

PR Fuel: Getting Your PR Message Across

It has always mystified me that politicians can't stay on topic. They're asked a question about abortion and the answer somehow comes back to education. They're asked a question about tax reform and, yup, somehow the answer comes back to education. Foreign policy is inexplicably linked to, you guessed it, education. What's going on here? The politicians are using messaging points.

Messaging points are the essential and core elements of an argument or pitch. It's the message that you want to get across, regardless of the subject. It's like getting a piece of press on "your terms."

Executives and clients too often miss the big picture involved in public relations. Too often they want hits, and a lot of them. There is little difference in their mind between quality PR and plain old PR. While PR is a results driven business, getting the core message across results is the biggest differentiator between plain old PR and quality PR.

Too often PR is measured by how much press you get. But if the press isn't on message, what good is it? Pets.com, the well-known Internet flameout, got loads of press because of its sock puppet spokes thing.

But very little of the ink it got was on message. In the end, all we ever knew about Pets.com was that it had a funny little puppet and sold pet stuff online. There had more to the company than that, right?

Jeremy Pepper of POP! Public Relations suggested I write about messaging points. So I asked him to define five the messaging points he would use for press about his own firm.

1. POP is a small, nimble boutique PR agency.
2. Boutiques offer corporations better service at a better price.
3. Large agencies do not provide the strategy and counsel clients need for good PR.
4. Small boutiques like POP bring senior PR practitioners to the client, not junior people to the account.
5. The PR world is moving away from large agencies to smaller boutiques that offer more strategy and counsel to companies.

If an article contained three of these five messaging points, Jeremy would consider it a success.

Defining your message points is the first step in the quality PR process. The points must be aimed at providing people with the message that you, not the media, wants to get across. When defining your messaging points, you must be prepared to offer a broad view of topic that can easily be narrowed. In the case of POP, if a reporter asked Jeremy why he decided to set-up his own firm, a good response would be:

"I launched POP because small, nimble boutique PR firms offer corporations better service at a better price." The quote, which is "ready-for-print," gets two messaging points across. "Why," the reporter asks, "do small PR firms offer corporations better service?"

"Large agencies do not provide the strategy and counsel clients need for good PR, while boutiques like POP bring senior PR practitioners to clients -- not junior people," Jeremy responds in our fictional interview.

By going out strong with the first two messaging points, Jeremy has forced the interview to concentrate on the message that he wants to get across. This isn't an easy exercise, but it can be accomplished by simply focusing on your core message. The message itself should define the interview by forcing you to make statements of fact or opinion that can't be ignored.

"We will beat the competition because we have the biggest network in the world."

"Our sales have increased 42% in the past year. No one else in the sector can claim that kind of growth."

"The U.S. Census indicates the Hispanic population is the fastest growing segment in America. We are the only automobile manufacturer that has a marketing program aimed directly at the Hispanic population in America."

Statements like these should lead a good interviewer to ask a follow-up question. That question should be answered utilizing one or more additional messaging points.

Even if the interviewer changes the subject, you can still bring it back to your core message. How many times have you heard someone on television say, "Well, as I said before." It's not that the question is being ignored, it's that the question gives no opportunity to stay on message.

Here's a quick checklist to keep handy when coming up discussing the idea of messaging points, coming up with them and preparing for an interview:

1. Pick five messaging points that you would want included in every media hit.
2. A quality piece of PR will include at least three of these five messaging points.
3. The messaging points should be concise, yet be able to be use as the answer to a number of questions.
4. Do not come up with "catch-phrases" for the messaging points. You'll get bogged down and sound repetitive.
5. The messaging points should be designed to lead to questions that give you the opportunity to get other message points across. Again, use strong statements of fact or opinion.
6. The messaging points should be the key element of your press releases and marketing material.

As I've said a number of times, PR is essentially selling an idea to the media and public. But unlike direct sales, the venue and direction is not dictated by you. Keeping your interviews on topic by using your messaging points will help level the playing field and lead to quality PR - not just hits.