

Press tectonics

Old media are disintegrating – new media aren't delivering – so how do you make the masses aware of your products? There is a way, even if your current resources don't know how.

It isn't hopeless, but it is challenging.

The people you want to have buying your products can't do that if they never hear about them. (Our focus here is on consumer electronics and workspace tech products, but this applies to many other categories).

Press coverage used to be a reasonable way to get the info across. These products were, not long ago, candidates for major media coverage with a very strong likelihood for placement across broad swaths of outlets.

But...

- **For every three people in the major media who were covering workspace and tech products just a year ago, only one remains today; the others have been fired, laid off, downsized or reassigned.**
- **The newsroom bosses overall feel that covering these products reflects indulgent spending, making it unsuitable for the current economic reality. Even in places where the possibility of coverage survives, there are fewer opportunities for coverage.**

Getting coverage is much more challenging, but not impossible; alas, the same old approaches to getting it to happen are a lot less likely to work.

New Media, PR Agencies and a monstrously big “little white lie”

Are you among those who believe that online venues are replacing traditional major media as where to go for coverage?

Here's an admitted generalization to which there may be exceptions: PR agencies work hard to convince their clients this is true because it gives them new noses to count when they claim “results” for their programs.

But ask yourself: Have you ever bought something because you saw it mentioned on Twitter? Have your brand preferences ever been influenced by something you saw on a Facebook page? Has any blog ever moved you to pull out your credit card and buy something?

If other factors drive you to a shopping site (like an online storefront), once you're there, we give many of those sellers credit for being able to compel a purchase, but those sites are not new media sites. Among all the new media sites, blogs, socialization sites, online news venues and so on, are there any with enough clout to have measurable impact on getting people interested in buying specific products?

We don't think so, though we do acknowledge that CNET is an exception here (not because of its online presence but because it sources coverage for the CBS network and for a good collection of newspapers).

What's left

It's still only the major media (newspapers, radio, TV and mass circulation magazines) who reach and influence enough people to be considered as meaningful for product coverage, especially for companies that expect their PR efforts to return more in revenue margins than it costs them. And in those major media, only about a third of the byline population remains, overall constrained to only about a fifth of their former opportunities to cover these subjects.

This is not an era for the faint of heart, but those surviving mass media opportunities are the only sensible news and coverage opportunities for products in this era.

Traditional techniques for plugging into those opportunities are less likely than ever to succeed.

The recipe for success in getting coverage for products these days is easy enough to state.

OK, that was a trick statement. It's easy enough for us to state because we're reporters, too. Few vendor or agency PR people could spell this out unless and until they read about it here, and even then, they may not have what they need to execute on it.

But we're not selfish, so here's the recipe.

1. You have to know who's still left and how their context has changed: to what extent are they allowed to direct their own coverage, how frequently are there openings for them to cover these products, what are the new qualifications for things they're encouraged to cover.
2. You need to know how their beats have been redefined and which topical stories they're working on.
3. You need to either shape-shift the product to fit the topic or – if the relationship is colleagues rather than prospects and if there's a high level of trust and if you understand all the factors influencing products and purchasers across the category and if you're up to date on what is or isn't happening in the streets – you may be able to convince the reporter to do a story on a theme you suggest and in terms of which the product you want to get covered is an obvious fit.

Don't overkill and don't count on old news themes to carry the day. "Green" themes are not as high on media hit lists as they used to be. Readers/viewers/listeners who spent the past months since the economic meltdown in a "winter" (hunker in the bunker) psychology are now impatient with moribund themes and much more interested in the "spring and summer" themes of recovery succeeding and hope and being past the bottom. PR people who pitch to old moods won't get too far.

The media

Finally, we believe that the traditional mass media have passed their economic bottom and are on-path to a slow recovery. Don't count them out.

But neither should you count on old approaches working out. Be smarter.