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Maintaining the board's attention

Craig McGuire - 8 Jan 2007 10:36

Quality, not quantity, is the key to building lasting relationships with editorial boards.

Landing a single briefing with an editorial board - those at a print titles dictating the direction of editorials - can be a coup for the right client. Building long-term ties with board members, however, can net a much greater return for the agency.

No one said it would be easy, though. In fact, subtlety is the key to such courtships.

"The editorial board members I've worked with would not be happy with the term 'building relationships' in the same way you might with a reporter," says Robbin Goodman, EVP and partner at Makovsky & Company. "At top-tier publications, they are often very accomplished and pride themselves on independent thinking."

The key is to position the client as a valuable source of facts and opinions on the types of issues found on editorial pages.

For instance, Goodman recently approached *The New York Times* regarding client TransitCenter, a New York-based nonprofit championing tax-free commuter benefits.

Not only had the *Times* lauded TransitCenter's creation of the TransitChek in 1987, the paper's interest was piqued by the fact that today only 14% of US employers offer it to staffers, even in light of rising gas prices.

For TransitCenter, the briefing of three board members and a transit beat reporter was an ideal forum to slip in mentions of its TransitChek Card launched last year.

Goodman got them in the door tapping a relationship with Makovsky principals that started years ago with Robert B. Semple, Jr., associate editor of the *Times'* Editorial Page.

Semple says the best way to gain access to a board such as the *Times'* is to focus on the individual closest to your subject.

"Don't make blind phone calls," he notes. "If your client has an interest in water pollution, seek out the person that covers local affairs or environment. Don't call the person who covers foreign policy. Visit our site. A few clicks and you'll find out all you need."

Semple also warns how not to build a relationship with his board. "One of my pet peeves is when someone comes in with a huge prepared statement," he says. "Make a brief pitch, no more than 10 minutes. Then steer it towards a brisk Q&A. Anything else and our eyes are glazing over."

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Most clients view the *Times'* editorial board as a rather aspirational target. Smaller titles' boards may very well be more accessible.

Before joining Eric Mower & Associates in 2005 as a senior counselor in the public affairs practice, Stephen Bell was editorial page editor of *The Buffalo News*.

"Most editorial boards are willing to meet almost anyone," he says. "Building relationships is easier today, especially with e-mail. Let them get used to hearing from you, but make sure every e-mail counts."

For instance, follow-up briefings with e-mails including details pertaining to the subject can facilitate a return visit - eventually.

"The key player is the editorial page editor, no matter who you [can] access," Bell adds. "Know what that editor and the publisher advocate want and [that's] what you need."

It's also important to understand that few clients are qualified to approach a board, says Bob Brody, SVP/media specialist at Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide.

"You must maintain the impression that you are providing value every time," he says. "Start small. A brief background call with a single board member will be appreciated. If he's interested, he may approach other members. There's less pressure. It's more conversational. It makes it easier when you parade your client in front of the tribunal."

Firms that have former journalists on staff need to leverage those relationships, too.

Ken Eudy, CEO at Capstrat, has not only known most of the board members at *The News & Observer* in Raleigh, NC, for years, but he also once was a reporter/columnist for its competitor, *The Charlotte Observer*.

Eudy requests editorial board meetings maybe four times a year. "I don't overdo it," he says. "When the editorial board gets a call from me, they know it will be worthwhile."

"You nurture the relationship by not abusing it through asking for meetings that won't likely result in a published editorial," he adds. "If you develop a reputation for being honest and forthcoming, it's easier to get your client's white papers, backgrounders, and fact sheets thoroughly reviewed."

Technique tips

DO

Be selective when approaching a board. This technique is not for every campaign

Approach individual members who have an interest in the subject

Prepare your client for the tough questions

DON'T

Waste the board's time. Be respectful of how busy they are

Bring an entourage. Call ahead so you don't outnumber the board

Send any gratuities afterwards. They could be misconstrued

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