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PR'S TOP TALENT IS NEEDED FOR MEDIA WORK

By Cyrus Afzali

Too much important work in our business, such as media outreach, is being done by junior-level staffers who, while well-meaning, often aren't prepared for the task. This leads to work that serves neither the client nor the industry very well.

Law firms would never trust a junior with complicated litigation, nor would doctors or CPAs employ comparative newcomers on difficult cases. I'm amazed that this model has persisted in PR for many years.

The junior staffers often work off scripts and media lists that are prepared either by themselves or by others and that are not usually carefully examined.

Media databases are wonderful tools but can easily contain information that's outdated or inaccurate since journalists often change beats, publications, etc.

Before going into PR, I was a journalist for a decade at media ranging from small daily newspapers to CNN Financial News.

Misguided E-Mails Are Frequent

I understood that PR people have a job to do and was never nasty or mean-spirited to anyone on the phone or via e-mail.

It did get tiring to receive more than 100 e-mails a day containing a lot of information on subjects that I would never write about.

This deluge increased when I left CNN for a technology-focused website during the height of the dot-com boom.

Instead of being short with these senders, I would explain that we didn't focus on consumer-oriented news but rather news of interest to people who made their livings on the internet such as web developers.

It was obvious that many of those pitching me had never ready our publication and/or had no interest in it. This is one of the chief reasons that the relationship between PR and the press is strained at times.

You could argue that law, medicine and accounting are far more complicated than PR and that history has shown that junior-level PR pros get a lot of valuable experience by dealing with important client and media-related work.

That may be true theoretically, but the question is, at what cost?

PR firms have a terrible client retention rate. Firms large or small spend a big percentage of their time chasing new business. All businesses do this but in PR the activity is so time-consuming that we should ask ourselves, "Is there something we should be doing differently?"

Talk to Critics

One of the first things we should do is talk to the critics instead of railing against them. We should use instances such as negative blog posts to ask, "Is it true what the critics are saying and can we do better?"

Everyone gives a lot of lip service to "professional education" but honestly, if it were really achieving the results as advertised, we wouldn't have so many angry journalists and clients would stick around a lot longer.

Putting juniors on media wouldn't be that bad if they were also given the time to read the publications they're pitching and made to do that.

In many instances, the juniors are too busy doing billable work. Juniors can be quite profitable because of their low salaries.

Lastly, we should stop vilifying journalists. I've been around PR pros who spend as much time badmouthing journalists as they did pitching for clients.

Getting a negative response from a pitch is frustrating for sure. However, the journalist, and not the PR pro, is always going to be the one in a position to give our clients the media coverage they desire so it is in the PR industry's best interest to learn how to work better with them.

As seasoned practitioners know, it's definitely possible to have many productive relationships with journalists.

If we as PR pros spread these philosophies not only throughout the profession but to young practitioners, things will definitely change for the better.

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