



30 Tips to Court the Press

How do you generate press coverage at a trade show? Six writers and editors offer the inside scoop via this dos and don'ts guide. *By Linda Armstrong*

Media reps are like bullhorns. Get just one to broadcast your message, and you can score millions of impressions — and crazy return on investment. But compared to typical attendees, journalists are a whole different animal. Most have neither a product need nor purchasing agenda. Rather, they cover shows with a broader perspective, trying to locate the products, services, and news items that best fit their audiences. Yet many exhibitors treat this unique species like just any other wildebeest among the herd.

Exhibitors often employ buyer-centric tactics, ask journalists standard qualifying questions, and then disengage when the proverbial “hot lead” alarm bells fail to sound. Then they bypass post-show follow-up — and are utterly perplexed by their lack of press coverage.

Other exhibitors are so hungry for publicity that they’re laser focused on their own needs and blind to journalists’ requirements. They hound writers with “breaking news” and “revolutionary products,” yet few if any queries are targeted to a publication’s audience or editorial scope.

So what’s a publicity-loving exhibitor to do? How do you effectively reach these wily — and sometimes elusive — journalists? You talk directly with press reps, ask about their needs, listen to their responses, and fine-tune your approach.

To give you a head start on this Q&A process, EXHIBITOR asked six writers and editors who regularly cover trade shows what they love and hate about interactions with exhibitors. Organized into five categories, their input provides a dos and don'ts guide to effective press strategies.

ILLUSTRATIONS: ROBERT NEUBECKER

Overall Communication

The single thread running through sources' suggestions is that you take time to learn about each publication and, if possible, develop an authentic relationship with media personnel — instead of blasting out generic, off-target messages to the masses.

✔ Do: Research each publication you pitch.

Paul Heney, editorial director with WTWH Media LLC and president of Trade, Association and Business Publications International (TABPI), says understanding each publication's scope and readership is paramount to not only scoring coverage but also getting your calls returned and emails opened. Heney, who writes about the manufacturing industry, proposes that at minimum you browse through several issues or online posts from targeted outlets and then focus your



pitch to address a specific topic or column. "If you don't take the time to find out what my publication covers and whether your pitch is appropriate," Heney says, "why should I make time to respond to repeated emails from you?"

✔ Do: Focus on quality rather than quantity.

If you have a broad announcement that is of interest to a wide range of outlets, it might be appropriate to send a wide-angle blast to everyone in hopes a handful of editors will cover your news. However, if you're hoping for more meaningful coverage, such as a feature or new-product mention in a top outlet, it's better to go after a few key

publications with highly targeted and well-researched pitches. According to Amy Fischbach, field editor at T&D World magazine and president of the American Society of Business Publication Editors Foundation, it's better to hit the pitch out of the park every time instead of fouling out with generic messages sent to everyone on your press list.



✔ Do: Use trade shows to start relationships.

Along these same lines, Katy Tomasulo, a freelance editor for various business-to-business construction publications, suggests you use shows to launch and foster relationships. "Trade shows are great places to start new relationships with editors," she says. "A relevant meeting with good follow-up can kick off a great working relationship that pays solid dividends." Doing so can help you better understand each publication's needs and increase the chances of your emails and voicemails being opened and heard. That's because communication from a name editors

recognize is more likely to stand out than spam from an anonymous sender.

✘ Don't: Presume that relationships always translate into coverage.

On the other hand, Tomasulo cautions against assuming relationships equal special treatment. "Personal relationships don't determine who gets coverage; that decision rests

solely on the newsworthiness of the content," she says. Assuming otherwise suggests that the writer or editor is less than ethical.

✘ Don't: Push too hard.

Nobody likes a pushy salesperson — or PR rep. "If you're pushy or demanding, you'll torpedo any chance of coverage," says Kristi Fender, editor of Dvm360 Magazine. Rather, offer information and gauge the response or lack thereof; then, reassess whether your pitch is on target before you approach the writer again. Even then, identify ways that the content can be beneficial to both of you, as opposed to only pushing your agenda 100 percent of the time.

Pre-Show Communication

When it comes to pre-show promotion, sources prefer targeted “newsy” messages and embargoed releases delivered via email — as opposed to phone calls or social-media posts and tweets.



✓ Do: Skip the calls.

“Prior to a show, writers and editors receive a barrage of phone calls,” Tomasulo says. “In fact, many of us simply stop answering our phones.” What’s even worse, sources advise, is when they pick up the phone and the caller reads a scripted message. This demonstrates that the exhibiting company knows very little about the publication and is instead “cold-blasting” information to anybody with a pulse. A cold blast usually gets you a cold shoulder. Instead, send a targeted email with related press releases attached. “I can save all show-related emails in a single folder and then easily sort through my options to determine what warrants my attention at the show,” Tomasulo says.

✓ Do: Reference any existing relationships.

If you’ve established a relationship with a writer, reference it in pre-show emails. “If I receive a personal email — as opposed to a mass-blast

message from an ‘info@’ address or a random PR firm — I’m far more inclined to open it,” Fender says. “And to jog my memory, always reference our existing relationship by mentioning when we last corresponded or even what coverage you may have received in the past.”

✓ Do: Send embargoed press releases.

“To increase your chances of receiving coverage, send



advance or embargoed press releases prior to the show regarding new products you’ll be unveiling,” Heney says. With an

embargoed release, the writer can’t publish a word related to the contents until after the date and time expressed in the release. “If I get info before a show, I can prewrite content before I leave for the event. After I view the product on site, I can tweak my text and publish it quickly.”

✗ Don’t: Contact writers via social media.

While industries with heavy social-media involvement may be an exception, most writers prefer email over social-media contact. “If we already have a relationship, I don’t mind the stray tweet from a PR rep,” Heney says. “But for formal communication, stick to email.” In addition to accommodating writers’ preferences, this approach also ensures that if recipients choose to write about you, they have the relevant information in their inboxes and don’t need to mine their Twitter feeds in search of it.

✗ Don’t: Bury your “new” information.

“I’m on the lookout for what’s new and of interest

to my readers,” says Anna Zeck, managing editor at 10Missions Media, which publishes trade publications for the collision and mechanical-repair industries. “So ensure your email subject lines and opening paragraphs of messages and press releases focus on what’s new — and why my readers would be interested in the info.” You have to grab attention with the subject line first and opening paragraph second. If you bury “new” information in the body copy, writers will hit “delete” before their eyeballs ever get there.

✗ Don’t: Carbon copy everyone on your list.

“Please, for the love of God, never send an email with every press outlet in the universe listed in the cc: section. This says: ‘We don’t care enough to send you an individual message, and you are indeed just another journalist,’” Heney says. “If you have to send a mass message with a broad industry announcement, either use bcc [blind carbon copy] or mail merge.”

Press Releases and Press-Room Presence

Don't poo-poo a press-room presence, and always offer digital content paired with a one-sheet explanation. When it comes to your press release, include contact info, bypass the "marketing speak," and complement text with high-res visuals.

✔ Do: Plan to have a press-room presence.

Writers spend considerable time in on-site press rooms while attending shows, so they're ideal locations for exhibitors to reach the media via promotional materials, press releases, and the like. Fender, a self-proclaimed introvert, concurs: "I prefer not to encounter my competitors any more than necessary, and networking makes my skin crawl," she says. "But I almost always pop in to the press room when I'm covering an event to scan the materials for potential story leads."

✔ Do: Consider a one-page flier and digital content on a flash drive.

In terms of your press-room presence, Heney prefers a simple flier paired with digital content. "I normally have no use for printed materials, and my computer certainly doesn't have a CD slot anymore," he says. "So instead of a traditional press kit, I love a flash drive paired with a 'one sheet' or notecard listing what's on the flash drive."

✔ Do: Include high-quality photography.

"Product news without a high-res image is pretty

much worthless to me," Tomasulo says. "My publication almost never runs product info without an image, and if I don't have to track down your artwork, your chances of receiving timely and thorough coverage increase." Sources also recommend including video whenever possible, especially when courting bloggers or media outlets with robust websites or active social-media profiles.

✘ Don't: Waste money on glossy press kits.

"I practically never take home press kits, as it's burdensome to keep them organized and haul them around," Zeck says. "I much prefer digital content."

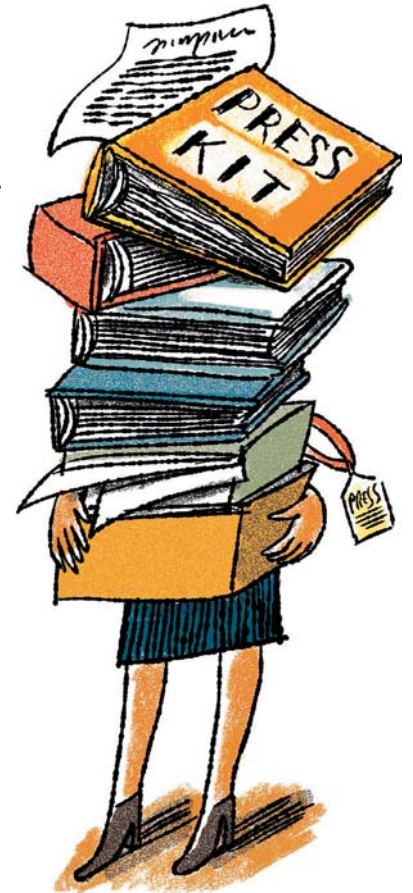
Writers indicate that digital content also allows them to save the data on their computers and organize it as necessary, a feat that's impossible for even the most impressive press kit.

✘ Don't: Forget to include contact info.

Even more important than high-res visuals in an electronic press kit is a contact person's name, number, and email. "Always include a press contact in every document so we don't have to go searching through other releases or your website," Tomasulo says. If writers don't have a contact, they may not seek one out, and if they do, they could end up speaking to an employee who's far less media savvy than your PR liaison.

✘ Don't: Use overly exaggerated verbiage.

"Don't use promotional language such as 'leading,' 'exciting,' etc.," Fischbach says. "Most of the time, these words and phrases are overkill, and they really



irk editors and writers." Exaggerated or vague words or phrases such as 'innovative,' 'premium,' 'world class,' 'top,' 'groundbreaking,' and on and on, are often immediately weeded out and replaced. So rather than letting writers choose your product descriptors, maintain more control of the word choice by filling your content with concrete, accurate words that are more objective and likely to appear in print.



Press Briefings and Evening Events

Consider both your needs and those of media reps as you plan press briefings and off-site events. Keep them focused, short, and nearby — and skip the ubiquitous press breakfast.

✓ Do: Analyze other possible options.

Before you schedule a press briefing, carefully consider whether an event is the right medium to relay your news. Would one-on-one meetings with key journalists be more appropriate? Is an event even necessary? “My idea of a



press-briefing nightmare is when I've set aside time to attend an event and then it offers me the same exact info I just read in a press release,” Zeck says. “Make

sure the event has a clear purpose that can't be met by any other means.”

✓ Do: Focus on content.

Along these same lines, the event should focus tightly on the news being presented. “Food and drinks are fine, as is a nice environment,” Zeck says. “But if you don't offer quality content, it may not be worth the time spent.” Fender also suggests you skip the networking time. “I prefer to get down to business sooner rather than later,” she says. “If we want to chitchat and network with our peers or competitors, we can do that in the press room.”

✓ Do: Give writers plenty of notice.

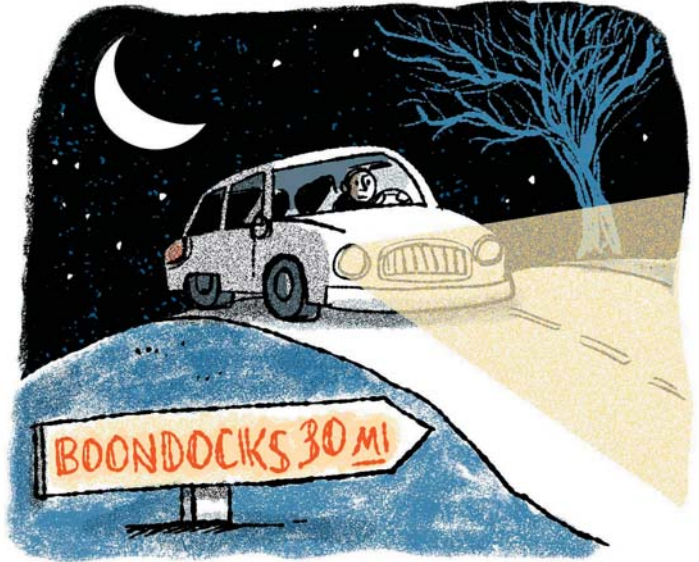
Journalists need time to map out an effective plan of action for a show, and time is always in short supply. So sources insist they need at least two weeks' notice prior to the show to work your event into their schedules.

✗ Don't: Disrespect your attendees' time.

More often than not, a media rep's day is precisely scheduled from dawn to

dusk. “Please respect my time,” Zeck says. “Don't start your event late or veer off topic, and don't let an executive ramble about company projections that

exhibitors think that journalists are thrilled to get their hands on free food. We're not. Nobody wants to get up two hours early to hear your news. And since



have nothing to do with the news story.” “And keep it under an hour, tops,” Fender says. “I'm going to physically or mentally bail after 60 minutes anyway.”

✗ Don't: Hold late-night or lengthy events in the boondocks.

Be conscious of journalists' time — or lack thereof — with regard to off-site events. “Editors often have to go back to their hotel rooms at night and write up stories from the day,” Tomasulo says. “No matter how cool the venue or activity, being stuck at an off-site event until the wee hours is going to cause me stress, since it means I'll be up until 1 or 2 a.m. writing and editing.”

✗ Don't: Host early press breakfasts. Ever.

“Forget the press breakfast,” Heney says. “Many

we're usually traveling on our companies' dimes, our breakfasts are free anyway. Most of us would much rather eat a healthy meal at a restaurant than your 1,000-calorie Danish.”

✗ Don't: Set meetings with multiple writers.

When publications send multiple writers to a show, they've likely devised a divide-and-conquer plan to maximize efficiency. If you ask them all for private meetings, be transparent when one accepts. “It's maddening to discover — after I've made time in my schedule — that a source is also meeting with all my co-workers,” says freelance writer Alan Landry. “Unless you're targeting each rep with a pitch unique to his or her beat, don't monopolize the entire staff's time.”

Staff Behavior/Meetings

This is face-to-face marketing after all, so make time and prepare for press faces, too. Have the right staff on hand and ensure that each person is equipped to at least meet and greet media reps. But above all else, apply the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

✔ Do: Have the right representatives on hand.

Most of the time, media reps are covering a show to discover new products. "When I'm visiting a booth, I want to talk to the person who can thoroughly and eloquently explain the products and why they might be beneficial to my readers," Tomasulo says. "Sometimes the person that best fills this role is a PR rep or exhibit manager. Other times a product manager or developer is better, especially if the product is highly technical. Just be sure someone is available who's capable and willing to talk to members of the press."

✔ Do: Train your team.

Train exhibit staffers about the value that press reps can provide your program and how to interact with them. "Despite telling staffers I'm not going to buy the product, at times they still try to qualify me," Zeck says. "Some can't switch gears to explain how the product might make a difference to my readers." Heney runs across similar problems. "I can't tell you how many times I have walked up to a booth, introduced myself, and asked what new products the company was offering, and the staffer replies with, 'Nothing much,'"



Heney says. "Where do exhibit managers get these people? Even if you truly have nothing new, staffers should be able to offer a positive spin about something that's noteworthy. But 'nothing' will get you 'zippo' press coverage."

✔ Do: Schedule times to meet with the media.

While some writers employ a less structured approach to trade shows, many prefer to set meetings with exhibitors to ensure they obtain critical info. "Prescheduled meetings make up about 75 percent of my exhibit-floor time," Tomasulo says. "Granted, every meeting doesn't turn into a mention, but you'll have the editor's undivided attention for an average of 20 minutes."

✘ Don't: Send writers away empty-handed.

"Always have your digital press kit on hand in the

exhibit or even a business card with a URL that takes me to an online press room," Tomasulo says. Sources also recommend you offer a product-benefit and -specifications handout (with press contacts). This is a godsend for journalists who happen upon a demo and want to know more.

✘ Don't: Lose control of your meeting.

Scheduled meetings often go off the rails if executives or product managers are included. While execs like to talk at the 30,000-foot level, product specialists often dive too deep into technical explanations. Sources recommend that a PR rep or marketing manager act as the journalist's ally. "A good PR person shouldn't be afraid to gently redirect the exec or specialist back to what matters to the editor," Tomasulo says. Failing to do so wastes everyone's time and sours the experience.

✘ Don't: Treat writers and editors like they're second-class citizens.

It's not unusual for staff to see a press badge and look the other way, which could cost your company coverage that might reach more people than your exhibit ever would. "Journalists don't expect VIP treatment," Fender says. "We just want to be considered as important as other attendees. Show us this courtesy, and we'll consider your products as important as everything else on the show floor." **E**