

Using the Media to Your Advantage by William Howard Horrocks

Big business uses the media to its advantage all the time. You can too. The media can help promote your practice and Dentistry in general. But it's certainly easy to fly into a rage over how the media, especially on a national level, sometimes treats us.

Take the "20/20" story on "fresh breath" halitosis treatment in March. Some of my clients were upset because of the negative spin ABC put on it by showing an ADA representative saying that not enough testing had been done. "If only they hadn't injected that little bit of negativity, it would have been a great story," one of my clients said. "Why did they have to do that?"

Here's why; without that "little bit of negativity" the piece would never have aired. To understand why this is true and what we might do about it we first need to know some basic facts about how the media operates.

Media Facts

Fact #1 Thinking that TV, radio or newspapers are interested in giving anyone positive, free exposure automatically qualifies you for the lead role in "Dumb and Dumber, Part 3." The media will not say good things about anyone or anything without also including some trash. If you want a positive story, they will simply tell you to buy ad space or air time and then you can say all the good things you want about yourself and your profession (say, now *there's* an idea).

Fact #2: The reason the media exists has nothing to do with being the beacon of truth, nor does it have anything to do with informing, educating or entertaining - those are all side issues. The media's purpose and function is to sell product to the public and to sell ad space to their advertisers. The obvious purpose for the commercials that interrupt "Murder One" is to sell products during the show right? But also realize the purpose of the entire show, in fact any show, is to sell products. Would there *be* a "Murder One" without Budweiser beer or Toyota trucks?

Fact #3: The media is generally only interested in stories of an alarming nature i.e., stories of violence, conflict, controversy or disharmony. Or

anything to do with a celebrity. If they can do a story on a celebrity involved in a violent, conflicting, controversial or disharmonious situation then their place in O.J. ratings heaven is assured. Correctly or incorrectly they think that's the only thing the public will buy.

Fact #4: You can only expect a "puff piece" - a favorable story devoid of conflict or controversy - if you're a huge corporation with mega bucks to spend on advertising. For example, big pharmaceutical companies often get favorable stories about their latest breakthrough drugs.

Fact #5: An unfavorable story isn't necessarily bad.

Any Press, But Not Always the Bad

There are marketing and public relations people who believe that "any press is good press." I'm not one of them. There's no question that bad press can kill your business. But understand there's a difference between bad press and press that's simply less than 100 percent favorable. The "20/20" story was a great example of how the media treats its victims, er, subjects. It was "balanced." This is a media euphemism which roughly translates into "we'd better find or create something bad about this subject so we can be seen as presenting 'both sides' of the issue." The fact that there doesn't have to be any "issue" or that something could be entirely beneficial and useful doesn't interest them.

So was I upset with Barbara Walters? Not at all. In fact I wrote a press release about the halitosis treatment for my clients to use and spent the night faxing it to their offices all over the country with instructions to get it into the hands of their local media the very next day. I wanted them to take advantage of the already existing national exposure and ride its coattails.

Why does this have value even if the national exposure isn't totally positive? It's because the public isn't stupid. Just because some "expert" throws in an unflattering comment doesn't mean it will be believed, much less acted upon. People are not going to stay away from the dentist just because "20/20" implied there was a profit being made in halitosis treatment (horrors!) or that there hadn't been enough testing (one person's opinion). To the contrary, this puts the subject into the limelight and creates interest.

Vitamin Industry Example

Look at what happened in the vitamin industry. If you recall, it wasn't too many years ago that anyone selling vitamins was attacked in the media as a quack, or worse. Yet the public continued to buy vitamins in ever increasing numbers. The pharmaceutical companies were, shall we say, less than thrilled over the prospect of people improving their health through nutrition instead of buying their drugs, so the media attacks became even more vitriolic.

What's the situation today? There are still some hatchet jobs, but over all vitamins get unusually good press on the local and national levels. I just saw a very positive piece on the benefits of vitamin E last night. The vitamin industry is huge. (Humm, maybe it's not a coincidence that there's better press on the subject ever since the larger drug companies started manufactured their own vitamins.)

If you're going to be upset that the national media will not do puff pieces on the dental profession, then be prepared to be upset most of the time. One hundred percent favorable press is a pipe dream. It's just not something you should expect. Fortunately you have your hometown media.

Local Media is Different

My comments above are mostly applicable to the national media. Your local media, especially small neighborhood newspapers, don't usually act like pit bulls on Prozac.

These papers will often run a positive story simply because they don't have the investigative staff like their national media colleagues do. But mostly it's because there's usually nothing else to print. That is where you can use the media to help you.

All you need to do is employ the good old, tried and true press release. They are easy to write (one page, maybe two), easy to send, and are the number one way the media finds out about a possible story. How did "20/20" even find out about halitosis treatment in the first place? You can bet it was someone's press release.

Press Release Subjects

What do you write the release about? Here's a *short* list: any new treatment, equipment or instrumentation you have (intraoral cameras, video imaging, tooth whitening, halitosis treatment, electronic anesthesia, air abrasion, etc.).

Or your annual Toys for Tots drive, the addition of an associate, your charity work the absolute miracle results of cosmetic dentistry, the fact that you just returned from Bill Dickerson's Institute, your unusual lifetime warranty on crowns, your massage pads on your chairs, the fact that your office is next to a pet shop and you do doggie prophies on your day off, you're six foot nine and your hygienist is four foot three, your mother wears army boots...

Well, you get the idea - anything that might interest an editor. If all the big news stories are covered by the major dailies, what's that leave for the small neighborhood papers to write about? They write about what's going on in the neighborhood. Realize you're part of the neighborhood and therefore can get your stories printed.

You've Got To Create It

I recently got front page coverage for a client of mine for his electronic anesthesia. This came about because of a simple press release faxed to the appropriate editor at the local newspaper (faxing works much better than snail mail). They will often simply print your releases but sometimes, as in this instance, they will send a reporter to do a full feature story. Another client got a full half-hour feature on a local TV show because he faxed a press release to the TV station. Yet another faxed to his local paper a press release I wrote for him about toothpaste advertising claims. The next day a reporter was in his practice interviewing him about his views on the subject.

I'm not saying this sort of thing happens a lot, but it does happen. Only it won't happen for you unless you create it. The way to create it is sending releases on anything that might be news to all print and electronic media in your area. And doing it regularly.

Understand the nature of the beast. Treat the media a bit like you would a rattlesnake. Sure the snake can kill you, but it also does a pretty good job of getting everybody's attention.