



PR TECHNIQUE: PRESS CONFERENCES - Avoiding a nightmare press conference. Standing in front of hundreds of journalists, and your client, is one time you don't want to screw up. Craig McGuire recounts press conference horror stories to learn from

Written by **CRAIG MCGUIRE**

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Hutt booked a great venue in Washington, DC, and landed top speakers.

She even had exciting new safety technology to introduce. Little did she know, the US Senate was about to vote to impeach President Clinton and Speaker-designate Bob Livingston would step down due to an extramarital affair. As if that weren't enough, the US bombed Iraq.

Fortunately for Hutt, the event was salvaged by a video news release which was picked up across the country, but that's usually not the case.

Talk to any PR manager and chances are they've got a sabotaged press conference story to share. Though the advent of new, exciting technology is enabling many in PR to bypass the press conference, it is still a centerpiece of most major campaigns.

Once you've decided a press conference will get your client the biggest bang for his PR buck, there are several key elements you need to know.

First and foremost, a press conference is essentially a news conference.

Therefore, if you don't have any news, you shouldn't be holding one - a painful fact Scott Matulis will forever remember.

As PR manager for the World Wide Senior Tennis Tour, Matulis had to organize a press conference for a tournament in Atlanta in late 1998. He argued against holding the event, partly due to the lack of news value, but mainly because heavyweight champ and hometown hero Evander Holyfield planned to appear at a press conference the same day and time, to be held right next door.

'Not one member of the media showed up, not even the food mooches,' recalls Matulis. 'We even sent people over to lure reporters with offers of food, but they wouldn't budge. To this day I flashback to that empty room and the looks on the faces of those four unhappy sponsors.'

Accommodating the needs of the media is also critical in gaining coverage.

When Continental Airlines wanted to announce its 'Global Gateway Strategy at Newark Airport' in the summer of 1998, its PR agency The MWW Group was called in to organize the press conference. However, they didn't make it easy. Not only had The Star Ledger already run a news story, but the press conference was slated for the Monday following the three-day 4th of July weekend.

'Actually, the holiday weekend worked in our favor because it meant a slower news cycle,' says MWW's Carreen Winters. 'We timed it early at 10 am, meaning we wouldn't interfere with breaking news, and we brought out the CEO, who was a much-in-demand executive.'

By rolling out a highly sought-after speaker, and accommodating the media's schedule, MWW was able to overcome the less than ideal airport setting and short lead time.

These days, how you present the message is almost as important as the message itself. PR managers should be using multi-media tools such as Web-casting, Web-site press rooms, ProfNet-type services, audio and video news releases and satellite video capabilities to augment, and in some places supplant, press conferences.

Technology, though, will only get you so far.

'You can have the greatest presentation, most powerful audio/visual support and superior professional printed collateral,' points out Brian McManus, an AM at Strategy Associates 'but, if there's no story, there's no press conference. I tell my early stage start-up clients that they are at least two years or two major partnerships away from a successful press conference.'

Managing client expectations is also critical, says Jerry Schwartz, head of GS Schwartz & Co.

'Press conferences can be life savers or disasters, but they are almost always nightmares for PR folks,' he says.

Although his number one rule when it comes to press conferences is 'don't hold one,' he has some tips. He suggests holding the event in a city with a huge concentration of media, in an interesting venue with food and giveaways, timed at the beginning or end of the day. Finally, he says, 'pray ... pray that there's no major national or international news or event that will siphon off interest in your press conference.'

PR managers working for public companies have disclosure issues to worry about. When Compaq planned to announce its acquisition of Digital Equipment Corp., PR managers at Shandwick (Compaq) and Golin Harris (DEC) were kept in the dark until the day before - which also happened to be Super Bowl Sunday. Fortunately, they were able to mobilize in time to pull it off, says Shandwick New York general manager Nancy Tully. However, the brand recognition more than anything was what drew the media's attention.

Oh, and one last thing. Never hold a press conference around midday, and definitely not after cocktails.

'For one of (our client's) 4pm press conferences, and his last, about half of the audience was sleeping,' says Ellen Chamberlain, a senior account executive at Schwartz.

'And, one of his clients that was scheduled to give a presentation,' she remembers, 'had spent a little too long at the cocktail hour and was unable to deliver his prepared statement.'

DOs AND DON'Ts

DO

1. Make sure the subject is newsworthy.
2. Check calendars and check-in with news organizations to make sure your event doesn't conflict with another.
3. Provide thorough press kits with contact information.
4. Keep control: When hostile questions arise, close it down and invite journalists for one-on-ones.
5. Follow up with news organizations that attended; offer them interviews and get them the information in electronic format.

DON'T

1. Go in cold. Schedule run-throughs and check all equipment.
2. Forget to feed hungry journalists.
3. Hold the event midday. Instead, have it first thing in the morning, or at the end of the day.
4. Hold it on Monday. A lot can happen over the weekend and you need at least a day to get firm commitments.
5. Embarrass a client by booking a huge hall when you expect a small turnout.