

Best Practices for Creating a Reporter- Friendly Website

WHITE PAPER



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INTRODUCTION

Earned media remains the holy grail for established and aspiring companies interested in keeping their brands forefront in the hearts and minds of stakeholders. Yet reporters' jobs have become increasingly challenging. Publications across the country continue to downsize newsrooms and staff photographer pools, leaving contract writers on their own to find, create and deliver timely, accurate, compelling stories on deadline. Corporate websites play an ever-growing role in the success (or failure) of engaging reporters who cover industry and business news.

This white paper examines market research and published works to better understand reporters' needs and to outline how your website can support (or block) their efforts to cover your organization.

HOW TODAY'S JOURNALISTS WORK

Not so long ago, reporters were primarily concerned about writing stories. Their newsrooms monitored potential stories, conducted research, sourced images and edited the articles. Reporters focused on the analysis, accuracy and deadlines for their stories – which ran in daily or weekly publications.

These days, though, reporters operate in a 24/7 digital news cycle. Looming deadlines are ever-present. Following massive waves of layoffs, consolidated beats, reduced staff and centralized production, many reporters are now independent contractors.

In a *The Washington Post* editorial², Steve Cavendish points out that 65% of all newspaper jobs have been eliminated since 1990, resulting in stories that go uncovered. "Years of erosion have damaged the paper's ability to cover the community," he says.

Now paid by the story, reporters must scramble to find and write stories before someone else submits a similar article to the same publication. They are also expected to submit quality photos, images and/or video to support the story.

Additionally, though trust in media may have taken a hit in recent years, journalists remain one of the most trustworthy sources of accurate news – easily surpassing corporate promotional materials from marketers and advertisers.² Which means that reporters must still

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meet the high ethical standards of the industry.

What's left is today's group of hard-working, deadline-driven reporters who are scrambling to do it all – investigate, construct and submit timely, accurate, compelling stories and images based on publicly available data and trusted sources.

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Against this backdrop, reporters are still churning out news. The Cision 2019 State of the Media Report⁸, which surveyed nearly 2,000 journalists and other media professionals from 10 countries, found that 35% of journalists publish seven or more articles a week. A recent Boscobel Marketing Communications survey⁵ of 2019 AUSA defense industry reporters showed that most reporters planned to write one or two articles each day of the trade show, based on up to five interviews.

It's no wonder, then, that journalists look to company websites to support their efforts.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Why is a reporter-friendly website important? Many public relations and marketing professionals mistakenly believe it's enough to send reporters your press releases and media pitches, or have them interview their executives. However, reporters routinely rely on company websites for news stories or to prepare for interviews.

A 2017 survey of print, online and broadcast media by TheNewsMarket⁶ found that 65% of reporters visit online content hubs daily – usually as they are looking for stories and/or have received an email alert on a topic that interests them. Boscobel's AUSA reporter study⁵ backed up this finding, with 70% of reporters saying they check company websites when preparing for interviews.

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That should be good news for companies who want to get their executives, thought leadership, and products or services in the news. However, too many reporters are disappointed, irritated or frustrated by their experience with poorly designed websites that overlook the media as a key audience.

Washington Technology editor-in-chief Nick Wakeman explains¹⁰, "I spend a lot of time looking at company websites each day. Generally, I'm looking for what I think is very basic information, and it's frustrating how often it is hard to find."

He's not alone. A 2016 study conducted by digital communications platform ISEBOX⁴ found that only 6% of journalists polled found that digital newsrooms met their expectations. Marc de Leuw, CEO ISEBOX, commented, "We see too many cases where Media Centers prioritise brand image over journalists' needs. So, while most digital newsrooms look great – far too many lack functionality and content to do a good job."

What's the worst thing that can happen if reporters do not like your website? The short answer is, they won't use it. They'll look for other sources, potentially competitor companies, to get the industry insight they're looking for. As public relations expert and author William

Comcowich³ puts it, "If corporate communications professionals don't post what reporters or bloggers seek, and in a place where they can easily find it, they'll turn to other, less reliable places for information."

"While most digital newsrooms look great – far too many lack functionality and content to do a good job."

*Marc de Leuw,
CEO, ISEBOX*

SIX MISTAKES TO AVOID

In the ISEBOX study⁴, more than 65% of journalists said most Public Relations online resources are insufficient. When it comes to barriers to coverage, the list of website problems is long.

Here are just six common mistakes to avoid:

1. FORMS

Many sites require visitors to register before downloading helpful content or connecting with the media contact. Journalists on tight deadlines will skip that obstacle and move to the next company.

Wakeman¹⁰ identified forms as a major pet peeve, explaining, "I want a name, email address and phone number; I'm not going to fill out a form."

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*Nick Wakeman
Editor-in-Chief,
Washington Technology*

2. SLOW PAGE LOADS

Many corporate sites boast state-of-the-art online technology: animation, video downloads and music. In the right place, at the right time and for the right audience, that's fine. Particularly among tech companies, it pays to look cutting-edge.

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However, those cyber-bells 'n' whistles can surely cause cyber-frustration. Journalists have one overriding desire: to get relevant information, fast. Anything that gets in the way will prompt them to abandon the site.

3. POOR ORGANIZATION

Time-pressed reporters want one place to get the information and content they are looking for. It's frustrating and time-consuming to search for information and assets that are spread across multiple pages.

In TheNewsMarket⁶ survey, when reporters were asked what frustrates them most, "can't find useful content" was their top answer (57%). In a *PR Daily* article by Russell Working¹², Brad Nevin, editor-in-chief for Nissan's global communications website platforms, explains "Newsrooms are successful when they're simple [and] clean and there isn't a lot of circus music going on in the background..."

4. GENERIC EMAIL ADDRESSES

Public relations is personal. Relationships between reporters, PR professionals, executives and other industry thought leaders are all person-to-person relationships. So, journalists want to reach a person – not a function – inside your company.

A generic email (press@mycompany.com) is impersonal and off-putting. If you're concerned about publishing email addresses that can get scraped from your website, it's easy to use the name of your PR contact from your agency or team and simply link to the email address.

5. INACCESSIBLE CONTENT

Journalists don't want to spend a lot of time finding and collecting visuals to support their articles. In TheNewsMarket⁶ survey, 34% of reporters cited "can't download media assets in useable formats" as their third biggest frustration (after not finding useful content and confusion around rights for that content).

Files that are too big are still a problem. Sometimes, it's the wrong format – a PDF file when Word would work better. Or only low-resolution files for company executives or bios. Generic links are another no-no. If your blog, for example, has only one URL for all entries (because each blog is a "pop-up" on the same page), it's very difficult for reporters to link back to a specific blog as a reference in

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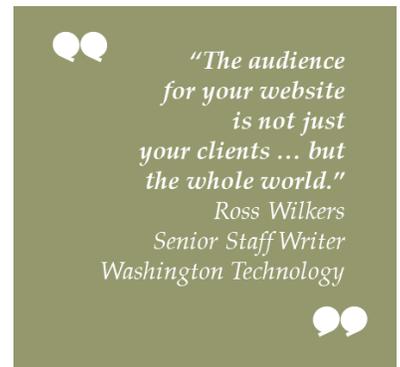
their articles.

6. MARKETING-SPEAK

Remember, reporters are a trusted source of content. Their industry was built on a tone and a practice of reporting facts, not opinions. Therefore, they tend to question or even distrust websites that are rich in self-congratulatory, self-promotional language and lack pure educational content.

CREATE A WEBSITE THAT WORKS

By now it's clear that journalists are a special audience. They're not potential clients, business partners, shareholders nor competitors. You want them to feel welcome, to help encourage them to cover your company. Ross Wilkers¹¹, Senior Staff Writer at *Washington Technology*, shares this reminder, "The audience for your website is not just your clients (yes, we can tell when it is set up that way) but the whole world." Keep reporter needs top of mind as you develop your website and keep the content fresh.

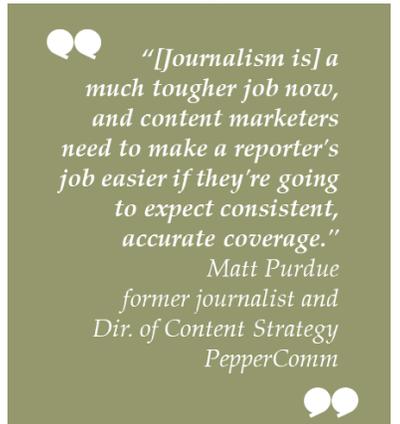


A *Ragan PR Daily* article by Tina McCorkindale quotes⁷ Matt Purdue, Director of Content Strategy at PepperComm and former journalist, "I've seen journalism change dramatically in recent years. It's a much tougher job now, and content marketers need to make a reporter's job easier if they're going to expect consistent, accurate coverage."

The goal of an effective online press room, then, is to anticipate and provide everything reporters need all in one easy-to-access digital hub. If you can put a check mark next to every item that follows, you stand a good chance of satisfying the needs of the journalists who visit your site.

EASY-TO-FIND WEBSITE

With Google search, it should be easy to find your website by searching on the company name. Be sure you're using search engine optimization (SEO) best practices to promote relevant content on your site, so reporters looking for experts can find your company. Commit to



keeping the content fresh, with a plan to add new content as often as possible (at least weekly or biweekly), to support positive SEO results and increase the visibility of your site and your experts.

Also, if your company name is similar to another in the same industry – or if you’re using one of the newer URL extensions (.biz, .io, .ngo, .pro ...) – be sure your online and printed marketing materials, and email signature lines, emphasize your name and URL, to minimize confusion.

EASY TO NAVIGATE

Think like a journalist. From the moment a reporter arrives at your site, make it clear and easy for them to find what they need. This goes for all devices. Journalists are on the go and they are as apt to access your website from a mobile device as they are from a laptop. Include a robust search tool, to help visitors find the page they’re looking for.

“Be sure the Press Room is accessible from your homepage, so it’s clear that you welcome their interest,” advises Joyce Bosc, president and CEO of Boscobel Marketing Communications¹. Put a link to your “Newsroom” or “Press” or “Media” section of the website in your top navigation, to ensure that reporters get there quickly and easily.

Drilling down to these next-level pages (and back) should also be as quick and simple as possible. We still try to use the “two-click” rule whenever possible to guide how deep you place your content. With the growing complexity of websites, three clicks are OK, but make sure the rewards are worth the extra step.

PRESS CONTACT INFORMATION

What is the first thing journalists look for on a site? Your press contact. Put the name, phone number and email address of your press contact on every page, every press release and every speech. If you are a large company with several regional or local staff, be sure to provide the contact information for each.

Reporters want the basics of your company: headquarters location, significant office locations, year founded, number of employees, (if public) annual revenues, names and bios of senior leaders. Include,

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Communications

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too, your core lines of business.

“Those are the basics,” Nick Wakeman¹⁰ reminds us. “Think about it as telling your company’s story. You want to have this kind of basic information presented in a clear, concise manner that is easy to find.”

If some of the information resides in the “About” section of your website, provide clear links from your press room to those elements.

CURRENT (AND PAST) PRESS RELEASES

Journalists thrive on good press releases. Job one is to ensure that press releases are well-written and include a clear statement of news and quotes from key executives and other stakeholders or partners.

Job two is to ensure that all press releases are easy to find and easy to download. And not just the current ones, but also the archived ones. Make them available in MS Word, PDF and HTML versions. And include a keyword-enabled on-site search engine capable of finding and delivering the exact release a reporter might want.

Hubspot’s Carly Stec⁹ calls out one best practice example that allows visitors to “scroll down the page to check out headlines accompanied by an image and a brief explanation of [each] announcement.”

NOTEWORTHY MEDIA MENTIONS

Whenever one of your spokespersons are quoted in the media, post that press hit to your website. Include the publication’s logo next to the article title and a short description.

In addition to reinforcing the credibility of your company and your executives, a quick scan of this media coverage tells reporters more about your company than just the press releases. (It can also be an incentive for the right reporter to write about you, knowing that you’ll take the time to share their story on your website).

SPOKESPERSON BIOS

Make it easy for reporters to find your experts to provide background information, a fresh perspective or a quote for their stories. Make your executive and spokesperson biographies, high-quality photos, areas of expertise and recent press hits readily available on your website.

“Bios should be short, with the most important credentials first, including previous media appearances in TV, print or online,” counsels Joyce Bosc¹. If the exec bios sit on your “About” page, create

clear links from your press room to these important press assets.

PHOTOS, GRAPHICS, VIDEO

Many media channels require reporters to submit visuals to support the story. Providing high-quality graphic content will profoundly ease a reporter's burden and can double the likelihood of having an article placed.

Photos of executives, product photos, company logos, charts, diagrams and/or video all help engage readers. In addition to formal shots, include candid photos, staff in the community, products in action and "b roll" video that reporters can use in their stories.

"If not video, then create unique and interesting graphics and photography to illustrate news announcements, product launches and manufacturing processes," urges Comcowich³.

Be sure your content is easy to download and in a usable format. Provide high-resolution image files in a variety of formats (.jpg, .png, .eps) to be most useful. For video, a link to your YouTube channel can be enough. Or, provide downloadable video files with a simple alert to visitors that the large files may take several minutes to download. Finally, provide a short credit line that reporters can use to acknowledge copyrighted or company materials.

THE PRESS KIT

While much of the information in a traditional press kit can be found in a well-organized online press room, many reporters still want a downloadable press kit. Include separate files for each element, including your About [Company], executive bios, company history or timeline, fact sheets or FAQs, product and service descriptions, case studies, company logos and photos. Be sure to offer a choice of MS Word, PDF and HTML versions.

TRENDS, COMMENTARY AND SUCCESS STORIES

Nothing helps a story come together better (and helps journalists more) than commentary and opinions above and beyond the press



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Joyce Bosc
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William Comcowich
Public relations expert
and author



release. Fuel reporters' story ideas by including industry trends, coverage of the relevant legislative environment, comments from your thought leaders, white papers, position statements and speeches.

A section devoted to your organization's success stories is also highly recommended. Some customers are reluctant to publish their names, but many will approve case studies with names omitted.

SOCIAL MEDIA, SOCIAL SHARING

Feeds from your corporate social media accounts on your website will give reporters instant insight into your company perspective. Use relevant hashtags and tagging to insert the company narrative into the industry conversation. Then, make social sharing an integral feature of your online newsroom, to make it easy for reporters to share the link directly with their audience.

WEBCASTS AND LIVE VIDEO EVENTS

Live executive presentations used to be reserved for earnings calls. Now companies are using webcasts and live social media events to present their financial information, launch new products and share important company news. Live video events pack a lot more punch than a text release when it's time to share important news. And they're far more engaging than conference calls.

Use your online press room as the hub for reporters to join your webcasts. Open an online chat room where journalists can submit questions to a company spokesperson. When you're done, your broadcasts and chat room Q & A sessions can be archived — and offered as yet another resource for journalists.

EMAIL ALERTS

Make journalists' lives easier by offering to email them when something important happens. Alerts can regularly keep your name in front of targeted reporters and can help ensure that reporters are looking your way when you have something to say.

Categorize the alerts to maximize relevance and minimize the risk of annoying reporters with news that has nothing to do with their beat. Some reporters will be more interested in company financial news (earnings calls, annual reports); others in product and service updates; and still others in staff appointments and executive speaking engagements.

FEEDBACK LOOP

Invite feedback from reporters about their experience with your site. In your press room, provide a visible and simple way for reporters to submit a comment on your press room or other feedback they might care to share.

CONCLUSION

For today's journalists, easy access to important and credible information and resources is essential to getting their jobs done. It's frustrating when the online press room fails to deliver such a rich resource. Insufficient, disorganized and poorly presented content leaves reporters disappointed. This means many companies will miss opportunities to build important relationships and obtain coveted media coverage.

On the flip side, there is strong agreement about what journalists want from a website. And, as HubSpot's Stec⁹ points out, "Having a clean, informative press page is invaluable because it aims to simplify the process of discovery [and make] it easy for outside sources to publicly recognize your ... brand." If you build and maintain your website with reporters in mind, it helps reporters help you to amplify your organization's voice through media coverage.

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ABOUT BOSCOBEL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS, INC.

As a government contractor, your reputation precedes you, whether that's through the press, advertising, content or social media. Since opening our doors in 1978, Boscobel has differentiated our clients with industry-first, innovative solutions that elevate profiles and establish brands.

Boscobel is a certified Woman-Owned Small Business providing full-service digital and traditional communications support for the government contracting and commercial markets. Our clients specialize in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, engineering, big data, enterprise IT, mobility, health care IT and more. Boscobel offers both modular and integrated programs, including M&A communications, content marketing, capture support, recruitment and social media.

Our team of passionate, senior professionals make your story resonate and bring innovation to government contractors and commercial companies that, likewise, bring innovation to their customers.

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