

Getting Through to Editors, Writers and Analysts

On September 3, 1998, the Silicon Valley Association of Software Entrepreneurs hosted a panel discussion, moderated by Tom Geller, with Sandy Reed, Dan Gillmor, and Tom Abate.

Sandy Reed

Sandy Reed, Editor in Chief of InfoWorld had the following opening comments. There are ten ways for getting media coverage on a product:

- Know your audience. What information are they looking for?
- Get our name right. Misspelled names immediately tell us that we're just a name in a book; that no one has ever bothered to check.
- Look at our web site and get to know us. Look at the topics that are covered. See who were the reporters who wrote articles on your competitors. It is better to find and contact writers directly, than try to work down from the top.
- Don't assume that people at a publication, talk to each other. News, reviewers and columnist all work in different departments.
- Please send us email, but don't phone us.
- Use trade shows and conferences as an opportunity to get coverage. We want to know what is going to happen. Most coverage will be provided the week before the conference or the week of the conference.
- Be explicit about the understanding and policy of embargoes at a publication, before you release your information to them.
- We are very wary about companies who say they have no competition because they are in a new category. When you are a startup, you need to sell yourself, the company, and your pedigree.
- In a big publication, never tell the editor that you're considering buying ads in the publication. You'll make them think you're trying to bribe them.
- If a staff member is unresponsive, try escalating to the editor, or even the editor in staff.

Dan Gillmor

Dan Gillmor, Technology Columnist, San Jose Mercury News commented:

- Read the publication and know the types of things they do.
- Don't leave phone messages saying, "I'm sending a fax, I sent a fax, what did you think of the fax?"
- Keep your mailing list up to date.
- I prefer email. Make the subject line of the email relevant. Don't send email with 150 lines of addresses. Make the first 10 to 15 lines of the email informative, otherwise I won't continue reading past the first screen. I get a foot of snail mail, faxes, and emails (if I printed them all out). I have to be efficient with my time.

- If you send snail mail, write on the outside of the letter, what is inside. Otherwise, it may not get opened.
- Please spell my name right.
- We rarely do a NDA (non-disclosure agreement). We tend not to do embargos. Remember, as a daily newspaper, we print what is news today.
- At one level, I'm amazed the energy and creativity behind all the stuff going on, and I can't get enough of it. But when I'm on deadline, at the end of the day, I get short tempered and I simply don't have enough time. Don't take it personally if I don't get back to you.

Tom Abate

Tom Abate, Technology Columnist, San Francisco Chronicle noted:

- Newspapers are story tellers. We want to tell what is happening, who is getting killed, who is winning, and who is losing. We like David and Goliath stories, and things that are moving the market. Stories about personalities that communicate excitement are good. But for products, it either has to be incredibly weird or useful, in order to make it into a newspaper with general readership.
- Study the publication to see what they have recently written about. We get new PR firms pestering us to give coverage on something we just wrote about.
- Use email.
- If you get us on the phone, don't regurgitate the press release. In general, the phone should only be used in order to make a deadline.
- Much of coverage is going to be unfair, due to luck. Remember, luck favors the prepared mind. It helps to build familiarity with us.
- For a newspaper, if a product cost more than \$200 or \$300, we're not very likely to cover it, since it won't have appeal to most of our readership.
- Don't assume that our reporters talk to each other. Tell me if you have been talking with other reporters at the paper, or at least approach us serially. The last thing a reporter wants to do is to work on a story for several hours, only to find that another reporter is working on the same story.

Questions

The floor was opened to general questions to all three speakers and the moderator.

Smaller magazines are more desperate for information and stories, but companies are less interested in meeting with them, because they have smaller circulation's.

The web and email have changed how we get information. We used to get more polished presentations.

Businesswire does get monitored at the larger publications. But in smaller publications, you are often likely to have no one monitoring it. Paying \$65 is wonderful in that it is a very inexpensive way to get all of the high technology trades, just don't count on your press release getting read.

The more esoteric a company, the less likely it is to get coverage.

We like trend type stories, particularly if we, as a regional paper, can run it before the WSJ, Time or another national publication runs it.

If you can put human interest on the story, that is usually highly effective. For example, our product provides sight to the blind, usually works.

When you write your email, remember that cute and catchy rarely works. What we thrive on is bad news, when we can catch you on the way down. We want to be the first to publish that your president is getting indicted. Of course, if you can tell us that your competitor is the one getting indicted Be direct and honest.

When we are on deadline, it really helps for a company to get back to us immediately. Even when it is bad news, at least you can put your spin on it. Microsoft gets back to us in 60 to 90 minutes. Apple on the other hand can take days to call back, if they ever do call back.

The larger the publication, the less likely it is to accept white papers. The closest thing you'll find will be guest columns.

Unfortunately with modern journalism, the desire to be first, often wins over being right. We hate getting beaten on a story.

As a journalist, an ethical publication has a church-state separation between editorial and advertising. At least this is true for larger US publications. For smaller US publications that accept white papers, and in many foreign publications, it is very common to see an ad next to the editorial page discussing that company or product.

Do you need a PR firm? If you can do it yourself and have the necessary contacts, you should do it yourself. But if you don't have the time to do all the leg work, and there is a lot, get a PR agency. Often someone will have to make a hundred calls to get all the contacts you want for a launch. PR firms tend to be better at follow through than a product manager. If they promise something, they will deliver it.

What do you do if you're a company not currently in a hot space, i.e. you have a product that people don't want to cover? You have to be a guerilla marketer. You will have to be creative and think out of the box. You'll need patience, and will have to try to put a new twist on an old story. Remember, magazines have to do this on their annual stories about modems, and other commodity products.

There are times when you are better to do your initial release through a regional paper, and let the wire services pick it up. The national papers will sometime feel forced to provide it with more coverage, than if they were provided with an exclusive to begin with.