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All the news that's fit to embargo

Craig McGuire - 20 Mar 2006 00:00

Exclusives and embargoes are still very much alive, despite questions about relevance.

The 24-7 media machine has made the age-old practice of offering journalists and media outlets exclusives and embargoed stories far more challenging.

"Exclusives still appeal to journalists due to their intense desire to break news, which becomes increasingly harder to do in our 24/7 media environment," says Sandra Sokoloff, Porter Novelli's national media relations director.

Sokoloff recently pitched a high-profile celebrity's announcement that she suffered from a debilitating disease to *People*. While the news interested the title, it was the offer of an exclusive that generated a full page of coverage.

"But an exclusive, in and of itself, doesn't increase the chance of coverage," she stresses. "Compelling news does."

Last month, Jim Baker, press secretary for United Cerebral Palsy, was able to leverage the exclusive results of a national, state-by-state analysis report on Medicaid, by offering it initially to a wire reporter in the top-ranked state.

"Allowing a reporter to see your story and resources early on is not only a solid method for ensuring coverage, it [gives you] an early read on how the media will perceive the story once it hits en masse," Baker says.

Today, many diverse national outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *Today*, and *People* often require an exclusive, particularly if they are being asked to commit in advance.

When Ogilvy was promoting *You Can Do It!: The Merit Badge Handbook for Grown-Up Girls* for client Chronicle Books, it had an appealing subject, but still needed to offer *Good Morning America* the exclusive. Lauren Catuzzi Grandcolas quit her job to pen the tome, but was aboard United Airlines Flight 93 which was attacked by terrorists on 9/11. Her sisters finished the book.

"Generally the top morning shows operate on the assumption of exclusivity," says Bob Brody, SVP/media specialist at Ogilvy. "So it was to our advantage to offer it as such."

"The exclusive is more of a carrot stick than ever, and any outlet of repute places a premium on scoops," he says. "But, offer an exclusive only when you believe your news rates as such and you think the reporter will go more in-depth."

Sokoloff suggests that when considering an exclusive or embargo, ask yourself the hard questions, starting with how will the breaking news impact your client's stakeholders.

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Equally important is the news material and whether the news is part of a larger event (such as a medical meeting or earnings announcement) with strict requirements on how news must be delivered.

It's also important to know about other ongoing events that could impact potential coverage. Today, when it comes to exclusives and embargoes, the automotive media segment is probably most affected by encroaching bloggers and enthusiasts, says David Thomas, online editor for *MPH Magazine*.

Not many embargoed vehicles actually stay under wraps until their embargo date these days, making it increasingly tough for manufacturers to make the impact they used to. "In the online automotive sector, it is pretty unheard of to get an exclusive," Thomas says. "Those that run that kind of headline usually just run the story before others, not because they're besting an embargo."

Still, PR pros have to do their best to make sure media contacts have all the photography and information on a release, and make an event out of it when the embargo lifts.

When Thomas ran Autoblog (one of the Web's most popular auto blogs), his team literally posted every story as the embargo time passed at so-called "embargo parties." It is also important to recognize that different kinds of media don't operate in isolation.

"Although print, broadcast, and online outlets engage in enterprise reporting, we often prioritize wires, as almost all media use wires as a content source," Sokoloff says. "Print and broadcast journalists watch online media and blogs for news. Online media comment on mainstream media."

Lastly, note that there is always a chance that no matter how much care is taken, a renegade blogger itching to be first to the news will smash through the embargo.

Technique tips

DO Understand clients' stakeholders, and anticipate how the breaking news will affect them

Make sure use of exclusives or embargoes does not expose the client to regulatory compliance issues

Make sure the subject is not only exclusive, but compelling

DON'T Talk off the record when negotiating exclusives. It will lead to misunderstandings

Provide opinion on embargoed material. Stick only to the facts

Offer the same exclusive simultaneously - you could get burned

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