

RELATE WITH MEDIA, Reap Rich Rewards

— Nadeem Ahmed

Nothing succeeds like successful business. But successful businesses are built on reputation. And reputation comes easy and quick via media. Today, the media is flooded with information but still hungry for knowledge. In this backdrop, nothing confers as much prestige as being the 'go-to' person in your area of expertise. Being an authentic source of information for busy editors can give a CA a unique marketplace advantage.

Noted writer Larry Chambers, in his book *Credibility Marketing*, says that more than 55% of all news is generated by public relations (PR). The CAs, loaded with in-depth knowledge, can claim lion's share of this PR activity to populate ever-growing space for economics in today's media - print, electronic, wires as well as Internet.

The current scenario offers an excellent opportunity for CAs to take a highly rewarding but rigorous media route to exclusive success in professional lives. There are thousands of newspapers, magazines and news websites in India that are always looking out for authentic resource persons, particularly in economics and related fields.

Yes! It has benefited many CAs

The long-drawn process of transforming into a spokesperson in the media happens in small increments, but the basis of it is making esoteric knowledge accessible.

Because the technical financial information of a CA's work is generally alien to much of the rest of the

world, translating it into everyday language is a particularly valuable service. Once a CA's name is associated with solid, useful information in print, or on the Internet, television or radio - it validates his or her authority and becomes a credential. Reporters are likely to ask the CA for background or a quote when more input is needed to clarify a point or give a future story heft or colour.

A number of professionals who have slowly but surely built a relationship with media through their print and web write-ups, eloquent and analytical quotes, etc. have been a clear gainer - both in terms of business and prestige. New client prospects often see them quoted when they do an Internet search of their name and a media presence gives them peer recognition and generates referrals.

Your peers look upon you as the expert in the field and tend to leave that speciality to your firm. Such CAs



(The author is Assistant Secretary in ICAI. He can be reached at nadeemahmed9@rediffmail.com)

mostly retain those clients who realize that the professional is on the cutting edge of the expertise.

However, the fact that needs to be underscored is that sharing with the media doesn't come with any specific guarantees. Sometimes you may not be quoted at all or quoted only very briefly. But even that thoroughly edited, brief quote is full of professional benefits. The clients' confidence is generally bound to be more in media-linked CAs and thus they get more referrals. And these referrals are more likely to become clients than those from all other sources combined.

HOW TO GO ABOUT IT

To become a key local spokesperson in your field is no cakewalk. It's an arduous task, full of patience and persistence. *You must identify your target audience, have something to say, establish relationships with media people who report to your target audience, reinforce the connection with reasonably frequent press releases and follow-up phone calls besides being available for interviews, comments, etc., on short notice, even in odd hours as newsmen often have very short deadlines in which to produce stories.*

Identify your target audience: The first step is to exactly know the audience to target. They can be individuals earning more than a stipulated amount of money or the top-level manufacturers, etc. After that, aim at becoming an information source to their sources of information, such as a broker or insurance people. Or else, you can narrow down to your geographical area of operation and work with local media. But in this case you have to look for specific technical content related to what you do to determine whether you can be helpful to a publication or other media.

Have something to say: Most of what you can share springs naturally from the knowledge already basic to your practice. The key is to familiarise yourself with the concerns of your audience and address

them. For an unsolicited story, write about local trends and how they are either in line with or different from national trends. Be very clear about why the information is important. It's OK to learn more about a subject to extend your range if you think specialized information will increase your chances. The CA who wants to be a 'go-to source' should focus on being conversant in the area of expertise in which he wants to become an authority. Get to know the topic as though you deal with it every day, even if you don't yet do so.

It's helpful to have on hand an information package about you and your business in an attractive folder that should include problem-solving articles that quote you or are about or by you, a bio data and other information about you. If you include a photo, make sure it's in colour and has more stylish look than a standard business headshot.



Get to know the scribes: Home in on publications on programmes that focus on important aspects of your business and address the audience you would like to reach. Within that group, identify competent reporters whose beats cover topics that concern you and you are qualified to speak about.

Read their published articles carefully to get a feel for their style and to judge whether their reporting is balanced and trustworthy. Make sure their audience is the one you want and that you are comfortable with their integrity and professionalism.

Once you have chosen the reporters, get to know them and call them when you have any idea to share. Be cordial and avoid being too self-promoting. Respect their public obligation to present facts fairly. Develop a relationship of trust, so you will be the first person they think of to call when they need information. It's appropriate to take them out for lunch every so often.

Media possibilities cover a large spectrum, from your own website to free local shopper publications. List of local publications are easily available anywhere. Get to build press credentials by starting small:

Send out some useful tips, ‘How-Tos’ and alerts to local reporters as well as to clients. Their coverage of your material may lead to invitations to write for local organizations or to contribute to local media.

Online presence: Many professionals have found online discussion communities a particularly successful point of media entry. Reporters, who are known to be news-hounds, often monitor such discussions and join in to ask directly. Don’t submit anything online that you don’t want in print. Sometimes reporters will pull ‘chat bites’ without checking first, which is their right.

The professionals can conveniently have online presence, thanks to a range of news and other sites hungry for expert opinions almost on a daily basis. Almost all the major publications have their websites, which are mostly run independently without any space restraint, and target NRIs and others to increase their readership base. You can contact these sites and start to write expert columns on various facets of economy to begin with. Most of those who start contributing for websites, start getting invitations to write for print editions also.

A unique advantage from having an online presence is the ability to have hyperlinks to both your firm’s website and your biography information in the tagline to every message you send. Include your name and contact information everywhere.

Participation in ICAI activities: A more effective participation in professional organizations, CPE seminars and programmes, etc., can also enable a CA to establish instant rapport with local reporters. Many



Acquire Training

You can get media relations training from many public relations firms. Good training will include interview simulations and videotaping to help you capitalize on your interpersonal strengths. Entering ‘media relations training’ in an Internet search yields several research leads. Your best bet though is often just to talk to journalists themselves and ask them what they want.

Other sources of useful information

Credibility Marketing, by Larry Chambers, Dearborn Trade Publishing, Chicago.

Public Relations Kit for Dummies, IDG Books Worldwide Inc.

The Public Relations Society of America (www.prsa.org). It is the world’s largest professional organization for public relations practitioners with more than 120 chapters.

Public Relations Society of India

List and addresses of publications in Indian Newspaper Society publications.

professionals, who did indulge in expert-speak with a difference at such programmes, have got media attention and have become ongoing sources for a range of articles.

Many a professional have earned media attention through their articles in *The Chartered Accountant* journal too, which is circulated among all the who’s who of Indian economic world and is constantly monitored by the reporters concerned.

Starting with a few good media contact leads to other. Reporters are often prompted to contact a professional who has already authored expert articles before or has been widely quoted on different occasions.

Reinforce the connection through press releases

Timely, simple, short and to-the-point press

releases, written authoritatively, can click in a big way when it comes to relations with media. However, you have to be sensible about how often to send releases to busy news editors. Unless something exceptional is happening, more than once every six weeks is probably overdoing it.

Think carefully on what material should your press releases cover? You can write about:

- How to do something efficiently. Offer a roundup of tips. Explain financial procedures.
- Case studies, which are especially interesting to readers. If clients' names are cited get their written permission first.
- Interpretations of important new regulations.
- Forecasts of future trends and events.

Don't step outside your area of expertise while writing the release. **There is nothing worse than saying something that's off the wall. Reporters get hammered by editors if they print something incorrect, and any professional involved in such a situation can end up on media blacklist.**

In fact, there may be two types of press releases – one as a general press release for general newspapers and the other as a technical release preferably accompanied by the technical document in question for financial newspapers. The press releases should be drafted in newsworthy, interesting and short-clipped sentences with a catchy headline. Avoid too much of technical jargon. Your first draft might be OK, but your second and third drafts will surely be much better. Also, ask peers to proof-read your work.

The same event can be covered in three press releases on different times – once when it is about to happen, then when it actually takes place and thereafter analyzing its aftermath. Care must be taken that one press release covers only one theme or story.

Follow up with phone calls

Let reporters know you are available to clarify professional issues that are in the news – or just schmooze if their time (and your yours) permits. Contact them if you know that an issue or event is about to become hot.



Be available on short notice

To establish yourself as a viable media contact, you need to be more than an expert – you need to be available when reporters call, sometimes even at odd hours or inconvenient times like yearend or tax times. Respond quickly to their requests for information. If you are not responsive, efforts to establish yourself as a media contact will be wasted. **Remember, if you are not available others will be.**

Try to return the reporters' call right away to set up a timely appointment to discuss their story. Ask them about the story's focus, so that you can ascertain how detailed to be and prepare some thoughts in advance.

Tips for an interview:

If you are called on to round out a reporter's story by delivering background information on a topic or giving a comprehensive interview, do the necessary homework beforehand.

KNOW THE PRINT

Write frequently. Do try that your readers move from mere awareness of your name through acceptance of your expertise to anticipating your message. Start by finding a local periodical – such as a municipal regional newspaper or newsletter – that will publish your information often. A regular column is ideal. Other possibilities are to contribute to online publications. Make sure that your contact information appears prominently.

A good story

- Has a catchy headline; it should be provocative to grab the reader's attention.
- Has a human-interest angle. Focus on how you can help the reader.
- Includes facts and figures and source them properly. Do your homework; it adds tremendous credibility. Make sure you include the five **Ws** when they are necessary: **Who, What, Where, When and Why.**
- Remember the principle: When in doubt, leave it out... or else... find it out.

CAREER

- Before the interview, ask the reporter to tell you more about the questions he or she will ask. You want to be able to address the areas the reporter is interested in and support specific points he or she may want to make.
 - Find out who else will be interviewed. This gives an idea of how deep the coverage will be. You may be called on to augment – or disagree with – information from another source.
 - Know your key message points and write down a list of possible questions. Then answer them and practice what you are going to say so that you are comfortable when it's time to speak 'on the record.'
 - During the interview try to maintain a consistent position on issues. If you change your mind, make sure you say so and explain why your opinion shifted. Respond to questions with short answers and get to the gist, provide detail only when asked to.
 - People remember the last words spoken more than the first ones, so end the interview on a positive note. Some subjects may be quote serious, but being constructive is always appropriate.
 - Simplifying complicated ideas helps to educate the reporter's audience. Use a simple vocabulary – think in terms of using language to convey concepts to a client – even with highly complex subjects.
 - Be honest when you don't know or need to research an answer. It gives reporters confidence in you about what you know.
- If you have built a rapport with the reporters you want to work with, you will be treated more like a partner than an adversary.
- Finally, in exchange for your time and effort as reliable source to media, you increase your visibility, enhance your image and that of the profession and acquire high potential business lead, which is always and forever be the key to new business. ■

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