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2010

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The Value of Research to PR: A view from having been on both sides

By Shoshana Deutschkron, PSB San Francisco

I can tell you from firsthand experience, as a PR practitioner over the past decade, that compelling data helps land dream targets. I've used it to get coverage in *The Wall Street Journal*, *NY Times* and *USA Today*, and to generate social media buzz. Plus, leveraging data turns up overall volume. The head of communications at online real estate search site Trulia.com told me that approximately 80% of their media coverage is data-driven. Surprised? You shouldn't be in today's information economy.

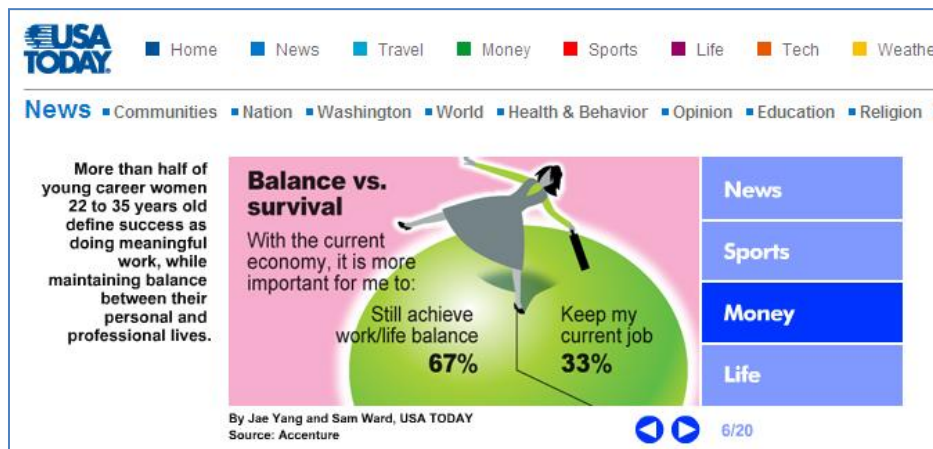
Probably no one would dispute that providing thought leadership in industry discussions is critical to a company's success. But anyone can spout visionary claims. How do you sound credible and rise above the clutter? Three words: Cold Hard Data. With it, you are going to stand out because a) you have something to offer that truly is currency and b) you become more credible. Reporters will use your survey results to back their story up with scientific evidence. They'll also be grateful for the jumpstart the numbers provide to their reporting process.

One of the major benefits of research I'm not sure people realize also is that it levels the playing field. Whether you're a big name or an up-and-comer, with data your voice carries weight. Yet, I suspect many PR people haven't commissioned surveys. Having been on both the PR and research side now, I wanted to offer some perspective. Here are my **10 Steps For PR To Use Research**:

1. **Set clear business objectives** – What you're trying to achieve for your business guides your research methodology and topic. It is the most fundamental thing to figure out before moving ahead. For example, your primary objective may be to raise awareness of your company in a specific new vertical market it is trying to sell to.
2. **Figure out your associated PR objectives** – Establish media coverage goals that tie back to your business objectives. In order to do this, you have to know who your audience is and understand what will interest them. In the example above, where you're trying to raise awareness in a new vertical, this step is fairly straightforward. Your goal is probably something like one major spread in the top vertical publication. If you don't know which audiences you're targeting or what will interest them, interview key stakeholders (media, analysts, etc.) to get a better sense.
3. **Craft your media strategy** -- Once you have your objectives set, think carefully about how you can approach them before creating your actual survey. You may want to involve media in unique ways to help meet your objectives. You can even invite a reporter to be part of the process from the start, allowing them input on the survey questions and providing early or exclusive access to the data. Figure out if you want to pursue this tactic before you start drafting your questionnaire, otherwise it could be a missed opportunity.
4. **Find a trusted research partner** – This is important for the credibility necessary to generate coverage (especially with the more elite media) and for your own counsel. I enjoyed reading a February special report from *The Economist*, "[Data, Data Everywhere](#)," which quoted one source as saying that statistician will become one of the "sexiest" jobs around because, while data is everywhere, "the ability to extract wisdom from it is scarce."
5. **Have fun telling a story** – Clearly, I like research. If I didn't, I wouldn't be sitting on this side of things today. But research really is fascinating. It reveals surprises and informs stories you would never arrive at otherwise. If you're feeling a bit overwhelmed or scared by the math involved, don't. Your research team's job is to guide you through the story the numbers are telling, provide you with the insights you need to actually pitch, and help develop materials as well.
6. **Make the story a good one** -- Part of understanding what will make a good story for your audience(s) is knowing what will cause a reaction, whether it be empathy, astonishment, frustration or any range of emotions. A perfect example is a recent [survey](#) *Parade Magazine* commissioned which showed a "compassion boom" in America. Also tie into hot media topics that

are likely to draw attention. For example, *PCWorld* cited research in an [article](#) as part of the widely covered current cloud computing industry discussions. That said, careful not to waste time and money asking questions that there are already known answers to. Say a company was looking to craft a sustainability story. They wouldn't need to determine if sustainability is still important despite a down economy, there is proof that it is from [PSB-JWT's "Survey on Sustainability in the 2009 Recession."](#)

7. **Maintain focus** -- Keep your survey (and your story) focused. After about 20 minutes you risk losing survey-takers. That's the equivalent of 50 questions of so, which is already a lot. Plus, you won't want to overwhelm media with too much data anyways.
8. **Make sure you have pretty pictures** – Beyond the typical release announcing results, make sure to visually represent your results. Everyone likes pretty pictures, right? Eye candy visuals help encourage more viral pick-up, especially in social media. When I was a PR person announcing survey results, I got more requests for charts than for interviews themselves so be prepared to fulfill the demands of content-hungry media. These requests are a great opportunity to get additional buzz around your survey. Think pie charts, bar graphs, heat maps or even video to bring in qualitative anecdotes. For example, here is a *USA Today* chart from a survey we did in January 2010 for Accenture about women in the workplace:



9. **Invite everyone** – I am assuming the PR objective(s) you set included creating a splash with lots of media coverage. If you're working with select media only, obviously cater your efforts to them. But if you're going broad, make sure to put press materials and data highlights (or full results if you're generous) online where everyone can have access to them once they're public. A good example of a survey site is AT&T's [Small Business Technology Poll site](#). It includes current survey highlights, results by region, press materials and previous survey results. This sort of site, combined with the visuals from step five, extends your online reach.
10. **Create a data legacy** – Trended data is even more powerful. And really surveys shouldn't be done in isolation. To get the best impact from research for PR efforts, an overall research strategy should be in place that provides a regular "pulse" by tracking key measures ongoing. The more frequent, the bigger advantage you'll have. Some companies are even able to provide real-time data, but for most a quarterly tracking survey will provide a good pipeline of results.

About Penn Schoen Berland

Penn Schoen Berland is a global research-based consultancy that specializes in messaging and communications strategy for blue-chip political, corporate and entertainment clients. PSB has over 30 years of experience leveraging unique insights about public opinion to provide clients with a competitive advantage. PSB executes polling and message testing services for Fortune 100 corporations and have helped elect more than 30 presidents and prime ministers around the world. Penn Schoen Berland is a part of Young & Rubicam Brands, a subsidiary of WPP, one of the world's leading communications services networks. More information is available at www.psbresearch.com.

About the Author



Shoshana Deutschkron is Vice President of Penn Schoen Berland, San Francisco, where she provides research-based communications and branding counsel for a variety of Fortune 500 corporations. An experienced public relations executive with particular expertise in the technology industry, Shoshana previously managed global PR for Tealeaf Technology, where she was responsible for strategic communications and all media and analyst relations.

Before joining Tealeaf, Shoshana worked on the agency side as an Account Director for Bite Communications, managing accounts and providing counsel to high-profile technology clients including Dolby Laboratories, BEA, Siebel, Sun Microsystems and Veritas.

Shoshana began her career as Public Relations Manager at Digital Impact, where she oversaw corporate public relations and enhanced news generation and coverage for the company.

Shoshana holds Bachelors of Arts Degrees from Stanford University in Communication and Psychology