



Emerging Manager Monthly, May 2007

StreetSavvy Marketersm

Wednesday, May 2, 2007

Top Ten Media Relations and Interview “Don’ts”

You’ve read it here before: Never think of an interview as something as simple as a conversation. At the least, it’s a conversation with an agenda. You can bet that the reporter you’re talking to will have one, so you’d better have one, too. And like everything else in life, the devil is in the details. Before you even sit down with a reporter, it’s important to be clear about the three or four key points you want to make about your firm, investment products and track record. Here are my Top Ten media relations and interview “Don’ts:”

1. Don’t mislead reporters. It’s easy, sometimes, to get caught up in the moment and fall into a self-promotional mode, but don’t let hyperbole overtake good judgment or the facts. Tell people who you are, what you do and keep it honest. It’s okay to point out how you differentiate your firm and products, but don’t let yourself get caught up in exaggeration. Remember, it’s not just your credibility at stake, but also the reporter’s. And, reporters have long memories.

2. Don’t be patronizing. As money managers, you deal with complicated, industry-specific issues seven days a week. Most reporters don’t operate at that level of sophistication or expertise; it’s not their job. Be prepared to do some professional handholding. A few minutes spent today in educating a reporter about a complicated issue or product will not only be appreciated, but could potentially pay huge dividends on your relationship further down the road.

3. Don’t sabotage your media relations outreach. As you may remember, I’m not a big fan of mass news releases. If you decide to issue a news release, though, remember to leave the industry jargon in the office. Keep it brief. Make sure you have something to say and that you send it to the right reporter. Most of all, be prepared to deliver what you promise. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard reporters complain that when they went to follow up on a news release, no one was available to speak with them. If no one is available, what’s the point of a news release?

4. Don’t ignore media requests. I know of one young hedge fund company, now very successful, that is routinely called for commentary and insight by The Wall Street Journal, CNBC and the trades. Suddenly, they’re not returning press calls. On the one hand, you might argue they’re simply being more selective about media opportunities, but the reality is something very different – they’re actually in danger of forgetting their roots. Don’t forget the people who’ve helped you move up the ladder. It doesn’t mean you have to step

up to every press inquiry. You don't. But be professional about turning down inquiries. Get back to reporters in a timely manner. They will respect you for it.

5. Don't insist on reviewing a piece in advance. It just ain't gonna happen. You'd stand a better chance at shooting a hole-in-one at the ninth hole at Pinehurst. Reporters are as anxious to preserve the integrity of their process and work as you are yours. Remember, they're in the news business, not the PR business. It's okay to ask a reporter to fact-check or read back your direct quotes to you – but only if you make that stipulation at the start of an interview and they agree to it.

6. Don't pitch old stories. Recycling doesn't work in the news business. What you can do, though, is go back to a reporter and say: "I know you've already written about this, but as time goes on it's likely you're going to revisit the subject again. Here's some information I think you will find useful when you do." If you can introduce new angles, information and sources to make a better story, your call will be appreciated. Otherwise, spare the reporter and save your breath.

7. Don't promise an interview and fail to deliver. You've got to understand that a commitment is a commitment. That people are relying on you. Space or air-time may have already been set aside with your name on it if you've committed to an interview. A reporter or producer on deadline is not going to react well to being kissed off at the last minute. I know one guy who promised CNN an interview the Friday before a holiday weekend. He didn't show and the producers refused to deal with him or his organization for nearly six months. Don't leave anyone with a hole to plug. It's the surest way I know how to move from media resource to media target.

8. Don't try to control the outcome. On occasion, a reporter or fact-checker will call after an interview to check for accuracy. Don't view this as an opportunity to change your quotes, alter the content or retract a candid comment or insight you might wish, on reflection, that you had not shared. Candor and spontaneity are the lifeblood of most articles and reporters will fight you tooth and nail on changes they see as dilutive of what they see as a "good" story.

9. Don't criticize reporters or critique their stories after the fact. After a story runs, don't ring up the reporter to criticize him or her for substance or style unless a serious factual error has been made. Reporters are generally well-intentioned and most bring a high degree of professionalism to what they do. They care about people. They care about words. And they start with a strong commitment to getting their story right. But their view of the world is going to be, by definition, different than an asset manager's.

10. Don't go over a reporter's head. If you feel you have a legitimate complaint, start with the reporter and not his or her boss. Most often, errors made are errors of omission not commission. If, on the other hand, the mistake is egregious – and in 30 years-plus, I've seen this happen maybe three or four times – I would suggest going first to the reporter and seeing what you can do to fix the problem. If that isn't satisfactory, arrange a meeting or conference call with the reporter and his or her boss. Just be sure you're right.

I said "10 Don'ts," but here's one more: Don't ever call a reporter on deadline. If you're not sure when his or her deadline is, find out before dialing them up. The reason should be obvious.

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