

Creating a Media-Friendly Online Newsroom

By Rosanne E. Desmone

Journalists are usually on deadline when they start poking around your Web site to see if your association might fit into a story they're writing. Because they're in a hurry, they need to find information fast and get in touch with someone right away. If they can't do that from a quick look at your online newsroom, they'll move on.

How do you ensure that journalists find what they need? Think about your online newsroom the way they would and then do the following to make it as effective as possible.

- 1. Put a direct link to your newsroom on your home page.** Many organizations place a "Newsroom" or "Press" link under the "About Us" section of their Web site. Yes, this makes sense architecturally, but a direct link on your home page tells journalists that you've tried to make their job easier.
- 2. Make sure your contact information is prominently displayed on the newsroom home page.** I am absolutely amazed at the number of online newsrooms where I can't locate the public relations contact's name, phone number, or e-mail. These are among the most important pieces of information you can offer to journalists. Make sure contact info is one of the first things the journalist sees on entering the newsroom. If you have more than one media contact, or if you happen to be working with a PR agency on a project, list all contacts and their areas of responsibility, if applicable.

Public relations is all about accessibility. On some sites I've visited, a PR contact is listed at the bottom of a news release, but many organizations remove that information when they post the release to the Web site. Some sites list only an "info@" or "press@" e-mail. If you were a journalist on a deadline, would *you* send an e-mail to a no-name person and expect to be answered in time to finish your story?

Remember also that not all stories get written between 9 and 5. Make sure that, in case a journalist needs you at 10 p.m., you have a 24-hour contact number on your Web site and voice mail. This is particularly important in the event of a crisis, when you want to be the first person reporters reach to find out what's happening. If they can't get you, they are going to find someone else—and it could be your competition.

- 3. See to it that your newsroom demonstrates your association's thought leadership.** You can do this in a variety of ways.

Share your association's views on industry or public policy issues by posting white papers, speeches, bylined articles, and other public communication. Journalists may find these helpful when they're looking for someone to take a stand on breaking news stories that affect your industry.

Help out journalists who are unfamiliar with your association by offering some industry background.

Consider creating a mini-list of experts. Many times, when researching a story, a journalist will be looking for an expert to interview. If your site carries the right kind of information, linked from the newsroom, one of your executives might just fit the bill.

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4. Put everything you want journalists to know about your association within easy reach.

Don't assume that reporters who hit your newsroom are going to know—or bother to search your site for—where to find executive bios, information about products and services, or copies of your logos. But journalists will be in hog heaven if they find that your online newsroom has news releases (searchable ones are best), an overview/history of your association and industry, executive bios and photos, logos/graphic standards (if appropriate), product or service descriptions, and photos they can download and use to accompany stories.

This doesn't mean you have to restructure your site to include all these things in your newsroom. Put some of them there so that they're easy to find (and so that it's easy to get back to the newsroom—if reporters get lost in your site, they're out of there). The information you provide should also help journalists put your industry in context...how many employees it includes, primary products or services, annual sales, and so forth.

5. Forget the marketing hype— just the facts, please.

Don't offer downloadable brochures as the only option for product or company information; journalists really don't want to navigate through the hype to the heart of the matter. Brief industry or product descriptions are a far better option, and you can offer a link to the brochures as well.

6. Lovely to look at often means too long to download.

Forget the fancy stuff—flash, large graphics files, and the like. Remember that many journalists write on the road in hotel rooms or at home late at night and don't always have broadband access.

I once visited a site that had great information, but it was in zip files. I was using DSL, and it took 45 sections to download. And then I had to unzip and save it somewhere. All I wanted to do was read it! If I had to download zip files with a typical modem, I just wouldn't have bothered. It's much better to offer HTML, Word, or PDF files that are smaller and easier to download. Again: What matters to journalists is accessibility.

7. Search and/or sort capability.

Most journalists want to be able to search your newsroom. But if adding a search tool just isn't possible, at least try to offer a search and/or sort capability for your news releases.

8. Provide an e-mail alert service.

If journalists are covering your association or industry as part of a regular beat, it makes sense that they would welcome being notified if you're posting relevant news releases or new white papers, speeches, and events. The alert could be as simple as a monthly e-mail noting what's new in the newsroom.

Just make sure to use this for real news only. Send too much nonuseful stuff, and they'll opt off your list.

9. Forget about asking media to register to enter your newsroom.

Yes, you want to know who's visiting, but to many journalists this step is just a big turnoff. Registration is a barrier to access, and again, public relations is all about accessibility.

10. Include a newsroom link in every press release.

Just add a line that says, "Online newsroom: www.myassociationnewsroom.com." It's a no-cost, highly practical way to market your newsroom and drive media there to see what's happening. The only caution: Be sure you make the trip worthwhile or they won't bother to come back a second time.

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