

For nearly 50 years our firm, Development Counselors International (DCI), has been helping chambers of commerce tell the tourism and economic development stories of their communities through the local, national and international media.

As a DCI principal, I'd love to tell you that the skill levels required to do so are on a par with the mapping of the human genome, and that the only hope any chamber has is to hire a New York City-based marketing firm alternately known as "the leader in marketing places."

But that wouldn't be even close to the truth. Placing stories in the *Wall Street Journal* or on *CNBC* is neither rocket science nor genetic engineering. While there are merits to working with a good public relations firm, your Chamber may simply be unable to pull that trigger, for reasons ranging from the financial to the political.

But that doesn't take you out of the publicity game, by any means. If you're willing to make the requisite investment of time, talent and personnel, you can indeed "try this at home," without outside counsel, and do it quite successfully. Many chambers have.

Much of the rest of this article will deal with the basic tools and tricks of the publicity trade. First, though, let's address an

even more fundamental question: What's the value in media coverage? What are the direct and ancillary benefits in telling your community's story in the media?

POSITIVE PRESS COVERAGE: WHAT GOOD IS IT?

Every day brings news, generally bad, about the health of conventional sources of news—newspapers, magazines, nightly news broadcasts, etc. Circulation for many daily newspapers is in a free fall, with revenues tumbling even faster as advertisers move to the Web. The Web, of course, is the source of news for more and more Americans, especially those whose age gives them a much sharper memory of Ronald Reagan's funeral than of his presidency.

And yet, when it comes to promoting communities for tourism or economic development, the benefits of positive press coverage remain manifold. For starters, there's the credibility factor.

Every three years since 1996, DCI has conducted a survey of corporate executives throughout the U.S. called "Winning Strategies in the Economic Development Marketing Game." The survey asks executives for their leading sources of information as they assess a community's business climate. Consistently, "articles in newspapers and magazines" is ranked #1 or #2. (Advertising, where many chambers funnel the bulk of their marketing treasury, ranks at the bottom among a dozen

GETTING YOUR 15 MINUTES

↘ and Then Some
Tricks of the Trade for
Publicizing Your Community



By Rob DeRocker



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potential information sources.) One positive story in *USA Today* or *Inc. Magazine* can have more impact than an entire series of expensive print or broadcast advertisements, simply because the credibility of the former so far outweighs the latter.

That can be true even when the article turns out to be a mixed bag. Several years ago the **Irvine (CA) Chamber of Commerce** invited the Los Angeles bureau chief for *The Economist* to tour its rapidly expanding business park, The Irvine Spectrum, which at the time was adding as many as four new tenants per week.

Sure enough, the reporter wrote about the phenomenal success of the corporate park. But he also couldn’t resist a poke at Irvine’s meticulous urban planning, referencing “the Stepford wives” in his piece. The kicker, though, was the artwork used by his editors: a half-page photo of the vacuous, broad-hatted blondes taken from the movie, along with the headline: “The Irvine Wives.”

The Chamber’s response? In essence, it was this: “We’ll take it. We get that Stepford stuff all the time. But now one of the most respected business journals in the world has declared Irvine to be one of America’s most successful business locations. The Stepford reference is worth the price of admission.”

Just as important as the impact of good national press on the external audience is that on the *local constituencies*. For decades Tacoma, WA, had suffered as the “Rodney Dangerfield” of the Puget Sound, getting no respect in the region and especially from Seattleites, who took a perverse glee in referencing

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the “aroma of Tacoma” long after the pulp and paper mills that had given birth to that unfortunate phrase had been cleaned up or shut down.

It was only after *The New York Times* revealed a new Tacoma with the headline “Its Air Clean, Its Tech High, A City Rebounds” did the likes of the *Seattle Times* and *Puget Sound Business Journal* start writing about Tacoma’s renaissance. The municipal “prophet” was without honor in its own region—that is, until a paper 3,000 miles away gave it the recognition it deserved.

That brings up another advantage of high-level media placement for a community: It *legitimizes* the story and can generate more of the same, in both the print and national broadcast arenas.

For all its travail in recent years, that’s especially true in the case of the *New York Times*. A Los Angeles-based producer for *Good Morning America* once told me she had been pitching a

story to her own bosses in New York for months without even being acknowledged. But when the same story appeared in the *New York Times*, they were on the phone with her at 8 a.m., asking, “Why aren’t we doing that story?” Ironically, television, the “immediate” medium, often follows print.

Today that’s also true of the even more instantaneous online media. Not only do virtually all print media have an online presence, with stories that are easily spun around the internet, they bring with them the imprimatur of credibility that a story from, say, a MySpace correspondent might not.

Finally, good media coverage can be merchandised six ways from Sunday to enhance other aspects of a Chamber’s marketing program. Are you attending an industry trade show like BIO International with slick brochures and an attractive booth? Nice. Can you include reprints of a *Wall Street Journal* or *Genetic Engineering News* story declaring your community America’s next biotech hotspot? Priceless.

GENERATING POSITIVE PRESS COVERAGE: THE FUNDAMENTALS

With the value of press coverage for your community now exhaustively established, how do you go about getting it? Following are fundamental steps useful whether you are using an agency or doing it all in-house.

First, define your story: Identify, Quantify, Contextualize. What’s the story you want to tell? One way to answer that question is to ask another one: If I could literally write the script—

the script being a headline in, say, the *Wall Street Journal*—what would that headline say?

Even if you’re less than gifted at concocting headlines, that step—the “what”—is likely to be the easy part. Harder will be the “so what”—i.e., how do you put your own community’s story in the broader context needed by mainstream national press? This is where you need to don the hat of the journalists themselves, addressing the following questions:

- How can his/her readers profit by this knowledge?
- What’s new here? Prove it!
- Is my community or program a model for the rest of nation?
- Does this story exemplify a national trend (or perhaps it is a countertrend)?
- What’s the “hook” and how do I exploit it without being seen as exploitative?



Back in 1995, the **Greater Oklahoma City (OK) Chamber of Commerce** had to address that last question in spades. The city had just embarked on a massive downtown redevelopment project that it hoped would put Oklahoma City on the map. The bombing on April 19 did exactly that in a way that only the diabolical mind of Timothy McVeigh would have designed.

Suddenly Oklahoma City was the worldwide focus of one of the biggest news stories in years. The anchors of all three major broadcast networks paid visits. ABC News alone sent 100 staffers, commandeering the entire second floor of the Medallion Hotel. Every major news outlet sent correspondents, and in some cases established sizable Oklahoma City bureaus that lasted for weeks.

What an audience for telling the downtown redevelopment story! But of course the Chamber recognized that with a rescue and recovery effort underway in what was left of the Murrah Federal Building, it was not the time to extol the virtues of the new Bricktown Ballpark that would be going up just a few


“My colleagues will all deny this, but here’s the truth: There are four magic words that will open the door every single time: *‘I read your story.’*”

She went on to say that what journalists fear most is not that their work will be criticized, but that it will go unrecognized. Genuinely commenting on a recent story or two will invariably buy you more air time with the reporter, allowing for a segue into your own story pitch and launching what could turn into a mutually fruitful relationship.

THE BASIC TOOLS OF THE PUBLICIST— DO’S AND DON’TS

The four magic words aside, there is generally little magic at all involved with media placement, just smart and focused effort combined with a persistence that falls just shy of pestilence.

There are some fundamental techniques publicists use, however. I’ve identified five of them below, with a handful of tips on each:



“Present the sizzle, not the steak. You obviously need enough meat in your pitch to suggest that you’ve got a genuine story. But the reaction you want is IWMO (I want more) vs. MEGO (My eyes glaze over).”

blocks away. Instead, the Chamber set up a simple hospitality suite at the Medallion Hotel, offering coffee, donuts, directions and help with housing and other prosaic needs, saving the aggressive story pitching for another time.

The low-key relationship building paid off. For months and years later media ranging from CNN to the *Los Angeles Times* returned to write glowing stories about Oklahoma City, its kind and resilient people, its recovery from the bombing and, yes, the downtown redevelopment.

This brings us to our second point: **cultivate media relationships**. The right media relationships can make all the difference in the world.

Consider this: We live in an age when virtually anyone can reach virtually anybody at any time. That’s even more the case with the media, whose phone numbers and email can be found in easily obtainable directories (e.g., Bacon’s Media Outlets) and frequently in the publications themselves. Consequently, these media are bombarded with story pitches every day. One reporter for a national newspaper told me that it had gotten to the point where he throws away Federal Express packages from publicists without opening them—not to mention the hundreds of emails that are directed into his junk folder daily.

Paradoxically, this makes the old-fashioned personal relationships more important than ever. So how do you develop them? You can start with four magic words.

Claudia Deutsch, a veteran business reporter for the *New York Times*, addressed the DCI staff awhile back and left us with the following advice:

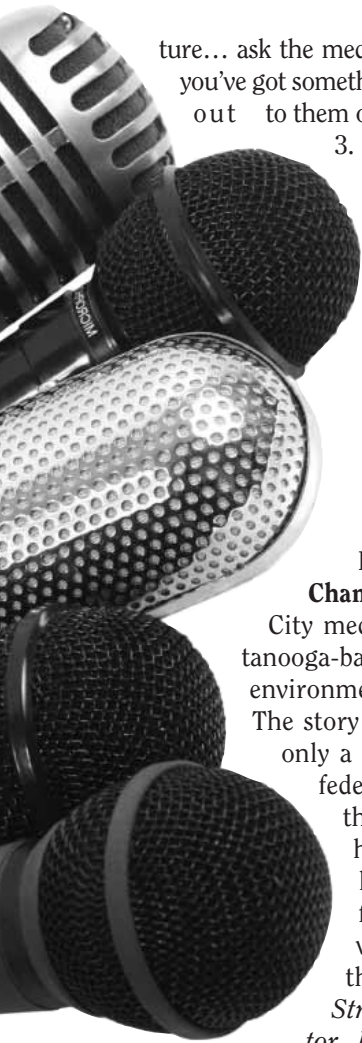
1. **Pitch Letters**. Or I should say, **pitch emails**, since that is the way most media like to be initially pitched these days. Some key pointers:

- Keep it focused and short; anything longer than a page will have a “don’t read me” look—with the predictable response.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the publication/reporter’s past articles. “Know me, know what I write,” is a common media refrain, and with the likes of Lexis/Nexis and Google there’s no excuse not to fall in line.
- Provide a “subject” line that serves as a mock headline; or at least use the four magic words—and mean them!
- Present the sizzle, not the steak. You obviously need enough meat in your pitch to suggest that you’ve got a genuine story. But the reaction you want is IWMO (I want more) vs. MEGO (My eyes glaze over).

2. **Press Releases** (ones that get picked up by the media, not the sanitation department) and **Press Conferences**. I’ve grouped these together because they both fit within the “use sparingly” category. Personally directed emails are better than broadly distributed press releases unless you are announcing:

- Major events or developments that are “the first,” “the only,” “the biggest” or “the best” (remember you have to prove it)
- Major news about public companies
- News that the media will likely cover whether you disseminate it not.

Press conferences should be conducted under even stricter criteria. Are you running for president? Are you *withdrawing* from the presidential race for “family-related” issues? You get the pic- ▶



ture... ask the media to come to a press conference only if you've got something really big to report. Otherwise, reach out to them on an individual basis.

3. **Media Tours**, or desk-side briefings in major media centers—New York City and Washington, DC and to a lesser extent Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco—can be an effective way to entice top-tier media to take a closer look at your community's story, perhaps followed up with a visit to the community itself. Ideally these visits to the media's home turf include private sector executives as well as public sector leaders and chamber executives.

Recently the **Chattanooga Area (TN) Chamber of Commerce** led a New York City media mission that included three Chattanooga-based technology companies involved in environmental cleanup efforts around the world. The story carried with it a certain irony: it was only a little over three decades ago that the federal government labeled Chattanooga the most polluted city in America. Now hailing from one of America's most livable cities, the Chamber-led group found a receptive audience in individual appointments in New York with the *Dow Jones Newswire*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Reuters* and *Nikkei*, a large Japanese newspaper chain in the midst of a profile of the American Southeast.

4. **Inbound Press Trips**, taken mainly by vertical trade media that cover industries ranging from life sciences to warehousing and distribution (trust me, there are magazines for everything), bring a variety of benefits. They almost certainly lead to coverage, and can be an excellent way to involve a Chamber's private sector members as spokespeople.

There's just one caveat: Make sure you vet those spokespeople. Several years ago British Petroleum shut down a massive refinery in a small Midwestern town, leaving a large percentage of its workforce without jobs. BP forked over some guilt money, which the town used to invite media to tell its story of a suddenly large and available workforce. One of the interviews it set up was with a plant manager of one of the few other businesses in town.

Evidently he missed the memo about singing the community's praises. Asked by one reporter about the quality of his workers, he responded: "They're okay, I guess. But I wish I could find someone who can pass the drug test."

That little gem didn't just end up in the reporter's story. It was used as a pull quote. The media campaign was short lived.

5. **Special Events** can be used by a Chamber to generate good publicity for its community. Asheville's "five day weekend" did exactly that for the beautiful Western North Carolina city.

In 2007 the **Asheville Area (NC) Chamber**, working with the Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB), grabbed hold of a study showing that Americans were taking fewer vacation days than any other nation outside of Japan. The group responded with a mock campaign for the creation of the Five Day Weekend, hiring a professional actor as its spokesman, conducting press conferences in Atlanta and a rally in Charlotte, purchasing billboards and advertising time on the regional airwaves, all in the name of this noble cause.

Congress has yet to move on a Five Day Weekend. (Give it time. This is an election year.) But the campaign generated reams of publicity and other tangible benefits for Asheville. According to Asheville CVB Assistant Vice President **Marla Tambellini**, who personally appeared on FOX News' Shepard Smith's Studio B to talk about the movement, the campaign generated:

- An Associated Press story that appeared in newspapers across America and hundreds of media (TV, print and radio) websites.
- \$120,389 in advertising equivalency value through public relations efforts.
- 68 total television placements, including 53 in rally cities.
- Newspaper articles in Atlanta, Greensboro, Raleigh and other key Asheville markets.
- 9 radio placements throughout the U.S.

That's not to mention nearly 100,000 visits to the website www.FiveDayWeekend.org, and clicks on YouTube, MySpace and other online features about the campaign. Moreover, hotel sales in Buncombe County (where Asheville is located) grew upwards of 10 percent while the campaign lasted.

Although the campaign was wildly successful, it didn't come cheap—costing more than \$650,000 when all the advertising, paid spokesperson, rallies and other costs were factored in.

And that brings me to the final point of this article.

An effective public relations program can be an extraordinarily cost-effective way to get the word out about your community. Whether done in house or by hiring outside counsel, most chambers can pull it off for between \$150,000 and \$200,000 a year—or about the same cost as one full page ad in the *Wall Street Journal*.

But ultimately, the mission of chambers and related tourism and economic development organizations is not to place articles. It's to foster investment in the community, whether by visitors spending a few hundred dollars for a weekend or by companies pouring in millions of dollars over a generation.

In the end, though, the "play is not the thing," and while the play (publicity) takes a critical role in the thing (investment), it's the latter a Chamber has to ultimately measure. Is your current marketing program, with or without a publicity component, contributing significantly to that bottom line? Then "feed strength," as a mentor once advised me, by pouring more resources into those areas that are working. And "starve weakness" by cutting off—or radically altering—the ones that are clearly not. ☐

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