

Want to Play Hardball with the News Media?

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Want to Play Hardball with the News Media?

By Rusty Cawley

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There comes a time in the life of almost every company when its honesty, its integrity and its health are threatened by attacks from the news media.

Frequently, these attacks are well deserved. Example: Enron.

All too often, these attacks are engineered by antagonists (usually plaintiff attorneys or issue-oriented activists) through all-too-willing news reporters who are hell-bent on winning this year's Pulitzer.

When that time comes for you and your company, you will have to decide: Do I want to play hardball with the news media?

Before you even consider that question, you must take an inventory. You must have three things in your corner before you even consider taking on the media.

First, you must have persuasive evidence of your innocence.

In the Court of Public Opinion, you are guilty until proven innocent. If you plan to take on the news media, you must be prepared to present evidence that sways the public in your favor.

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"Persuasive" is not the same as "conclusive."

Indeed, logic need not apply.

You will want "proof" that persuades the brain by aiming at the heart.

You must also make sure that you stand on solid legal ground. Your team should always include a legal counsel who is media-savvy and crisis-oriented.

You want to have a lawyer on your side who is not

afraid to do battle with, in or through the media. But your attorney should also be an expert in communications law, particularly libel.

The attorney's job in a Hardball PR situation is not to steer your ship, but to help navigate your ship around the rocks.

Second, you must have sufficient resources at your disposal.

Never go to war with the news media if you lack the money, the time, the energy or the will to see it through.

You must have the cash to pay for excellent PR counsel as well as for excellent legal counsel. You must be prepared to support the tactics that will lead to victory. This often includes such expensive items as advertising and lawsuits.

Each year's company budget should include a PR defense fund large enough to fend off any attack, larger or small.

Third, you must see a recognizable gain.

Never go to war with the media if there is nothing for you to gain by it.

In short, never fight out of spite.

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Let's say a columnist in a free alternative tabloid makes a snotty comment about your company that is obviously unfair and untrue. Forget about going to war with that reporter.

It's not worth the effort. The odds are low that anyone among your key stakeholders saw they item. If they did, they likely put no credence in the item.

Simply write a careful, polite letter to the editor that refutes the comment and presents the facts. Ask the tabloid to publish the letter. If it refuses, buy ad space.

You do this only to get it on the record that the comment is unfair and untrue, just in case a reporter at a mainstream paper decides to pick up on the story.

That's it. Leave it alone.

Keep your powder dry and save your resources for battles that count.

In addition, there must a low risk of revealing other bad news. The last thing you need is to fend off a media attack on an unfair and untrue story, only to have the media uncover a fair, true and devastating story.

If you have skeletons in your closet, stay away from a media battle.

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To Make News, Become Newsworthy

By Rusty Cawley

To Make News, Become Newsworthy by Rusty Cawley

Far too often, the CEO calls in the PR team and says, "Get us some news media coverage." All too seldom does the CEO stop to think, "What do we have to offer that the news media would want to cover?"

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The PR Rainmaker knows: Before you can attract a reporter, you must have something to report. It doesn't get any more basic than that. And yet so many executives, professionals and entrepreneurs fail to comprehend this simple fact.

Instead, they have their flack call the reporter and say something along these lines: "We have a great company and a terrific CEO. Are you interested in doing a story on us?"

Reporters hear this sort of lame pitch day in, day out. And you know what? It rarely works.

When it does work, it is because the journalist is very inexperienced or was already interested in your company before you called.

Beware of either situation.

An inexperienced journalist is as likely to get your story wrong as right and will probably churn out an article that will get poor play and little readership.

A journalist who is interested in your company before you call probably has an agenda in mind. Odds are this journalist will discard your message and focus on that agenda while pretending to deeply care about what you have to say.

Publicity is not advertising. It is not a product or a service for you to buy. You cannot place an order. You cannot dictate content. You are not in control.

You must negotiate for publicity with those who are in control: the news media. And that means you must give a good reporter a reason to report about your company.

You must be newsworthy. You must perform.

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