



Marketing

by John Hogan, Ph.D., CHA, CHE, MHS

Five tips for hoteliers in order to effectively interact with the media

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle®. the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

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The late Skip Boyer of Best Western International was a wonderful speech writer, author and story teller, who used those skills to share a straightforward and entertaining story explaining the differences between the various forms of marketing. In the course of less than ten minutes, Skip would deliver a concise and clear presentation on “publicity”, “public relations”, “advertising”, “promotion”, and “salesmanship”.

A major objective of hotel owners, managers and sales professionals is to profitably provide hospitality services to as many guests as possible. Recognizing the differences in the various components of the sales and marketing efforts will undoubtedly make that service provider more focused on net results, guest satisfaction and profitability, rather than on headlines. As a veteran hotel manager, former corporate director, and hospitality consultant who is involved with service as an expert witness, I can assure readers that advance planning, preparedness and the responsiveness of hoteliers can play a significant role in litigation.

Unfortunately, hotels are inviting venues for potential crime, lawsuits, and media stings. Recently, the American Hotel & Lodging Association has warned hoteliers about the increase in investigative journalism stories by national and local media outlets targeting hotels, in an attempt to increase audience share during Sweepsweeks periods (see inset box). Remember that both national and local television networks generate their income from advertising revenues; higher audience share = being able to command higher advertising rates.

As a result, there are many times in this global economy when your hotel or hospitality business might become the news, rather than be featured in it and that realization is the reason behind this column. The following five major points are offered as a primer for positive contact and professional relations with the media.

1. Understand the media

Hoteliers have been led to believe that much of the media is like the “paparazzi”, searching for sensational stories and photographs. In reality, most of the media are hard-working, focused professionals completing their assignments on regular everyday stories. The stronger the relationships, the more likely that coverage of any and all stories will be fair and reasonable.

Proactive steps for hoteliers to take include:

Important Media Reminders from AH&LA

Before and during Sweepsweeks, Hotels Are a Target

“Inside Edition” aired a segment May 4 in which they visit at least three hotels in the Dallas/Fort Worth area who have registered sex offenders in their employment with access to guests’ room keys and personal information. Some of these employees were given responsibilities ranging from driving the shuttle vans (requiring access to the cell phone numbers of guests) to working unsupervised on the night shift at the front desk. Although the reporters tracked down these employees via public records in Texas, they remarked that registered sex offenders are working in hotels throughout the country.

Additionally, several media outlets, including those located in Los Angeles and Tennessee, are airing investigative reports on hotels housing registered sex offenders. They are able to locate these guests through various online portals, including the National Alert Registry (www.nationalalertregistry.com). In many cases, people (including sex offenders) are being paroled and given vouchers to check into hotel properties – usually extended stay properties. Many times they are placed in residential housing relatively quickly, due to costs.

Review Security Procedures to Avoid Being an Undercover Exposé Target

In the wake of the Erin Andrews stalking incident last year, several hotels have reported incidents of guests attempting to check in without a reservation or proper identification and later being recognized as local reporters. Be aware that just prior to and during Sweepsweeks, media outlets may be conducting sensational undercover pieces as in years past. Hotel managers should take a moment to review security procedures with their staff, including checking all guests’ identification, and paying close attention to any unattended luggage or bags, and consult the many resources of the Educational Institute, a subsidiary of AH&LA (www.ahlei.org), that offers training programs/resources for hoteliers, including the Spotlight on Security video.

- Building a professional working relationship with as many reporters, editors, news analysts, etc. in as many media outlets as possible
- Getting to know the reporters in your market
- Learning their special or particular interests
- Identifying potential media opportunities radio news and programming, newspapers, online services, and magazines. There is also some potential for local television or cable coverage of some stories.
- Planning potential positive coverage by matching hotel events, activities, and personalities with the known interests and/or local story leanings of the media.



2. Satisfying media needs

The range and kind of potential media opportunities depend on the size of the community, the types of competition the media faces, and the interests of the overall area. These can include:

- Business stories of general or unique perspectives
- Travel writing
- Cooking features, especially if your hotel has an unusual or signature menu item or a well known chef
- General or seasonal features that can range from the first born baby of the year to graduation success stories to ghosts in hotel tales around Halloween
- Topical and current events

When trying to promote a story placement, be certain to prepare colorful, image filled, yet concise press releases for the media. Plan photo opportunities and have a planned verbal message ready.

3. Building relationships

Relationships with the media need to be ongoing and two-way in structure:

- If you see or read a particularly good story on any topic, acknowledge it with a complimentary note to the station/reporter or at least a phone call.
- Support media events and attend the appropriate ones. Donate prizes, offer broadcast locations, or ask to host charitable events at your hotel.
- Offer industry expertise. The hotel and hospitality industries are frequently barometers of other business indicators. Offer to comment on industry trends for news reports.

4. Dealing with a crisis plan

People literally are born, live and die in hotels. There can be many crises, such as fire, accidental death, food poisoning, criminal activity, drowning, physical assaults and more. The first rule is to always have a crisis plan for dealing with “bad news” or negative publicity:

- Have an in-depth crisis communications plan that includes dealing with the media, the community, and your hospitality staff.
- Regardless of the size of your hotel or hospitality business, be certain there is someone in charge and professionally skilled in handling hard news interviews. Identify a spokesperson and at least one (preferably two) back-ups NOW. Do not wait for the crisis to occur.
- Deal with the crisis head-on. Hiding will not help the situation or anyone’s perspective of your hotel or brand. Respond to reporters’ questions as soon as possible or they may begin to suspect something that is probably not true.
- Do not lie! If you even think of telling a lie in a crisis situation, think of any politician or celebrity you dislike that has lied to the media and was caught. Reporters will figure it out and then the news event will take on a completely different life of its own.
- Practice implementing your hotel’s crisis plan by going through a mock crisis once a year. Do not forget the news media element during the practice.

About William “Skip” Boyer and Best Western

William H. “Skip” Boyer, KCCH, spent 25 years of his career with Best Western, overseeing the writing and production of major business meetings, video presentations, an in-house convention television station and senior speechwriter for the president/CEO and members of the Board of Directors. He earned more than 70 regional and national awards for his writing and editorial work, and was the author of *Simply the Best*, a full-length history of Best Western, which was honored with six national writing awards. A strong supporter of Freemasonry, he spoke at a number of Leadership Conferences before being diagnosed with cancer, and eventually succumbed to the disease in May, 2006. His “Chronicles of Furthermore,” can be found at www.furthermoreraven.org, and will bring a smile to all, especially those who knew Skip and his dry wit.

5. Do's & Don'ts of responding to the media

As always, there are appropriate and inappropriate responses when interacting with the media. Appropriate responses will help ensure that your message is delivered and received in the best possible light while inappropriate responses will do far more harm than good.

Do's

- Keep a positive tone.
- Listen carefully to the questions being asked. Make sure you know what question you are answering.
- Set time limits boundaries on an interview. Approximately 15 minutes is ideal.
- Choose a video location that is appropriate to the circumstances.
- Do have your own audio recording of the interview and advise reporters of this company policy.
- Express concern, compassion, and sensitivity.
- Show a willingness to get the facts and respond in a timely fashion.
- Speak in sound bites. Get to the point. Capture the essence of what you want to say in the first one or two sentences of your response, and add details later if need be.
- Keep it simple. Most journalists are looking for clear, simple quotes that will be understood by a wide audience.
- Repeat the message you want to give repeatedly. Remember that while “They control the questions, you control the answers.”
- When responding to questions you can't answer, use responses such as:
 - “ I'm not sure, I'll look into it.”
 - “I can't discuss that at this time.”
 - “I'm looking into that matter, but I can't share that information at this time.”
 - “Our first concern is the safety of our guests and employees.”

Don'ts

- Never say anything that implies guilt, omission, fault, or negligence.
- If you do not know the answer, do not make it up.
- Forget about trying to “correct” the situation.
- Do not speak “off the record.” Remember - there is no such thing. Crises cause confusion. Do not add to it. Tell a reporter only what you want to see on the front page of the local paper or the lead story on the 6 pm news.

As an African proverb reminds us, “Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors”. Hence, leaders are defined by how they react under pressure and trying situations. The best leaders are those that are forward thinking and prepare their staffs to respond appropriately in unpredictable situations. This will require an investment in time, training, and relationship-building before the unpredictable happens. ✧

(With over 35 years experience, Dr. John Hogan, CHA, CHE, MHS, is a successful hospitality executive, educator, author and consultant and is a frequent keynote speaker and seminar leader at many hospitality industry events. His consulting expertise and research interests include sales management and training, turn-around and revenue management, customer service, and expert witness services for litigation matters. He is co-author of Lessons from the Field – A Common Sense Approach to Effective Hotel Sales. Autographed copies are available from The Rooms Chronicle website at www.roomschronicle.com. Websites: www.hoganhospitality.com; www.hospitalityeducators.com. E-mail: info@hoganhospitality.com).