

## Reduce pesky media follow-up calls by using reply cards

If there's one thing that drives journalists batty about PR people, it's the follow-up calls. They understand why PR people have to follow through on pitches, and they're hip to your need to report back on a campaign's success to your client or company. But the nonstop parade of follow-ups is the reason why so many reporters and editors have barricaded themselves behind voice mail systems.

Fleishman-Hillard's Kansas City office has been brainstorming some methods for reducing the dreaded phone calls, while at the same time soliciting feedback for their clients. "The ideas grew from our frustrations in trying to make large numbers of phone calls, particularly if we sent out large media mailings," explains managing supervisor **John Armato**. A press-kit mailing of 400 demanded "a tremendous amount of people hours" in terms of phoning, and the media people on the receiving end weren't nuts about getting the calls either.

That's why F-H has begun making heavy use of business-reply cards, and variations thereof. After reading about the cards in a PR textbook during his days as director of communications for a Kansas City college, Armato tested them out on a few pitches.

"I found that I was getting a 3-4 percent response rate even at the college," Armato recalls, and says the cards have proved to be promising tools at Fleishman-Hillard. "We have not eliminated phone calls," he explains. "But we have used the business-reply cards to qualify leads." He compares their use to a salesman's search for qualified sales leads—in other words, come up with a limited list of people interested in your product, and you increase the chances of a successful "sale." Here are the three types of reply missives they're using:

### **Standard business-reply card:**

This postage-paid card would go out in

large mailings—perhaps as a postcard in a press kit, or as a tear-off card that's part of a promotional piece. Recipients might be asked, "Are you interested in receiving more items like this?" and "Would you like us to call you with more information?"

To improve response, make the card pop out of the package. "We avoided using just a simple 3x5-inch card, because those look like cards asking you to subscribe to a magazine," Armato says. "So you try to bring your creative skills into it. Maybe it's an oversized card with artwork that relates to the client. You want it simple in terms of function, but creative in terms of design."

Armato says F-H tallies higher response rates when the cards *aren't* sent in a first mailing. For instance, a press kit might go out first, followed by an updated press release and the reply card. "You have to get them accustomed to your message first," he says.

**Fax-back form:** This works best for pitches to a smaller, more targeted audience. "On a media alert or pitch letter, leave a few inches at the bottom asking the person to fax the letter back if they have any questions," Armato says. The form at the bottom of the letter could contain the same questions found on a business-reply card. To boost response, explain the benefit to the journalist.

"Make it explicit," he says. "Say, 'We know you'd like to reduce the number of phone calls you receive, and a stroke of the pen now will save you time later.'"

**Personal letters:** Make it easy for your best media sources to respond without a phone call. For instance, Armato was recently trying to reach a New York magazine editor about a pitch, but couldn't get her by phone. He mailed a letter, saying he appreciated her frantic schedule, and asking her to scribble a note with the thumbs-up or thumbs-down and fax it back to him. "I told her,

that way I'd be getting out of your hair," he says. "The personal letter becomes an impromptu fax-back letter." ♦

### **The plus side**

Besides the development of qualified leads, business-reply cards offer other benefits:

**Less phone time:** "They simply reduce the phone work you have to do," Armato says. His staffers still take time to personally call the top dozen or so important pitching targets—but the rest of their calls are limited to journalists who've expressed an interest in the pitch.

**More current media databases:** If a journalist tells you via a reply card that he's passed on the pitch to a more appropriate newsroom contact, you've got a new name for your database.

**Fast data:** "They allow you to monitor the success of a campaign more quickly," Armato says, rather than wait for the clips to come in. "For instance, we recently shipped out a limited number of a product, and we immediately got a 30 percent reply with the cards." Armato was then able to give the client some early feedback on the pitch.

**Media likes and dislikes:** "They allow you to build an intelligence file on the media," Armato explains. "You have a listing of their predilections and preferences." If you save a year's worth of responses from a Wall Street Journal reporter, for example, you're getting a clear picture of the pitches that work and the pitches that bomb.

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