

The Art of Brand Story Telling

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Three Tips for Crafting Newsworthy Brand Narratives

The art of getting earned media coverage for a product, service, or business is not as easy as it sounds.

Though the degree of difficulty varies from **brand** to **brand**, the secret to securing editorial is *not* a press release. A news release is neither essential nor needed (though it can be helpful sometimes).

A press release is useful in aligning a client team on key messages, spokesperson quotes, and the language the PR pro should use when talking about the announcement with media. However, unless your company is publicly traded and the announcement is material, the release is *not* required.

More critical elements for a successful earned media campaign exist. Those include the right spokesperson, useful media assets including visuals, and, most importantly, an interesting narrative or story.

It's no secret [what makes news](#). Journalists consider timeliness, proximity, conflict, eminence and prominence, consequence, impact, and human interest to evaluate a potential story.

Yet sometimes these elements are difficult—or even non-existent—to find in **brand marketing**. The trick is to dig deep to find the story, use seasonal opportunities to your advantage, or, when necessary, create a story of your own.

1. Dig deep to find the story

If you dig deep enough, you often find your company has countless stories to tell. The challenge is to identify the "newsy" narrative, explain it without jargon, and package it to pique media interest.

One example of a company that did this well is **Vineland Research & Innovation Centre**, an independent, not-for-profit research center based in Niagara, Ontario.

The Centre was seeking earned media coverage to support its goal of becoming a recognized center of horticulture research and **innovation** excellence.

Initial interviews with the Centre's communications team revealed the Centre was up to some interesting things:

- Making plants more tolerant to drought
- Studying the power of sensory traits to affect consumer choice
- Examining why technologies developed for space exploration impact growing practices on Earth

We developed several "story starter" ideas for Vineland. Those short, 200-word narratives featured catchy headlines and interesting background information explaining how the research benefits Canadians.

To give you a flavor of these "story starters," here are the headlines:

- Drought tolerance: "Perking up the petunias: It's all in the genes!"
- Sensory traits: "Give 'em what they want: Filling the grocery shelves and garden centers of tomorrow"
- Space technologies: "Plants in space: how exploration is driving **innovation** here on earth"

Local TV, radio, newspapers, and trade magazines all conducted interviews and ran stories in response to our ideas.

2. Use seasonal opportunities to your advantage

No one-size-fits-all approach to securing earned media coverage exists. At times, it's a matter of linking a **brand** to a seasonal opportunity.

Consider Crayola. Several years ago, it launched two new products into the Canadian market. Instead of pitching media on the products, we distributed a "creativity kit" for spring break, a time of the year when parents, grandparents, and caregivers are searching for projects to entertain their kids.

After receiving the package, many media members commented they could easily build articles and stories around the content. Postmedia published a syndicated article through its network in Canada, TV stations ran March break contests, and interest spilled into other seasons including a Mother's Day contest in the Toronto Sun, and coverage for back-to-school in *Canadian Living* and *The Calgary Sun*.

3. Use your imagination to create a compelling story

The toughest situation is when a **brand** has nothing (or almost nothing) to help tell a story.

Hallmark Canada relied on earned media as its primary communications tool to build awareness at Valentine's Day. This occasion presented an unusual challenge for the **brand**: It's the one time of year when mostly men purchase greeting cards. It's also a time when moms and grandmothers buy cards for their school-age kids and grandchildren.

Apart from editors of gift guides, media have little interest in covering Valentine's Day cards and gifts. Though Mom and Grandma are likely to peruse these guides in the newspaper or a favorite magazine, men are not.

Our challenge was to create a communications program to reach multiple audiences and generate earned media to create **brand** awareness.

The solution was crafting our own story called "Pucker Up for Valentine's Day," a hockey-themed communications campaign that appealed to Canadian men and women of all ages. The program focused on the fact that Valentine's Day fell on a Saturday, the same night as Hockey Night in Canada.

Canadians, both men and women, faced a unique scheduling conflict: Did they plan a romantic night out without hockey, celebrate early on Feb. 13, or incorporate their love of hockey with romance on the 14th?

National research with 1,000 Canadians explored these questions. We discovered 40% of couples would choose to watch a hockey game rather than celebrate the day in a more traditional and romantic way.

We distributed the survey results to media (and yes, we used a news release), provided them with additional regional results, gave them access to our company spokesperson, and developed an interesting visual for TV and print coverage.

Feature articles about the "dating dilemma" appeared in sports sections of major dailies, as well as in Valentine's Day features and gift guides, reaching both men and women prior to Valentine's Day. Significant earned media coverage across Canada also had a dramatic impact on **brand** awareness, consumer preference, and **brand** insistence.

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In all those examples, we did not need a news release to secure earned media coverage. Instead, we focused on helping media tell an interesting story incorporating many of the criteria they use to decide what makes the editorial cut: timeliness or seasonality, conflict, consequence, and human interest.

Although media relations pros prefer to have breaking news to announce, **brands** don't typically have it. And even when they do, it's important to devote energy to developing the story, instead of focusing too much effort on the news release.

Whether you have lofty goals or modest ones for your **brand**, an interesting narrative is the only

thing that matters when seeking earned media.

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