



MACIAS PR

A Guidebook to
Publicity during the Holiday Season

5 PR Tactics to Increase Holiday Sales

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GETTING THE MEDIA'S ATTENTION DURING THE HOLIDAY RUSH

It's the one question every person wants to know. How do the news producers and newspaper editors decide what to print and publish? Most people ask this question like there is a magical formula that scientifically reveals whether a story should be pursued or scrapped. If it were this easy to identify news stories, you can bet the formula would have been hacked and posted on the Internet by now. The fact is news selection is an art and just like any other profession involving creativity, opinions and experiences, it is subjective to where you stand.

News is a public service, which means your story must provide a service to the public. It sounds simplistic, but many people don't grasp that concept as they pursue publicity. They assume the media is entitled to do feature stories on the public in the name of public service. No, the media is entitled to do stories that benefit and help the public with new information that is relevant today. And in today's saturated media market where ratings and unique viewers drive advertising rates, you will have more success with a media placement by finding an angle that has an inherent tease value. This is a story that draws readers in because they are intrigued, leading to more viewers and readers for the publication.

Tactic One – Identify your Story Angle

Finding a unique story idea is not as difficult as it may sound. You just need to open your mind to holiday events that impact and influence sales of your product or service. Look through the newspaper for news stories on similar topics.

In December 2012, my company, MaciasPR, launched a media campaign for a cyber security company. We all know shoppers are using their cell phones to purchase gifts during the holiday season, but how secure are those financial transactions? We used that timely holiday angle to secure a prominent media placement with CBSNews.com (Link to story:



<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=50136919n>). We positioned the CEO as a security expert who explained how holiday shoppers can know if their Internet connection is secure enough for making a purchase. This is an example of using your insider knowledge to position yourself as an expert with the media. We researched mobile shopping statistics to support the story that more consumers than ever are making holiday purchases on their cell phones.

Later that month, MaciasPR created a trend story that got covered by one of the most influential technology blogs. The narrative is a familiar story that people see at the end of the year – Predictions for the next year or a recap on the current year.

For this media placement, we wrote a first-person editorial on the *6 Big Cyber Security Predictions for 2013* and pitched the story during the slow news cycle between Christmas and New Years. This is an angle you can pursue with your own company by using your own expertise to push your product or service. (Link to Story: <http://venturebeat.com/2013/01/02/6-big-cyber-security-predictions-for-2013/>)

Many times, a current tie-in to your company can be found on the front pages of the newspaper. Below is an actual media release I received when I was a Senior Producer with CBS. The publicist sent this to me on the morning *American Airlines* announced it was canceling flights due to maintenance concerns.

Hi Mark,

American Airlines has canceled more than **2,400 flights** since Tuesday, **impacting tens of thousands of customers**.

Seasoned travel service experts and co-founders of JetCombo.com, **George Khairallah** and **Michael Thomas**, are available to comment on this airline fiasco.

- Q- Who is at fault? American Airlines? The Federal Aviation Administration?
- Q- Is this a sign of more woes to come for the commercial airline industry?
- Q- What steps should American Airlines take for damage control?



Q- Where does this leave stranded travelers?

JetCombo.com is a first-of-its-kind online booking service that overlays existing commercial airline schedules with charter and private jet aircraft availability to create a new way to fly.

Please contact me for more information or to schedule an interview.

Best,
(name of publicist)

This publicist had the right strategy with her tie-in to American Airlines, but her media pitch lacked credibility. After looking deeper into the story, I realized it was nothing more than another travel website. Her idea was in the right place, but she should have spent more time establishing her client as an expert and related it back to the *American Airlines* story.

Tactic Two – Pitch the Ignored Reporters

One size does not fit all when it comes to pitching a story idea to the media. In many cases, you will have more success with your story pitches by targeting the proper news medium and reporter through unconventional ways. Newspapers can be a microcosm for this analysis. In many cases, you will have more success by targeting reporters or writers who are overlooked in their newsrooms. These journalists can consist of weekend writers or reporters, or even freelance journalists who need to constantly prove their value to news managers.

Let's say you are trying to get holiday coverage for a women's clothing designer. Most publicists would probably take the conventional approach and pitch their story idea to the style section or possibly even the business section. They would never think of pitching their designer to the sports editors or reporters. In a similar fashion, most publicists would also pitch a profile story on a high school football coach to the sports sections, as opposed to targeting the religious or business section of the newspaper.

Those methods are tried and true but in many cases you can improve your odds of coverage by pitching a reporter who doesn't traditionally hear your story idea angle. Take the example of the profile story on the high school football coach. What if that high school coach had leadership rules that applied to business? What if that high school coach was extremely religious and based his coaching philosophy on Biblical principals?

Suddenly, this story has a new angle that hasn't been heard, assuming you pitch the unconventional outlet. A story on a football coach with leadership principles could run in many different sections of the local newspaper: sports, business, metro and even the leisure sections. Add in the faith outlet, and that coach suddenly becomes intriguing to the newspaper's religious editors.

Likewise, in the case of the aspiring woman's clothing designer, she becomes more unique to the sports section if her fashion is geared towards female athletes. Sports sections are always pitched ideas on high school coaches and athletes, yet they aren't always pitched angles on athletic fashion trends for women. Of course you should always concentrate your pitch on the desired audience, but make sure you look beyond the stereotype. Your story idea or client will stand out if you can find that unconventional angle that others haven't pursued.

You should apply this same-targeted approach when choosing which news outlet to pitch. Many people make the mistake of pitching to the largest pie (the local television station or newspaper) rather than focusing on a news outlet that reaches their desired demographics. If your story idea involves a niche, focus your time and energy on pitching the news outlet that reaches those targeted viewers and readers.

You can better shape the public's opinion by reaching your specific customer, and that means going to where they are located. Let's say you have a product that appeals to housewives. You may not get on the show Oprah, but you can pitch the local newscast that airs at noon, which has a large audience of stay-at-home

mothers. Nielson figures show housewives are the majority of viewers watching those newscasts that air during the workday. If you are trying to get singles to visit your new nightclub, don't focus all of your time and energy on the entertainment reporter. Instead, target the alternative weekly, which will likely have a larger base of your potential customers.

And remember, there is nothing wrong with pitching a conventional story the conventional way. But if you find no one is biting on your story ideas, take a moment to review your idea from a different angle. You might find unconventional is the new conventional.

Tactic Three – Identify your Holiday Gimmick

If you want to stand out at a holiday party, you need something to push you above the crowd. Some people call that personality; others call it charisma. I like to call it a gimmick. It's no different with branding a product, business, or service, during the busy holiday rush. You need to discover your gimmick to stand out among the holiday retailers.

Now before critics start mincing words with comments like, "That is shallow," or "Execution beats style," or "Hype loses to substance," or "Consumers are smarter than that," I get it. And I agree with you. But let's take off that analytical, argumentative cap for a sec and discuss this idea in the gray world we live in today.



In 2010, I consulted an HR company on their publicity and we needed a gimmick to get on the media's radar. As part of their media campaign, we created an internal survey that asked their clients whether they planned on doing more or less hiring in the next quarter. We packaged this survey with Rutgers

University and positioned it as a private sector snapshot on where the economy was

headed. The informal survey led to a front-page story with the Philadelphia Inquirer, a 10-minute segment on a CBS public affairs program, a radio segment on National Public Radio and a few other news placements. We positioned the CEO as a jobs expert, who put their employer survey into perspective, giving consumers and business owners a deeper understanding of where the economy was headed.

Perhaps your company doesn't have the resources for an internal survey. You can still use this strategy by using another opinion survey. AOL and Yahoo always have new polls that show how people feel about themselves. Find a survey that relates to your industry, tie it back to your business and pitch a story with yourself as the expert.

A gimmick is especially important when you need to stand out from the crowd. This happened with the international non-profit organization, The Salvation Army, as we tried to determine how to get them more publicity outside of the holiday season. Their leadership committee told me it was difficult for the organization to get toy donations in spring, summer and fall when no one was thinking about Santa Claus. They wanted to find a way to remind the public of their toy drives throughout the year.

I recommended a publicity campaign involving Santa Claus taking a summer vacation to New York City. The idea was to put Santa Claus in Bermuda shorts and a T-shirt, and have him visit Coney Island for Memorial Day Weekend. He would ride a roller coaster at the park with the kids and be seen wearing summer clothes, which was not part of his traditional garb. The Salvation Army wrote up press releases alerting the media in advance that Santa Claus was taking a vacation from the North Pole and he wanted to remind parents that toys were needed year-round for kids. This media campaign was a success because it's unusual to see Santa Claus in the summer months. It was also a great photo opportunity for newspapers and TV stations that were looking for fun photos during slow holiday weekend. This

strategy wouldn't have been as successful if the campaign were launched in December when Santa was overexposed.

Finding a retail gimmick during the holiday season will have more success if you can find an interactive element. Is there a promotion you can run that allows customers to help underprivileged children during the holiday season? Can you give away a certain percentage of holiday sales to buy gifts for families in need? Do your business sales reveal any insight into how the local economy is recovering? What are the latest holiday trends in your industry and what does this mean for the local community? Finding that gimmick first starts with questions and a deep understanding of your product or service. Once you start asking open-ended questions, you will find a possible promotion the media may want to cover.

Tactic Four – Establish Credibility with the Media

Credibility matters in life, but it especially matters for journalists. Whenever a business owner is pitched to the media, journalists will quietly and overtly measure his expertise, integrity and experience in the industry. Journalists will want to see proof on why this person is the best expert to add color to the industry.

This is why your business must establish credibility in the online world if you want to secure credible media placements. If a reporter doesn't see a solid online presence, credibility questions will be raised and this includes stories with the other news outlets. This doesn't mean you won't succeed with a media placement if you have never been in the paper, but it will be a much harder story sell to the media if you can't show why you are an expert. You can establish credibility by writing editorials on the market and submitting them to influential business news sites, like the Huffington Post, Business Insider, trade magazines, etc. Writing a book on your industry will also give you another avenue to position yourself as an expert. Here are a few questions to address and answer before you pursue media placements.

- Q) What makes you qualified to speak on this topic?*
- Q) How many years of experience have you spent in the industry and why does this make you more qualified than your competitors?*
- Q) How big is your business in comparison to others?*
- Q) What part of your daily routine is spent reinforcing your expertise?*
- Q) What do you know as an insider that others would want to know?*
- Q) Does your business have a direct impact on reshaping the future?*
- Q) Is your business positioned as a leader in any trends?*
- Q) Do trade organizations recognize your business as a leader or expert?*

Tactic Five – Preparing for the Media Interview

At this point in your life you should know how to prepare for the job interview, but do you know how to prepare for the media interview? I recently interviewed a C-level executive with a very influential search engine company for a TV story. Minutes before the executive sat down in front of the camera, a woman from corporate communications tried to brief him for the interview. As the producer, I stayed quiet and listened as the corporate communicator prepped her boss with a briefing document that detailed answers to my anticipated questions. It was a long document filled with paragraphs. Luckily, the interview was taped because the executive flopped even though this was a friendly interview. The questions were softballs, yet this executive made the same mistakes that I continually saw throughout my TV career. He tried to memorize sentences rather than remembering themes.

If you ever do a TV interview, throw out the script. Don't try to memorize sentences, especially if long sentences because you are guaranteed to forget the words no matter how hard you study. And if you're preparing a briefing document for a client, don't write out long or even short sentences. In fact, don't write out any sentences. Instead, communicate your thoughts in bullet-points. These bullet-points will force you to learn the topic and understand the issues rather than memorizing words.

I made this mistake myself when I was interviewed on radio early in my career. Initially, I tried to memorize sentences rather than key points and I stumbled in front of the camera just like everyone else. It wasn't until I forced myself to communicate what I knew that my words flowed freely. If you're preparing for a media interview, study and prepare for the themes, rather than for the individual questions. For example, if you are being interviewed as a portfolio manager on CNBC, rather than memorizing sentences, grasp the concepts that you want to communicate on TV. Remember the big picture on why you look a specific stock. Even if a question is rephrased, you will always know how to answer it because you will be speaking from a deeper understanding of the theme. Remember, you are the expert, so communicate what you know – not what you memorized.

In the case with this C-level executive, after watching him stumble for 15 minutes over sentences written by another person, I asked the photographer to stop rolling. I then asked the executive if we could toss his briefing document in the trash. I reminded him that he knew what he was telling me and he had to explain in his words – not the words from his staff – what the message was. As soon as the camera started rolling again, we had the best sound any producer or viewer would want to hear. You know why? Because he spoke from his heart and mind, rather than from sentences he memorized.

IS IT TIME TO HIRE A PROFESSIONAL?



MACIAS PR

Choosing the Right PR Firm

Is there a quantitative way to measure value and success when it comes to public relations? As a former Executive Producer with WNBC and Senior Producer with WCBS, I worked with a lot of publicists throughout my journalism career. Some publicists took me out for

after-work drinks, trying to sell me story ideas with alcohol. Other publicists met me on the location of various video shoots, masquerading as my best friend. Of course, I met many publicists over the phone as I listened to their pitches for stories.

Now, as the owner of a PR firm, I see the other side of the PR business. In my weekly routine, I meet small business owners with tight marketing budgets and corporate executives with large budgets that require a spreadsheet. Regardless of industry, most business owners routinely ask the wrong questions when it comes to assessing the value of a public relations agency or publicist. Here are some pivotal questions to ask before hiring a PR firm to lead your media strategy.

Can you give me a publicity strategy for my business? This is a crucial question. You want to be able to see how the publicist thinks on his feet. I've asked this question to seasoned publicists for fun to get into their head. Most of them say, I need to research it. That is an excuse for, let me Google to see what others have done and I will copy their ideas. A great publicist will have his own ideas, but don't confuse strategy with an understanding of your specific field of expertise or knowledge. A great publicist will ask the right questions to determine what is a media strategy for your business. He will also come up with story ideas and specific tactics, so you can understand how he or she will lead your campaign.

How do you see my industry? This question reveals how well the publicist understands your business and industry. Make the publicist explain what he sees as the unique value in your service. But don't dismiss your publicist just because he doesn't understand everything at once. I've worked with high-tech platforms that took me time to grasp. TIP: Keep your question open-ended so the publicist can't repeat what you say.

Tell me about your clients and media placements you have secured? Media placements are everything in the world of PR. I have gotten my clients stories in the New York Times, New York Post, Good Morning America, CNN en Español, Fox News, Gigaom, Entrepreneur Magazine. You get the idea. A diverse portfolio



suggests that this publicist knows how to identify a narrative, regardless of industry. Sometimes, it is not valuable to work with a PR firm that only has expertise in one area because their ideas risk becoming stale. Once you see the media placements your PR firm has secured, ask how long it took them to secure those media placements. If it takes a PR firm six months to achieve one media placement, is that a time frame you are willing to wait for results?

Will I be working directly with you? Most larger PR firms in New York will send in the great sellers to get your business, but after they get your account, they will pawn off the work to a 22-year-old college grad. How do I know? Because I used to get emails and phone calls from publicists who were fresh out of college while their bosses took me out for after-work drinks. You have every right to meet the publicist who will be writing the pitches and selling your story to reporters. And whether you like it or not, reporters will associate the value of your business by how well your communications team interacts with them. Is your publicist organized and quick on his feet? Can he explain the specifics of how your industry? Make sure you meet the people speaking to the media on behalf of your company.

What if we don't get along? What if I want out of the contract because you can't deliver results? Every PR firm hates these questions, but it's a valid point to raise during your initial discussions. If you're working with a publicist and the chemistry is bad or he/she doesn't get along with you, you should be able to get a new person or get out of your account. Publicists are going to hate me for saying this, but I tell my clients, if it's not working for you, I'll let you out. I'd rather have a happy former client than a current unhappy client. (To date, no business has ever asked me if they could end an agreement early). I've clashed with some business owners because they wanted a media strategy executed their way, but after I explained my strategy and delivered media results, most of them deferred to my expertise when it came to the media.

How long before we get to see results? This answer can vary by the complexity of your campaign, but the PR firm should be able to give some guidance over a timeframe. The PR team might not want to give this hand away, but press them on it.

What is your media experience? Experience matters when it comes to anything in life and it matters even more with publicity. Does your PR team understand your industry, its competitors and what is your unique selling proposition? Force the PR firm or publicist to sell you on their experience, and make them explain how this relates to the media. This will also give you an idea of how well your PR team will sell your stories to the media.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The founder of MACIAS PR, Mark M. Macias, has worked inside the newsrooms of NBC, CBS, KTVK, the Arizona Republic and King World Productions. As the Executive Producer with WNBC in New York, Macias approved and vetted story ideas from publicists, reporters, producers and viewers. He was also Executive Producer for a national business show that was syndicated by NBC. This background in programming and editorial gives us an edge when finding the strong narrative needed for coverage.

OUR SERVICES INCLUDE

Public Relations, Crisis Communications, Media Training, Messaging, Social Media Strategy, Original Content for Blogs/Newsletters and Website Design, Press Releases and Distribution, Introductions to Journalists, Event Publicity, and Video Production.

If you are interested in scheduling a call with Mark Macias to discuss a media strategy for your company, you can reach him at: Mark@MaciasPR.com.

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