

Accessibility is Key to Accuracy

Addressing media requests is imperative to reinstating a positive brand image.

By Patrick S. Duffy

I was very saddened recently to hear about the death of a reporter I had befriended at the Los Angeles Times by the name of Annette Haddad. Annette had taken over the housing beat shortly before I became one of her sources, and over the course of several years we built a friendship based on mutual expertise: she taught me how to effectively work with reporters and improve my chances for getting some ink, and I schooled her on the economic, political and social workings of the building industry. But it was what we had in common which was what drew us together: a genuine interest in the housing industry and a desire to ensure that the story which got published – even after several editing iterations – was both accurate and fair.

Annette didn't just write about housing – she lived and breathed it, visiting model complexes and open houses on weekends in order to interview potential home buyers, even sometimes calling me and others on a Sunday afternoon for input. Today's reporters, often working under considerable time constraints, simply don't have the time to provide the sort of detail that's required for a balanced story on the steadily unfolding story of housing sales, prices, foreclosures and financing. Moreover, either out of habit or necessity, many reporters continue to call on the same sources ad infinitum looking for a controversial quote with little regard to whether it's either responsible or even correct. Other media outlets, working with a skeleton crew, figure it's better to re-print a wire story from AP or Reuters or publish

the latest press release verbatim from a well-known data provider rather than nothing at all.

Many readers, viewing traditional journalism as an unnecessary luxury – and forgetting that it's crucial to a properly functioning democracy – refuse to pay for online content, believing that any blogger with an opinion and the ability to type will somehow provide an adequate substitute. Add to this toxic mix an industry which often shoots itself in the foot by ignoring requests to defend itself, and it's little wonder that when the average person opines on the housing market, it's typically a regurgitation of something heard on talk radio or cable television – hardly bastions

of objective discourse.

Since this is not something which will get any better in a world of bloggers with an axe to grind, how can the

housing industry address this issue? Firstly, when a reporter calls for a quote for a story about your company, don't just ignore it. To most readers, when they read, "Company x did not return calls for comment," that just makes the firm look flaky, and even a canned response is better than nothing. Secondly, develop long-term relationships with reporters or influential bloggers with the intent of pitching them story ideas.

Thirdly, be bold about arguing your case against pundits who only care about seeing their own controversial – and often irresponsible – opinions in print. If the reporter refuses to write a balanced story, take your case up with their editor, and, if need be, write a letter to the editor and get your story told on the many housing-related

blogs that abound on the Internet.

Fourthly, make sure there's a responsive person on your staff who will be the responsible point person for all media requests, and be able to introduce in-house experts to address the particular topic. Forcing a reporter to call multiple offices and corporate communications departments not only wastes valuable time, but reveals something potentially unpleasant about a company's culture: unresponsive, incompetent or uncaring. And that's hardly the sort of brand image any of us want to convey to a nervous populace already shell-shocked by an economic meltdown.



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Fast Facts

- Changes in media mean fewer balanced stories on housing.
- Readers increasingly confuse many blogs with professional journalism.
- Always defend your company brand by being responsive to reporters.
- Appoint a single point person responsible for outreach and interview requests.