

Join the National Conversation by Understanding How Top Journalists Work

By Christopher Rieck

Becoming a leading voice on a hot issue isn't easy. But, if you really want to move your brand ahead and get into the thought leadership space, one of the best ways is to become a credible source for a momentous national news story.

That was our objective at **McDermott Will & Emery** as we set our sights on the pending Supreme Court decision on the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, commonly known as "Obamacare," which was the fourth biggest news story of 2012, according to the Associated Press' poll of U.S. editors and news directors.

McDermott was not a party to the lawsuit, but we were determined to demonstrate our health law leadership through active involvement with the press covering the story. To achieve that goal, we developed a three-phase campaign to burnish our brand in the press before, during and after the historic decision.

As part of this effort, we sought to make the firm, its partners and its PR team valued resources for reporters seeking to understand the finer details of health law. While the effort generated more than 70 stories in national media, we knew that we had really broken through as we watched one of our partners interpret the Supreme Court decision live on CNBC the moment it came down. The campaign also netted us the PRSA Bronze Anvil Award of Commendation—great validation and a reminder of what's possible when you're organized.

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A few key lessons stand out for those seeking to make their companies part of a national conversation:

- **Start small.** Begin by leveraging your closest media contacts. Pitch those reporters who know you best to speak with your executives on the topic you've identified. It will be easier to generate these first interviews, which should give your executives a relatively safe, known platform for airing their messages. These interviews will also force you to think through your messages and identify your best spokespeople for the campaign ahead.
- **Prove your credentials.** As you begin to target national media, make certain that you are giving reporters very compelling reasons to pick your executive over the scores of other choices they have for commentary. Lead with the fact that the person is a former senior immigration officer if the topic is the "Gang of Eight" negotiations. Do they have some other specific credential from a previous job that gives them unique insights into the issue? Say that. Don't bury the reporter with lots of irrelevant detail from their resume.
- **Make introductions.** If you know that a

reporter is likely cover your issue in the months ahead, reach out to them for a possible meeting now. Go alone or bring your executive with you. The goal is to introduce the reporter to your company and familiarize them with the sources who might benefit them as they report the story. It's human nature: Reporters tend to remember people they've met in person.

- **Manage the clock.** National reporters are among the most time-pressed individuals on the planet. Hundreds of emails are on their screens. Which ones are they going to open, the one that says "Supreme Court Sources Available" or the one that says "What the Supreme Court Got Wrong"? Use the subject line to make your executive compelling in eight words or less. Include quote attributions in your pitch wherever possible for even quicker strikes on extremely fast moving issues.

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- **Know what's coming next.** Strive to become as much of an expert on a given topic as the reporter you are targeting. Make sure you're aware of where the debate stands at any given moment. If you can reasonably anticipate that there will be a major development in the story tomorrow morning, make sure you have identified and prepared your spokespeople for such interviews today. And, if they're not ready to comment, don't

put them out for commentary. Wasting a journalist's time can be fatal to your efforts.

- **Be first.** When it comes to national news, if you haven't reached out to your target reporter by 9:30 a.m. or so, it may be too late. Tier-one media reps chasing the day's news story will not wait around for sources to present themselves. You need to reach them before they are in the throes of reporting the news. This generally means before 9:30 a.m. Even better would be to approach them in the late afternoon the day before the news hits, when they're not so busy.
- **Demonstrate your knowledge.** There are many ways to do this, but one of the most effective can be a media webinar. Invite top media targets to attend a free webinar on the potential impact of whatever issue you are following in an on-the-record format. This approach does several things: It shows top reporters just how deep your company's knowledge of the issues is and provides quotable insights for any stories they may be working on or planning. A well-attended media webinar also shows top media that their competitors see your company as a valuable news source—an invaluable perception to spread.

Understand the environment top journalists work in and try to put yourself in their shoes. By living a national news story with reporters and trying to anticipate what they may need, you can greatly improve your company's odds of becoming a trusted—and frequently quoted—source. **PRN**

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