

## **How Can Think Tanks Win Friends and Influence People in the Media?**

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Let me suggest, as a starting point for thinking about the issues surrounding relations with the media, an economic analogy that I believe will appeal to people in the think tank business.

You want the profile and the influence that flow from media exposure, but you are in some pretty fierce competition with a lot of other people seeking the same thing: access to scarce newspaper space or broadcast time. So how do you get people in the media to agree to a mutually-satisfactory transaction with you? The answer: By making your self-interest coincide with theirs.

The most successful salesmen are those capable of the effort of imagination necessary to put themselves in the place of the person they want to sell to, to understand and speak to the potential client's needs as if they were their own.

Now in the present case that means some obvious things. Journalists are, perforce, generalists; they have limited time and expertise and are always confronted by what I call the tyranny of the blank page or the broadcast slot. Whether they are ready or not, the paper is coming out tomorrow morning and the news is going on at six p.m. They've got to fill so many column inches, or so many minutes of airtime.

Being rational people, they want to fill those pages and minutes with the least effort, and at the least risk to themselves. If they can come out looking good as well — looking like they have mastered their topic, gathered new and provocative insights, or clearly advanced the public debate — they and their bosses feel that they've had a good day.

But there are other less obvious things that you need to grasp if you are to put yourself in the journalist's shoes, things that are challenging for the denizens of the think tank world. For example, to most journalists (and, indeed, to most people) the value of ideas is far from self-evident.

However, intellectuals tend to think that the value of ideas *is* self-evident, and assume that if they have a good idea that is not picked up by the media; it is due to ill-will or bad faith. And while both of those things also exist, failure to get noticed by the media is, in my experience, far more frequent due to the intellectual snobbery that disdains the very hard work of popularizing good ideas and marketing them.

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So having sound ideas and doing the research to back them up is only one half of the job. The other half is putting a lot of energy into strategic thinking about communications, and putting that strategy into effect.

The place to start is not with ideas, but with personal relationships. Journalists are moved much more by personal contact than by the best ideas in the world. One way that they economize on scarce time is by having a stable of people, experts in their field, in whom they can have confidence, knowing that if they are told something by these people, they can put a great deal of weight on it without running the risk of looking stupid or foolish.

Gaining this degree of confidence comes slowly and by a dint of hard work. You cannot plop a great study of some vital public policy issue on a journalist's desk and expect them to take the blindest bit of notice if they've never heard of you.

Put your expertise to good use. Scour the newspapers and television for people who habitually report on issues that you are interested in. Begin to feed them information, on a piecemeal basis, through calls and letters. Be selective. Carefully cull information that they can immediately recognize as allowing them to write better stories on these themes – more hard-hitting, insightful, and controversial. Be very certain of your facts (remember, this is a confidence-building exercise) so document them with care. Don't be concerned at this stage about getting credit. Let the journalist look good, thanks to your efforts. You will have accomplished two things. First, you will have established yourself in the journalist's mind as a credible source, and he or she will have a sense of being indebted to you. Then, and only then, can you really expect media people to take an interest in the things that *you* think are important.

Maintain your own stable of credible and reliable experts to whom you can refer journalists. Remember, if they know that a call to you *always* nets them a snappy sound bite or an angle on a story that they hadn't considered, or an expert contact that they might otherwise spend hours digging up, they will come back again and again for their purposes. And that is crucial when you remember that what you are after is to make your self-interest and theirs coincide.

As an aside, I should say that it will be very helpful, I'd even say essential, that you treat with respect people and ideas that you disagree with. Treat them as intelligent people whose only failing is intellectual error. When journalists call, be sure that you understand what the other side is liable to say about your position, report it respectfully, and offer them names of experts on the other side.

I say this because journalists are extremely attuned to what I call "personal energies." You want to project an image of yourself as self-confident, respectful and evenhanded, but with firm ideas of your own, thoughtfully expressed. Then, when the other guys try to trash your ideas, they look belligerent and defensive.

This is especially true if you've politely steered the journalist to this opposing expert. Never forget that the journalist is automatically going to seek out someone to give a

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different point of view whatever you do, so jump in and try to shape how the journalist is liable to receive the opposing point of view. How you handle these personal questions will affect the tone of the stories that they write.

Returning now to the main topic, having ploughed your ground carefully, you can now reap what you have sown. You are preparing a major book therefore, prepare the media as well. Feed journalists tidbits of your research that are relevant to stories they're working on. Find out who editorializes on these topics and feed them too.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that the head of your organization is the only one who can or should maintain these contacts. If you have confidence in the judgment and preparation of your staff, encourage them too to cultivate direct professional relationships with journalists who have been selected by you because they are likely to have a professional interest in your subject areas. Encourage your staff to call them informally, take them out to lunch, and generally wet their appetite for your next big study.

Finally, remember that editorial board meetings, as a rule, are easy to arrange. I used to be on the editorial board of the most powerful and prestigious daily newspaper in Canada. And whom does the Board meet with? Virtually anyone who asks. But remember, don't waste your time or theirs. Before you ask for a meeting, ask yourself, again, how am I going to use this meeting to make the editorial board's interests coincide with mine? What do I have to offer them that they will recognize as being of value?

The basic message is a simple one: treat the media as the intelligent people that they are, and accept that the value of your ideas is not self-evident. Then you will be ready to undertake the communications planning and cultivation of media contacts that will allow you to get your ideas noticed, reported and commented on.