

MEDIA GUERRILLA

Media References, Are They Really Needed?

There are only two things in this world that annoy me and one is a prospective client asking for my media references. I know some folks will disagree with me on this, but I just can't help but think that media references are an antiquated and quite frankly, ineffective way of measuring a firm's ability to work intelligently with the media.

First and foremost, most news organizations have policies in place now that restrict (read: protect) journalists from engaging in this practice – and rightfully so. A journalist's job is to objectively report the news. Period. It's not to serve as a barometer for a PR firm. Now that's not to say that some journalists don't bend the rules and extend a professional courtesy from time-to-time, but this should be treated as the exception, not the norm.

But media references help companies establish where strong media relationships preexist...so the argument goes. Really? If good PR is about building strong media relationships, then more agencies ought to think harder about protecting the integrity of those relationships and instituting reference restrictions like their editorial counterparts have done rather than pimping their address books out every time a prospect comes knocking.

Like so many others in the profession, I've worked hard to build good working relationships with the media. Sometimes I've succeeded and sometimes I've failed. But where I've succeeded it's because I established a level of trust—and being a trusted source is what it's all about. Hopefully you can begin to understand now why I'm not crazy about forfeiting this trust by opening up my media contacts to who knows what every time some big shot marketing VP wants to check media references off his to-do list right before tee time.

Ultimately, having a good media relationship means your emails get read and your phone calls returned, and in some cases it may even get you an interview, but relationships never get you ink – which is why I tend to think actual coverage is a far better measure of a firm's track record and experience than any media relationship that can be brought to bear.

Update: Some folks have emailed me asking "what's the other thing that annoys you?" It's carnies. Circus folk. Nomads, you know. Smell like cabbage. Small hands.

Update II: Gini Dietrich, president of a young Chicago-based firm, Arment Dietrich, shares a similar opinion toward media references. She writes, "I just read your article about media references and I couldn't agree with you more! As a relatively new firm (two years old), we are asked all the time to provide media references. We protect our relationships as if they're gold and never share information. I claim it as proprietary and, instead, show clips of placements we generated on behalf of a client."

"The other thing that irks me is when a client thinks they are entitled to our media list, complete with contact names, email addresses, and phone numbers. In no way, shape, or form would I EVER share that information."