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Credentials: Knowing who the undesirables are

Craig McGuire - 13 Aug 2004 00:00

The rise of legitimate blogs has made the already delicate process of credentialing the media even trickier. **Craig McGuire** discovers how it's done

The Democratic National Convention Committee's (DNCC) recent decision to grant convention access to bloggers struck a chord with event coordinators everywhere. Considering the rapid proliferation of non-traditional media outlets, credentialing as we know it will likely become increasingly challenging.

"Credentialing, especially on the scale we do it, is an exhaustive process we actually started about a year ago," DNCC secretary Lina Garcia says. "It helps that we've done it before, that we actually credential the organizations and not the individual. But still, you really must be organized and focused to get it right."

As if credentialing 15,000 journalists from all over the world wasn't enough of a challenge, the DNCC, fronting the so-called party of inclusion, decided recently to include bloggers for its convention, held in Boston July 26 through July 29.

Though the merry band of bloggers under consideration was minute in comparison to the mass of mainstream media that flooded the FleetCenter - 70 bloggers were credentialed, Garcia says - evaluating bloggers is no simple undertaking.

With traditional media, both major parties use criteria established by committees of journalists for getting passes to cover Congress, but no such procedure exists for bloggers. As such, they had to be examined individually.

From a publicity perspective, though, the DNCC scored a coup, garnering global headlines for what amounted to issuing just several dozen more press badges. The GOP quickly followed suit, announcing that it has also credentialed bloggers for its convention, to be held from August 30 through September 2 in New York City.

Unfortunately, not everyone has the DNCC's deep resources, says Amy Riemer, president of Riemer Communications, who manages PR for the annual International Restaurant & Foodservice Show of New York.

For this year's event, held at the Jacob Javits Convention Center, 200 media members registered, including trade publications and national consumer and business titles. Not surprisingly, with a seemingly endless smorgasbord of free gourmet vittles, this event draws its share of freeloaders.

"In my opinion, New York is the worst when it comes to fake journalists," Riemer says.

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"There is a group of 30 or so people who come to every show and try to scam their way in for free."

To prevent such invasions, it is vital to institute a process that ensures the journalists attending are exactly who they say they are, especially those that show up unannounced on event day.

To do this, Riemer demands that journalists applying for credentials be with a credible title - either online or in print - and can produce the clips to prove it.

Do not, Riemer adds, accept press badges from other shows as forms of identification; ask for picture ID and always get their supervisor's name and number.

"Unfortunately, this doesn't always work because they have caught on and give us their friends to call," she says.

Staffing the credentialing booth at your event is an oft overlooked issue.

"The problem is that when a temp registers the media, they do not know the person isn't credible, though many will say they see them over and over again at other shows," Riemer says.

Be prepared, be brave, and have security on speed dial. For, as Riemer says, these imposters can get quite aggressive.

"There was one man at the PC Expo I worked years ago trying to get a press pass, called Ugly George, who walked around with a large video camera duct-taped to his shoulder," Riemer recalls. "He was very unkempt and only there to take pictures of women to post to his website."

Start a running list of false scribes and bogus bloggers, use existing tools such as Bacon's and MediaMap, and have a computer at your check-in table to verify information, Riemer adds.

Meanwhile, when credentialing for popular events, remember you are limited by logistics, no matter how much exposure you seek for your client.

"It's a challenge to balance the need to let in as many people as you can while ensuring you have the resources and capacity to accommodate them," says Stephanie Bluma, VP at Powell Tate.

The Weber Shandwick subsidiary handled the June 21 SpaceShipOne launch when Mike Melvill, a veteran civilian pilot, became the world's first human to reach space in a privately developed spaceship.

"For the launch, we had unlimited room, as it was out in the middle of the Mojave Desert," Bluma says. "The press conference was a different story."

Essentially, Bluma had 175 seats to accommodate 565 journalists, representing 270 unique media organizations.

"Some hard decisions had to be made, which is why it is good to take reservations early," says Bluma. "Those that signed up late not only ran the risk of not attending the press conference, but because of the limited local accommodations, some even had to sleep in their cars."

For most events, though, PR pros are usually not exactly beating back hordes of journalists. "Most PR folks are thrilled to get a roomful of reporters any way they can get them," says veteran event organizer Michael Cherson, VP of PR at the Cherson Group in Livingston, NJ.

Steve Rubel, VP of client services at CooperKatz in New York, manages a program on behalf of The Association of National Advertisers (ANA). The ANA recently opened up its conferences to bloggers to boost online coverage of its events.

"We consider blogs a legitimate form of media, another channel for us to communicate to marketers and the industry in general, so we embrace them," Rubel says. "This is a new medium and you often don't face the same institutional cynicism that you do with traditional media."

When evaluating bloggers, establish a list of criteria in advance, use online blog-ranking sites, and allocate manpower to review content.

Rubel admits that his in-box isn't flooded with requests from bloggers, just yet. "But give them time," he says. "They will come."

Technique tips

Do request picture ID, a supervisor's direct dial, and current clips from reputable titles

Do set a deadline of submitting requests for credentials, well in advance of the event. (Also, have a plan in place for same-day attendees)

Do create a running list of banned instigators and use existing resources like Bacon's, MediaMap, and municipal government credentialing lists

Don't dismiss the promotional potential of bloggers, as many are read fervently by large online audiences

Don't lose perspective and give credentials to more media than you'll be able to accommodate

Don't accept press badges from other events as ID or validation

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