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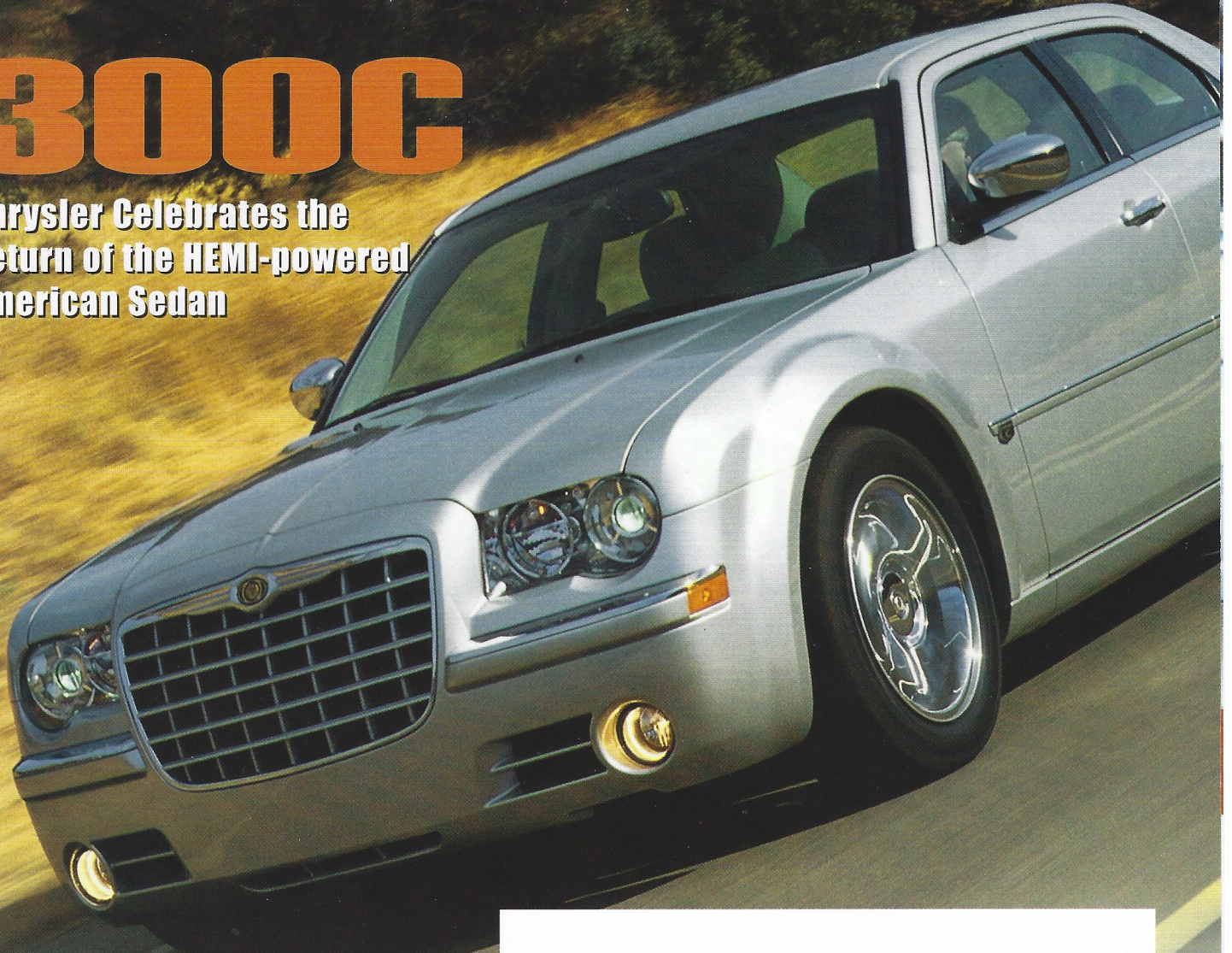
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# What Makes Good PR?

Tricks of this critically important, much misunderstood trade, and an AI media survey to learn who does it best, and worst

by Gary Witzenburg

**F**lash back to 1979, when U.S. import sales totaled slightly over two million for a record 19.5 percent of the market. Toyota was on a tear with 637,891 U.S. vehicle sales, Nissan (Datsun) was second at 574K, Honda third at 353K and Mazda fourth at 243K.

While Honda's cars were already among the best on the market, its public (really media) relations were among the very worst. Fast-rising Mazda, meanwhile, was pushing a growing stable of so-so products while excelling in the highly important PR game.

Mazda PR materials were excellent, phone calls promptly returned and questions accurately answered, test vehicles were readily available and new-product press preview events were well planned and executed. Mazda treated auto reporters as valued customers, not annoyances or adversaries, and its PR pros clearly understood their needs.

By contrast, American Honda PR at the time was either ignorant or arrogant, or both. For all but the very top-tier media, test vehicles were hard to come by, phone requests were returned late or not at all, and product intro events were typically held well after the new models being "previewed" were in dealer showrooms.

This latter bad habit was infuriating to writers for "long lead-time" (typically three months from preparation to delivery) publications. Everyone else's info and photos were available mid-summer, in time for fall "What's New" articles, and most held summer "long-lead" previews where long-lead media could learn about, photograph and drive their fall-intro products. Honda refused to provide early materials, and its concept of a long-lead was to host three major enthusiast mags in Japan. Everyone else had to wait until its new cars were on the street.

As a result, nearly everyone in the automotive media loved Mazda and hated Honda. And while this theoretically should make no difference to fair, accurate and objective reporting, most couldn't resist cutting Mazda some slack while looking extra hard for things to criticize about Honda's products. The point is that, whatever else your company does and however well it does it, PR Professional Rule #1 is to constantly keep in mind that it can't hurt if the media likes you and your company, and definitely can if it doesn't.

## What Exactly is "PR?"

Public relations, sometimes called "public affairs," should really be called

"media relations." Many companies have renamed it "Communications," which includes both internal and external communications. Its largest ultimate target is the public, which is most effectively reached through the media. While advertising targets that same public through purchased space and time in those very same media, it has limited credibility — no matter how good and creative (and expensive) it may be — because everyone knows it's a paid commercial message.

Most PR professionals' primary challenge is to get their companies' products and messages positively portrayed in the not-for-sale pages and air time filling the valuable space between the ads. That's where journalists report the news, express opinions and review new products. And while most try hard to be fair and objective, they can't help having feelings and opinions — based on past experience and knowledge — about any company and its products going into any story.

Because every automaker has a long-established, deeply entrenched reputation that is very difficult to change, one wag suggests that the average auto review is 70 percent expectations (the reviewer knows what to expect based on his/her experience with that maker and its past products), 20 percent styling (positive or negative based on his/her reaction to the new product's appearance) and 10 percent the way it actually drives.

The PR pro's job is obviously easier when his/her company is riding high and its products are respected, and much more difficult when the company is down and its products disrespected. Since perception lags reality by many years, the former situation can lead to arrogance, believing you'll get good treatment and reviews regardless what you do. The latter can be challenging and frustrating, believing that no matter how hard and well you work, no matter how good your products may be, they're rarely given an open mind and a fair shake.

PR pros don't design, engineer, develop or build vehicles. But — because they know and understand media opinions of specific designs, materials and features — the product-savvy among them can influence their companies' products by effectively communicating to those who do that work.

They can also positively influence media reactions by the ways in which new cars and trucks are positioned, presented and demonstrated. The product presentation, who delivers it and how well, and the media drive — carefully designed to showcase the product's strongest points and downplay its weaker ones, if any — can be key. Most, but not all, of the best PR people have operated on the "customer" side of the relationship as media members themselves. They know how the media operates and what is most important to them.

## **“Most auto manufacturers do a good job with proactive public relations,” says one major web site editor, “but reactive PR has suffered in this age of media web sites.”**

While there are other factors, auto PR effectiveness largely boils down to five important elements: responsiveness, product materials, test vehicles, events and relationships. Assuming their companies are reasonably well-run and its products at least competitive, PR departments that do these things well should be rewarded by good media relations, fair and balanced coverage and generally positive product reviews.

To get a good cross-section of opinions on who is doing the best PR job and who is not, we surveyed media members from a variety of large and small magazines, newspapers, newsletters, electronic media and web sights. Not surprisingly, the results were widely mixed. How satisfied you are as a media customer depends very largely on who you are, where you are, who are your primary PR contacts and (most importantly) for whom you write. While good PR pros try to treat all media customers equally well, there is a natural “pecking order” based on size (circulation), audience (who one’s readers are) and perceived importance.

### **Responsiveness**

How quickly and effectively do PR pros return calls or e-mails, provide product materials and accurate answers to journalists’ questions, line up requested interviews and test vehicles. Most reporters most of the time are on tight deadlines.

Toyota/Lexus gets the greatest number of high marks for responsiveness, according to our survey, followed by DaimlerChrysler, Nissan/Infiniti, GM, BMW and Honda/Acura. Demonstrating the diversity of opinions, Honda/Acura also get the most negative grades, tied with Ford and trailed closely by GM, Toyota/Lexus, Mazda and Mercedes-Benz. “Honda and Toyota don’t seem to be able to answer a straight question without getting uptight,” says one major car magazine editor. “Ford concentrates on its web site, which is often difficult to navigate,” adds a newspaper auto writer. “Have you tried calling Ford lately?” another asks rhetorically.

“Most auto manufacturers do a good job with proactive public relations,” says one major web site editor, “but reactive PR has suffered in this age of media web sites. It’s sometimes difficult to get anyone on the phone or find someone who knows something. The best tend to be strong media relations professionals who have developed strong relationships with journalists over the years. It’s always a delight to contact one of these folks, and if they don’t know the answer, they’ll get one as quickly as possible.”

One magazine editor praises DCX and Honda/Acura as best in his area. “Their regional PR guys are always accessible and responsive,” he says. And he scolds GM and Mercedes-Benz as the worst: “GM is asleep at the switch, and Mercedes simply doesn’t respond.” Another complained that VW is either slow or provides no answers, while Honda varies from “great” to “no answers.”

### **Materials**

Product information and photos are the tools of every auto writer’s trade. They are distributed in “press kits” at auto shows and product pre-

views, through the mail and on media web sites. Some reporters prefer information on paper, others on CDs or DVDs, but all need complete and accurate information and specifications and a good selection of quality photos, including a variety of colors, models and angles.

Our survey respondents voted Nissan/Infiniti best by far in materials, followed by DCX, Toyota/Lexus and GM. The most dishonorable mentions go to Ford, followed by BMW, Isuzu, VW/Audi and (can’t please everyone) GM and DCX. One editor complained that VW/Audi’s CDs contain only photos, not product info and specs. “Nissan is most timely with availability of advance materials on CD,” another asserted.

“A number of manufacturers offer inadequate photography,” says one auto web site editor. “The domestics are worst at this, but some imports are lacking as well. It’s appalling that Ford, for example, will provide only one wide-angle photo, which distorts the shape of the vehicle. Also, one photo of a product line doesn’t illustrate its myriad variations — coupe, sedan, wagon, convertible. They launch the product, then turn their back on it for the remainder of the product cycle. Volkswagen, GM, Chrysler and some others also could use more and better photography. The Japanese brands seem to do the best job here.”

### **Vehicles**

Since most auto writers test and review new products as they are introduced, one of the most important and challenging tasks for PR departments is providing test vehicles on a timely basis throughout the country and the world. Most maintain fleets in areas where auto scribes are concentrated (Detroit, New York, Los Angeles) and smaller ones elsewhere (Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, San Francisco, Seattle, etc.) as needed. And most assign the very important job of scheduling, maintaining, preparing and delivering them to a small group of experienced press vehicle handlers — one reason their performance varies by area.

Although this press vehicle business can get very expensive, savvy PR pros understand the enormous importance of it. They know their vehicles are competing with hundreds of others for space and time, and that each media outlet is competing for readership, viewership, subscriptions, newsstand sales, “hits” and advertising (based on all that), which keeps the best of them in business.

On the positive side of the vehicle category, VW/Audi scored the most high marks, trailed closely by BMW. “VW and Audi are always timely,” says one west-coast auto writer.

On the other hand, General Motors received far and away the most negative votes, apparently because budget cuts have reduced its fleets to where there are way too few vehicles to go around. Some legitimate media can no longer get GM vehicles at all, while others wait months for them, then get them for shorter-than-usual periods of time.

Some say they have quit reviewing GM vehicles entirely (there are plenty others to cover), which is a disservice to their readers, and to GM dealers. One weekly reviewer for a major newspaper said he had recently writ-

ten about two of the Cadillac XLR luxury roadster's direct competitors, which were offered to him while he was still unable to borrow an XLR.

Ford (including Lincoln-Mercury) was second in negative votes, probably because (at least in Michigan) it will not deliver test vehicles. That may be understandable given Ford's recent financial struggles, but it creates a time-consuming inconvenience for media who don't have staff "gophers" to pick up and return test vehicles.

Curiously, the only others who won't deliver vehicles (in Michigan) are the three most successful and profitable Japanese makers — Toyota/Lexus, Honda/Acura and Nissan/Infiniti. Timely availability of Toyota/Lexus vehicles was also an issue for some. "Why does it take four months to get a new Lexus into a major car book?" one complainer asked. The only other maker getting more than one negative mark was Porsche, probably due to more demand than supply of its expensive vehicles.

A southeast U.S.-based magazine editor writes that Toyota/Lexus is best in his area: "They have the largest press fleet, and product is more accessible." Then adds that GM and Ford have the fewest available vehicles. One freelancer says she finds it increasingly difficult to get vehicles or information from DCX, Mercedes-Benz and Nissan. The latter two, she adds, "have no respect for the publications I write for and don't want me to review their cars."

## Events

Another important PR task is planning and executing "previews" at which a number of media can learn about and drive important new vehicles and interview executives, engineers and marketing people in the same place at the same time.

These vary from large half-day local events with limited drive opportunities to small multi-day affairs in exotic locales. Because different media have very different needs and priorities, it is extremely difficult to satisfy everyone. Some, more business and marketing oriented, want to get there and back with a minimum of travel time and don't care much about time in the product. Others, heavily product oriented, want maximum quality drive time.

One top priority is the choice of an appropriate facility in a suitable location for accessibility and availability of good driving roads and scenery. Availability of vehicles — depending on the timing, often rare and expensive and prototypes or early builds — and budget usually determine how many media can be accommodated.

Which leads to the most contentious element of doing events: who gets invited. Since there is a limit to how many people most events can handle, PR planners go to their (huge) lists of media and pick who — based on the type of product(s) being introduced, the number of available vehicles, the audiences targeted, budget and other considerations — they will invite.

Small "long-leads" typically include the major auto enthusiast magazines and a few "lifestyle," financial and other mags that regularly cover new cars and trucks. Larger "short leads" include smaller magazines and trade publications, large and mid-size newspapers and web sites that cover automobiles and a selection of well-published freelancers. Every maker's list is different, and (depending on the event's size, priorities and relationships with specific media) many smaller publications and independent writers are left out and have to await the availability of vehicles in their area.

According to our survey, top performers in the events arena are Ford and

DCX, followed closely by BMW and Nissan/Infiniti, then GM, Volvo and Jaguar. Ironically, reflecting different media priorities, Ford also gets the most negative votes, trailed by BMW, Toyota, Mercedes, Porsche, VW/Audi, Mazda and GM.

One veteran technical writer lauds Jaguar for "great programs, good technology stuff and great driving locales" and Ford and Dodge for "the best truck intro programs, with GM close behind." He adds that, "Ford does a great job with tech presentations in Dearborn, GM full-line programs are really good with lots of knowledgeable people to talk to, and Chrysler programs have really improved."

A tech-oriented magazine editor feels that too many events are needlessly long. "Obtaining info and access to experts are the main draws," he says. "Those who facilitate a test — access to a track, exclusive time with the vehicle — are best, but this seldom happens. Changing planes and long rides to hotels...are my pet peeves."

One writer praises Mercedes, BMW and Porsche for "focusing on seat time and drive routes that feature vehicle attributes."

## Relationships

Knowing one's customers remains important even as the sheer number of automotive media explodes and most communication is done through impersonal e-mails. The best PR pros make a point to get to know — primarily through face-to-face contact at events — as many as possible of at least the most important journalists. Because it's more pleasant and productive to deal with people they know, respect and trust — and who know them and their needs, preferences and priorities — media members generally appreciate this.

Strongest performer on the relationships side, our survey says, is DCX, trailed by GM, Nissan and VW/Audi. The most negative votes went to Ford, followed by BMW, Mazda, Mitsubishi, VW/Audi and (again) GM. "Haven't gotten anything good from Mitsubishi in 10 years," one veteran complains.

One magazine editor says he appreciates PR people who understand the "crunches" editorial types are under: flat out all the time. Those who take "service for the customer" to heart get me bending over backwards for them. Those who call every month to see if their client's product has run gets on my bad side real fast. My biggest complaint is a rep whom I have to educate about the market his product exists in. I don't want to feel like a junk mail receptacle for people who use my name to tell their bosses they made contact with me. If I'm treated like a customer, I love it. If I'm treated like a tool, I hate it. Pretty simple."

As we said, PR performance as viewed by its customers depends very much on who they are and for whom they write, as well as where they're located and who are their primary contacts. Most outside the media business have little or no clue what PR pros do and how important it is to do it well. Many believe that they mostly write stories about their companies, people and products for the media to publish verbatim...and wonder why the resulting coverage contains objective criticism.

It is true that PR pros write stories ("releases") that media use for background information. What ultimately gets written and published is out of their control. But it can be, and often is, positively influenced by good PR. ★