

## June 2009 Corporate Communiqué

A conversation about business, policy and communication

### ***Feeding the Beast***

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In a media world with thinning staffs and a smaller business news hole, the H1N1 flu outbreak has delivered a valuable reminder: It's much tougher for businesses to get their messages across when a major news event occurs and dominates the media for weeks. To stand any chance of scoring coverage, corporate communicators must be more thoughtful than usual in determining how and when to communicate their stories.

These realities emerged at a recent Edelman Chicago session with several representatives of local and national media who visited to talk about what they do. They represented local newspapers and TV and radio news shows; national newspapers and magazines; a TV talk show; bloggers and media freelancers. What they related about covering the H1N1 flu outbreak proved illuminating.

Their loud-and-clear message: A major news development like the flu outbreak increasingly will devour the media's attention, and don't expect them to spend much, if any, time second-guessing their coverage decisions.

"Thinking back, did we go overboard in our initial coverage? That's a question to ponder at the end of the year. Unfortunately, now everything is about feeding the beast," said Andy Gavrilos, producer of WGN-TV's 5:30 p.m. news show.

That's what it's about today anywhere where coverage decisions are made. At the Edelman session, nearly every media representative, including TV news freelancer Wendy Wollenberg, emphasized how the frenzy to "feed the beast" takes prominence over nearly everything else. Even Hal Weizman, the *Financial Times'* Chicago correspondent who covers the financial markets and business hasn't been immune. At the time, he was seeking corporate stories with a flu angle. How, for example, is Deere & Co. affected by the pandemic?

So what do these journalists advise corporate communicators do to improve their chances of gaining coverage for their newsworthy events. Several offered these tips:

- As soon as possible, give reporters and producers an early alert of an event and a clear and honest explanation of why it's especially newsworthy. "Don't overhype or you'll never get our attention again," said one TV news producer.
- Consider more seriously than ever giving a news organization an exclusive and providing it with more resources than traditionally are granted to cover the development, including third-party experts and visual aids.
- If it's a broadcast outlet, determine how you can help the producer and correspondent put context around the story to underscore its significance and lessen the chances the story will be pulled at the last minute.

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- Use social media more intensely to preview the event and raise interest in it. This includes Twittering, interesting bloggers in promoting it and even launching a Facebook page.

The bottom line: If you're planning a ribbon cutting for a new facility, forget attracting much, if any, coverage. If you've got a development where the newsworthiness is clearer, spend more time developing a coverage strategy. And put yourself in the shoes of the news editor or reporter who must give the thumbs up or down on your news release or story pitch.

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