

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 at the forefront of stakeholders' hearts and minds. Yet reporters' jobs have become increasingly challenging. Publications nationwide continue to downsize newsrooms and staff photographer pools, leaving contract writers on their own to find, create and deliver timely, accurate and 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.

For this white paper, we spoke with journalists and examined 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. They focused on analysis, accuracy and deadlines for their stories, which ran in daily or weekly publications, while newsrooms monitored potential stories, conducted research, sourced images and edited the articles.

Now, however, reporters operate in a 24/7 digital news cycle with ever-present deadlines. What's more, many work outside traditional newsrooms. U.S. newsroom employment has fallen 26% since 2008, according to the Pew Research Center¹⁶. More than 6,100 news workers were laid off from at least 343 news outlets between March 2020 and August 2021, a study¹¹ by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism found.

The result is a growing contingent of reporters who have become independent contractors. As such, they are paid by the story and 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 took a hit in recent years – reaching a near-record low in 2021, according to Gallup³ – journalists remain one of the most trustworthy sources of accurate news, easily

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surpassing corporate promotional materials from marketers and advertisers.⁴ This means that reporters must still 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, and compelling stories and images based on publicly available data and trusted sources.

Against this backdrop, reporters are still churning out news. The Cision 2021 State of the Media Report⁴, which surveyed nearly 2,700 journalists and other media professionals from 15 countries, found that 47% of journalists publish seven or more articles a week. A Boscobel Marketing Communications survey⁸ of AUSA defense industry reporters showed that most 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.

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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 TheNewsMarket⁹ found that 95% of reporters visit company websites at least monthly, with 41% visiting daily. Boscobel's AUSA reporter study⁸ backed up this finding, with 70% of reporters saying they check company websites when preparing for interviews.

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

GCN Executive Editor Susan Miller checks company newsrooms every week, if not daily, for story inspiration, often from case studies.¹³ "I check to make sure the company has government clients – an industries served tab, for example. If there is a government client and

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case studies, I check the dates.”

A 2016 study conducted by digital communications platform ISEBOX⁶ discovered 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.”

“While most digital newsrooms look great – far too many lack functionality and content to do a good job.”
Marc de Leuw,
CEO, ISEBOX

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.

“The only thing I go to corporate newsrooms for is to find the point of contact,” said Jason Miller, executive editor of Federal News Network¹². “It should be either on all press releases or somewhere that says clear ‘media contacts.’ I want it easy, I want it right in front of me. I don’t want to have to work for it because, generally, if I have to work for it, I will find somebody else to talk to.”

SIX MISTAKES TO AVOID

In the ISEBOX study⁶, 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.

Washington Technology Editor-in-Chief Nick Wakeman¹⁷ identified forms as a major pet peeve, explaining, “I want a name, email address and

“I want a name, email address and phone number; I’m not going to fill out a form.”
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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 for tech companies, it pays to look cutting-edge.

However, those cyber bells and 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 need. It's frustrating and time-consuming to search for information and assets that are spread across multiple pages.

In TheNewsMarket⁹ survey, when reporters were asked what frustrates them most, "can't find useful content" was their top answer (57%).

4. GENERIC EMAIL ADDRESSES

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.

"I just want to find a PR phone number/email," Jason Miller said¹². "I prefer to find a person vs. a general box, but if I find a general email box, at least that gives me some hope [of reaching someone]."

The key to public relations is in its name: relations. And companies can't build a rapport with reporters without direct contact.

5. INACCESSIBLE CONTENT

Journalists don't want to spend a lot of time finding and collecting visuals to support their articles. In TheNewsMarket⁹ survey, 34% of reporters cited "can't download media assets in usable formats" as their third biggest frustration behind not finding useful content and confusion around rights for that content. Other problems include files that are too big, resolutions that are too low and incorrect formats – a PDF file when a Word document would work better, for instance. Generic links are another no-no. If your blog, for example,

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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 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.

"The audience for your website is not just your clients ... but the whole world."
Ross Wilkers
Senior Staff Writer
Washington Technology

CREATE A WEBSITE THAT WORKS

By now it's clear that journalists are a special audience. They're not potential clients, business partners, shareholders or competitors. You want them to feel welcome, to help encourage them to cover your company. Keep reporter needs top of mind as you develop your website and keep the content fresh.

A Ragan PR Daily article by Tina McCorkindale quotes¹⁰ 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 each of the following items, you stand a good chance of satisfying the needs of the journalists who visit your site.

EASY TO FIND

Reporters should be able to find your website with a simple search engine query.

Use 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. Plan to

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Matt Purdue
former journalist and
Dir. of Content Strategy
PepperComm

add new content 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 a newer URL extension, such as .biz, .io, .ngo or .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 regardless of the device they’re using. 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 Communications². Put a link to your website’s “Newsroom” or “Press” or “Media” section in your top navigation to ensure that reporters get there quickly and easily.



“Be sure the press room is accessible from your home page, so it’s clear that you welcome [reporter] interest.”

*Joyce Bosc
president and CEO
Boscobel Marketing
Communications*



Drilling down to these next-level pages (and back) should also be quick and simple. Use the “two-click” rule 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.

ACCESSIBLE 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, provide the contact information for each.

Other information that should be easy to find: headquarters location, significant office locations, year founded, number of employees, annual revenues (if public), names and bios of senior leaders, and your core lines of business.

“Those are the basics,” Wakeman¹⁷ says. “Think about it as telling

Use the “two-click” rule to guide how deep you place your content.

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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.

CHRONOLOGICALLY LISTED 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 download. And not just the current ones, but also the archived ones. Make them available in 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.

"It's really helpful when press releases/case studies have a date on them," Susan Miller said¹³. "I like to cover the freshest news, but I'm not averse to checking to see how a year-old project is coming along."

HubSpot's Carly Stec¹⁴ calls out a best practice 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 is quoted in the media, post that press hit on your website. Include the publication's logo next to the article headline 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.

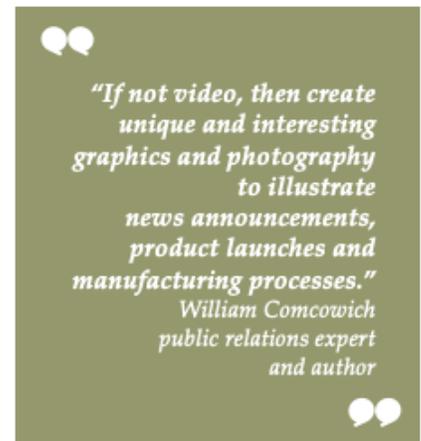
PHOTOS, GRAPHICS, VIDEO

Many media channels require reporters to submit visuals to support stories. Providing high-quality graphic content will profoundly ease a reporter’s burden, since they won’t need to spend additional time researching elsewhere for an image asset.

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 public relations expert and author William Comcowich⁵.

Be sure your content is easy to download and in a usable format. Provide high-resolution image files in a variety of formats, such as .jpg, .png and .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.



A 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,” executive bios, company history or timeline, fact sheets or FAQs, product and service descriptions, case studies, company logos, and photos. 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 release. Fuel reporters’ story ideas by including industry trends,

coverage of the relevant legislative environment, comments from your thought leaders, white papers, position statements, data 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 use webcasts and live social media events to present their financial information, launch new products and share important company updates. 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, archive your broadcasts and chat room Q&A sessions and offer them as yet another resource for journalists.

EMAIL ALERTS

Make journalists' lives easier by offering to email them when something important happens. Alerts keep your name in front of targeted reporters and 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, such as earnings calls and 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 or other feedback.

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 Stec¹⁴ 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 amplify your organization's voice through media coverage.

After all, "there's no better measure of success than someone telling you that you are in the news 'too much' for all the right reasons," Lee Gordon, Forbes Councils Member, wrote in "Creating A Newsroom Mentality In Corporate Communications."⁷

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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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