

Getting it wrong, even when you're right

The supplement industry needs to accept the reality of mainstream media

by Jeffrey Nedelman, Strategic Communications, LLC.



Recently I was on a conference call with the senior management team of a growing and vibrant dietary supplement maker based in the Midwest. Business was booming, and the discussion centered on how to make the bridge from extensive and fawning trade press coverage to mainstream nutrition and health media coverage. The CEO has the city's daily newspaper delivered each day, but when we focused on their relationship with the paper I was met with a stream of language not suitable for print in that family read paper. Emotions were white hot. Business sense lost to venting.

And thus nothing changed.

This is the fundamental problem with the companies and their trade associations that make up the supplement industry. Simply put, they hate the mainstream media. And, the feeling is mutual.

In more than 25 years of working for Fortune 50 companies and venture capital startups, advising and counseling them on the most sensitive consumer health issues from the impact of pesticide residues in the foods consumed by infants and children, to handling Federal Trade Commission consent decrees about false and misleading advertising, I almost never meet regulatory, compliance, legal, marketing or CEOs who understand the role of the media in public health. It is not a core requirement for getting a Ph.D., MBA or law degree. However, it is a core requirement to running a successful

supplement business or trade association.

When you are selling a product that is biologically active in the body, when you are promoting it as having health and wellness properties, when millions of consumers are buying products, the expectations for safety and efficacy are set pretty high. Expectations for a competent media strategy should be just as high. The ability to be ready, competent and able to communicate core messages consistently over time is essential. Only a few in the industry have such a plan in place.

Most importantly, dating back to the founding of the country, the role of the traditional media and business is not to promote your products. That is what the trade press do. The relationship with mainstream media, by definition, is adversarial and antagonistic. If you do not accept this premise and are not willing to play the game by these rules, stop reading now.

Perception always wins

It is a fact that the supplement industry is regulated differently than food, drugs or medical devices. The perception is that the regulation is weaker. And perception is reality, no matter how hard a supplement maker might argue against it. Compounding this perception is the abysmal record of enforcement by the Food and Drug Administration. Enter the state attorneys general. The history of public health regulation in this country, dating back to the 1960's, is that when FDA is not viewed as the "tough cop on the beat" others will act to fill this void. Accept that reality. Resistance is futile.

In media relations terms, it is a simple formula. There is a "victim" (the consumer). There is a "villain" (the industry). And, there is a "vindicator" (the media). Ignore this *sine qua non* at your peril.

So, the Emperor has no clothes, at least according to the twenty percent of the media who deliver 80 percent of the health and wellness news consumers devour. What to do?

Accepting reality

Here are the titles to the main chapters in my media relations and crisis management toolbox, expressed in political, "Washington, DC speak":

When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.

Time after time, the industry's main message is to blame the media and restate, much for the benefit of its dues-paying member companies, that everything is fine. Well, it is not. And the more the industry insists it is, the less credible it becomes. Stop the whining.

Never, ever, get into a public pissing match with folks who buy ink by the barrel, paper by the ton and have more than 24 million followers on Twitter like the *New York Times*.

There is an old journalism expression that says, "There is no such thing as freedom of the press unless you own one." Well, the industry doesn't. Why, except for internal association political motives, would you attack the people who have vast followings, whose publications influence consumer purchases?

You cannot beat something with nothing.

Companies that have invested in GMPs, companies that have quality assurance controls over their supply chain, companies that pursue and commit to publish peer-review journal articles, and companies that begin a dialogue with leaders in the public health community—like UNPA has done with the state attorney generals—have a good story to tell. The industry should be flocking to Capitol Hill now and telling it to all those GOP Members of Congress they voted for and the media that they want more funds for FDA enforcement.

In sum, crisis management requires as much planning and execution as new business development. It is another form of customer relationships. You cannot win with your head stuck in the sand. You have to have a plan, look forward and devote the resources to execute that plan flawlessly. 🍋