

Anatomy of a media story

Just because you've got a research report, and *you* think it's news, doesn't mean it's going to get up. Understanding what the media is looking for is crucial – with five key ingredients for success.

As a starting point, Essential Media Communications associate director Carla Stacey suggests asking yourself: why are you doing media in the first place?

"Is it to inform and educate, or is it about ego?" she said.

"Is the investment in media and the time it takes, going to deliver what you want?"

"For example, [a syndicated social research report] might do media because they have a report to sell and they want to be seen as thought leaders on how Australia is evolving.

"Often media outlets will commission polling themselves so they can generate news stories, on topics such as prime ministerial popularity.

"Media is about having a public discussion. How are you contributing to the public discussion?"

"Is it about the findings of the research or about the organisation itself. Who is the hero of the story?"

The five ingredients of a media story

- Facts
- It must be newsworthy; i.e there must be something new
- A credible spokesperson, supported by case studies or examples
- Timeliness
- An audience.

Added to all of this: good planning and a decent dollop of luck.

"Timeliness gives context to a story, and sometimes luck's on your side – if you've got research about what women want in the middle of a debate about sexism, or findings about Gen Y in the midst of a youth unemployment crisis.

"On the other hand, you could produce the story of your life, and a bomb goes off in Indonesia and suddenly you're way down the priority list."

Stacey said another aspect to timeliness was related to understanding the medium and the market.

"Knowing, that if you do a launch at 5pm, you are not going to get TV coverage for that day – that's understanding their medium and their deadlines.

"You also need to understand the market.

"Media outlets feed off one another so if you've got a media strategy to roll out, you might consider aiming for early morning radio so it's on the broadcast media's agenda all day and destined for newspaper the next morning.

"Alternatively you might aim for newspaper coverage first, for talk-back hosts to discuss and TV chiefs of staff to follow."

Understanding the audience is also important – as what works for the Daily Telegraph is very different to what works for the Australian Financial Review.

What's the yarn?

Laura Demasi of the Mind & Mood Report (formerly the Ipsos Mackay Report) says before trying to get a research report in the media always ask yourself: What's the yarn here?

"The media wants to tell a good yarn. Does your research tell an interesting story? Are their readers, who are often everyday consumers rather than a professional audience, going to care about this issue?

"Is the research telling a different story or shedding new light on an issue?

"If it's just reinforcing what's already out there, what's already known, then it's harder to get coverage."

This recent article from the Daily Telegraph, reported on research which found Gen Y valued politeness, family ties and financial independence – telling a different story from the prevailing narrative.



And while all media outlets will report on the same news event, these days it's common practice for commercial organisations or government to do an exclusive with just one outlet.

Other questions to ask are: Why are you doing media, and who's the audience?

"If you can answer both of those, then you can work out who you are pitching your story to."

In a rolling strategy aimed at getting media across the country, Stacey says the key is to contextualise the story for the audience, by taking a look at the local stats and regional targets.

Meanwhile, it's also crucial to have an integrated media strategy, as it isn't enough to just focus on legacy media.

"You've got to have your media hooked up with your digital and social media platforms," she said.

"You can extend the life of a story and its audience through twitter and social media feeds. Sometimes it's the other way around, with social and digital media driving new stories.

"For example the 'Destroy the joint' story. What started with a statement then became an online community of 20,000. And that's a news story in itself."

Research findings could also form the basis of an opinion piece – but must be written by a community or business leader or someone with a high media profile, she said.

In further advice, Stacey says visuals matter – not just for TV, but also in print and online, which was why it was important to organise photo opportunities for case studies, or supply imagery such as infographics.

"The better the visuals, the better placement your story will receive from editors."

She also advises against just randomly sending out media releases, saying a targeted media strategy was far better.

"Of course the best way of getting attention is a personal approach to a journalist about a story that will be of interest to their audience. Because then you're talking to the person who's going to be writing the story. But even then, you still never know what might happen further down the editorial process."

When trying to make a fact come to life, a case-study or real-life example was crucial, and a bit of basic media training could make all the difference – especially considering a five minute TV or radio interview might end up as a 12 second sound bite.

"People connect to personal stories, it's the emotional element to it, as it makes it something they can relate to," she said.

"We never send a spokesperson or case study out ill-prepared. We do a lot of media training for the basic stuff.

"You have to consider: do they have a stutter? Do they 'um' their words? How clear are they? What are their confidence levels like?"

The case study

Stethoscope Research director Sam Everingham says advocacy group Surrogacy Australia quickly learned from experience that it needed to provide real-life couples as case-studies, in order to get the media interested in its research.

Surrogacy Australia (SA) commissioned Everingham to carry out the study into how surrogacy is replacing adoption as an alternate means of family formation, and the reasons why Australian couples are resorting to commercial surrogacy overseas – despite the fact it is illegal in some states. The study was completed in January 2012.

SOME 30 TO 40 PER CENT OF AUSTRALIANS USING OVERSEAS SURROGACY ARRANGEMENTS ARE GAY MEN.



Family affair: (above) Queensland couple Dean (at left) and David with their three girls.

"[THE LEGAL SITUATION IS] THE PART THAT GIRLS ARE NOT WANTED HERE IN AUSTRALIA"

'From here to maternity', Good Weekend, SMH, December 21-23, 2012

The dad of two girls (both via surrogacy) says SA came to Stethoscope needing some hard research to generate public debate on the issue, with a two-fold strategy of raising community awareness and drawing the issue to the attention of politicians.

But it doesn't matter how interesting your data is, if you don't have a real-life couple to back it up.

"Don't ever expect to get research in the media without personal stories," he warns.

"We learned from experience that we needed families to make this stuff real – to breathe life into the data."

These days, before making an approach to the media, Surrogacy Australia will already have couples lined up ready to be interviewed, as well as providing contact details for legal experts and fertility doctors and even politicians. If the journalist wants somebody with an 'anti' view, it will also give them the names of possible contacts.

He said SA advised all the couples taking part in stories to negotiate up front to vet their component before it went to press and he would advise any researcher to do the same – as you always run the risk of being mis-quoted, or for the journalist to get the stats wrong.

"You can usually ask to check the story before it goes out, particularly if you're nervous about content. Sometimes journalists will agree to send you the whole piece, or sometimes just your quotes. I've never had a refusal."

He said while a few journalists asked to see the full research report, the commercial reality of the media industry these days meant most were not in the position to read lengthy documents.

So it had been up to Surrogacy Australia or its research partner to highlight the relevant and interesting stats.

"You've got to spoon-feed the media. You've got to do half their work for them. They don't want to read a whole long report, they just want the key stats to run."

Surrogacy Australia manages its own media liaison, and Everingham says it had cultivated relationships with journalists over the period of a year, developing a data-base of about 25 key contacts who had either made contact with SA or written about surrogacy in the past.

"So we were ahead of the game because we knew they were interested in this topic."

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