincing a reporter to buy any particular story, failure is far more likely than success.

As with any sales prospect, a reporter is more apt to say no than yes, even when you have tailored the story especially for that reporter.

Why? Who knows?

Maybe the reporter is working on a seven–part investigative series and doesn't have time. Maybe the reporter is being moved to another news beat. Maybe the reporter is coming down with the flu. Maybe the reporter is going on vacation. Maybe the reporter is just a jerk.

Who knows? Who cares?

When the reporter says no, move on.

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Don't argue. Don't rage. Don't resort to spray and pray.

Advance to the next proposal with the next reporter.

Reporters will buy for their reasons, not ours. Keep telling yourself this and you will have a much better chance of holding your temper, maintaining your sanity and placing more stories in the news media.

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