

MEDIA RELATIONS REPORT

The Insider's Guide to Media Placement
For Agency & Corporate Public Relations Professionals

Media Alerts

Anne Kreamer, contributing editor, joins **Fast Company**. For further information, contact the publication at 617.973.0300.

Joseph Kahn, formerly International Economics correspondent of **The New York Times**, is now the Shanghai bureau chief. For further information, contact the publication's foreign desk at 212.556.7415.

The **ON24** Web site announces layoffs of its entire news staff and discontinues its production of original financial news. For further information, contact the site at 415.369.8000.

Ning Chao, assistant to the managing editor, left **Glamour**. **Amanda Meigher**, assistant to the managing editor, and **Allison Mezzafonte**, beauty assistant, join. For further information, contact the publication at 212.286.7038.

Ewa Beaujon, research editor, and **Patricia Curtis**, associate health editor, left **Redbook**. For further information, contact the publication at 212.649.3450.

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Media relations, post-9/11

With war and wrongdoing dominating the news, PR pros push 'human' stories and learn to be flexible

In the weeks after Sept. 11, the business of media relations essentially ground to a halt. Unless your company or your client had some direct connection to the terrorist attacks or the war, there was no pitching to be done.

The industry was filled with dire predictions about the ability of any media relations pro to land any story with any member of the overworked news media—ever again. Fluffy, light-hearted stories would cease to grace newsprint or the airwaves; celebrity gossip was beneath contempt; and ironic cultural commentary was declared dead by the editor of *Vanity Fair*.

One year later, it's worth considering which of those predictions actually came true, if any. Has the practice of media relations changed in any meaningful way? Will PR people have to forever adjust the way they pitch news? The experts we polled say the impact may be more subtle than previously thought.

"The 9/11 effect in general is kind of over," says **Jon Greer**, founder of **MediaBridge**, a media training firm in Emeryville, Calif. "But 9/11 plus the recession plus corporate wrongdoing is taking up the media's attention, and changing [reporters'] points of view."

It's the cumulative effect of all of these major news stories, Greer believes, that has made journalists less patient with any sort of PR games-playing, or corporate missteps. "They won't even give you the benefit of a

doubt," he says.

Jerry Brown, senior at lobbying PR firm **Corporate Advocates** in Denver, also thinks the dominance of serious news has overshadowed many other stories, and probably will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. "If you include the corporate scandals, the news calendar is crowded," says Brown. "There are no slow news days right now."

So the amount of ink and airtime devoted to major news topics appears to have expanded and will stay that way, say the experts. Yet the predictions about the news becoming nothing but "all terrorism, all the time," haven't held up.

"Jason Priestley's car-race crash made the front page of the *New York Daily News* and the *New York Post* during the same week where there was news about Osama bin Laden possibly being alive in Pakistan," says **Ann Higgins**, managing director at **KCSA Public Relations** in New York.

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And **Ted Gartner**, managing supervisor at **Fleishman-Hillard** in Kansas City, noted in mid-August that “it’s only a month until the Sept. 11 anniversary, but we’re consumed by the 25th anniversary of Elvis’ death.”

Higgins says her friends in the media are telling her that they’re actually *trying* to cover more hard news stories beyond terrorism and the war, but that they’re getting shot down by editors who want to balance depressing war and economic news with lighter stories. “Once you get past the breaking news, there’s more time devoted to softer stories than ever before,” she explains. “The journalists are frustrated by the fact that they’re gliding over a lot of [other] hard news.”

The scant attention paid to hard news unrelated to terrorism or the economy isn’t a clear advantage or disadvantage to PR people. It depends on what you’re trying to pitch. “If you’re trying to pitch an in-depth story, you’re going to have a hard time,” Higgins says.

But **Lynn Medcalf**, vice president at **News Generation**, a PR firm specializing in radio placements, says the

media’s increased willingness to consider positive stories can be an opportunity. “The media is definitely more open to softer, human stories,” says Medcalf.

Nancy Tamosaitis, managing partner at **Mansfield Communications** in New York City, has also noticed this trend toward “uplifting news,” and she has used it to a client’s advantage.

“What we discovered was that by March, the press was very willing, even excited to hear about business success stories,” Tamosaitis says. “They need stories that aren’t doom-and-gloom, or about laying off people.”

Mansfield client Lavalife, a provider of technology-based dating services for singles, was able to land significant coverage in New York City with the angle of finding companionship as the city recovered from the devastating events of 9/11.

John Armato, senior vice president and partner at **Fleishman-Hillard** in Kansas City, says his team had a similar experience with client Hallmark Cards. The introduction of an inspirational line of cards based on the writing of Maya Angelou was sched-

uled for January; after initially hesitating about doing a big media outreach effort around the launch, the team went ahead. “That campaign produced some of the best results we’ve ever gotten for Hallmark,” Armato says.

When it comes to any kind of launch event, Gartner says PR people have *had* to learn to be more flexible.

“We need to be more nimble in scheduling and rescheduling the days of events,” Gartner explains. Don’t pin everything on an expensive one-day event that can’t be pushed back if breaking news gets in the way.

And if there was ever a time to reschedule your big media outreach efforts, now’s the month. Fleishman-Hillard’s Armato believes that a probable permanent effect of 9/11, at least for the next several years, is the media’s unwavering focus on the anniversary. (See our sidebar on this issue.)

“Companies need to communicate matters of long-term reputation, and not short-term publicity,” Armato says. “Anyone who tries to seize the anniversary as a media opportunity should take a long hard look at themselves. It’s better to go quiet.”

Hold off on pitches until end of September

In one of his weekly e-mails last month, CNN *Newsnight* host **Aaron Brown** said of his colleagues, “Half the organization is on vacation and the other half is working on 9-11 pieces.”

Since mid-August, just about every media outlet in the country has been covering plans for the anniversary of the horrific events of last year. **John Armato**, senior vice president and partner at **Fleishman-Hillard** in Kansas City, realized a few months ago that this might pose a problem when a client asked for advice about a product launch scheduled for Sept. 9.

Armato decided to canvass several media contacts and PR experts to find out how PR pitches that aren’t related to the anniversary will be perceived by the media. The results of Armato’s

research were originally published on Fleishman-Hillard’s intranet. KVO Public Relations in Portland, Ore., also added some research gleaned from its Pacific Northwest media contacts.

The experts all agreed. “From a media relations perspective, organizations should treat—at a minimum—the week before, the week of, and the week after the anniversary as a three-week ‘black-out’ period,” Armato reports.

The “experts panel,” which included Kansas City TV reporter **Krista Claus** and Fleishman-Hillard managing supervisor (and former CNN producer) **Ted Gartner**, told Armato that the first anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing effectively blocked coverage of any other news stories.

“Anniversary coverage of the

Oklahoma tragedy spanned nearly three weeks,” Armato reports. Gartner was at CNN at the time and told Armato that the news organization spent a full month in preparation for a solid three weeks of coverage.

Armato believes this upcoming anniversary will probably create a much larger window. “Given the magnitude of Sept. 11, we could see as much as four to five weeks of anniversary-related coverage,” Armato reports. “Even at a local level, we can expect to see approximately three weeks of a news hole dominated by anniversary coverage.”

“If you don’t announce before Sept. 1, I would wait until the end of September,” said an assignment editor at KOIN-TV in Portland.