



Selling Your Story: PR for Startups with Peter Shankman

Written by [Jolie O'Dell](#) / September 14, 2009 11:00 AM / [0 Comments](#)

Peter Shankman knows a bit about startups and PR. Ever since launching his own venture, Help A Reporter Out ([HARO](#)) last year, he's been living at the crossroads of journalists who need stories and companies that need exposure.

And in connecting expert sources with harried journos, Shankman has gleaned a wealth of tips, tricks, and common-sense dicta, many of which he shared with us in a phone interview this morning. Read on, and find out what this entrepreneur/skydiver/damn smart PR guy thinks about your pitch - and why we, the press, agree with him.

Get to the Point

To start things off, Shankman gives a word of advice that makes remarkable sense: "Journalists respond to sources who know how to write.

"They're doing six times as much work with six times fewer resources, and brevity has never been more important. Give them one paragraph - short, to the point, tell them exactly what you have to say - and help them write their story in a clear and concise way."

He also noted that it's important be sensitive to the fact that most journos operate on a deadline (or, in bloggers' case, race to break news at strange hours of the day and night).

Be in the World and of the World

If Shankman is to be believed, the sun has set on the day of the three-page PDF press release complete with company boilerplate, CEO biography, and a rash of pre-fab quotations. What makes press folks notice and cover startups these days, he said, is a mindfulness of the world around us.

"You get so wrapped up in what you're doing when you're starting a company. You sit there and think, 'We just created a widget we worked on for 7 months.' Well, it's not as important as Kanye West interrupting a country singer. But because you launched a widget, the world revolves around you?"

"What works better is working your widget into the news, make it part of what's going on in the world." Relating your startup to a hot news item is also a good way to catch a reporter's eye in a sea of sameness.

Offer Real Value

Is your startup's goal to get media attention, or to be seen as an expert, a go-to source of information? Are you trying to be a perennial fount of knowledge about your vertical or a one-off novelty for blog fodder?

"One of the best things a startup can do," Shankman said, "is to be aware of what's going on in your industry, and offer that information to the reporter from the perspective of an industry expert."

By tracking and giving insight on trends that others might now know about, your startup story might allow a journalist to "break" something new while giving you exposure, a win-win situation for both parties.

For the Love of Mike, Ditch the Jargon

Is your startup a real-time, semantic, social media solution in the cloud? You might want to reconsider the necessity of including those terms before sending your pitch email.

"Oh, I hate buzzwords," Shankman said, echoing the sentiment of every journalist we've ever met.

"People use them as a crutch. If you give me an interesting message - "Peter, you'll like this" or "I saw this and thought of you" - you might actually know what I'm looking for. Don't give me a buzzword."

Then again, he warns pitching companies to use familiarity with care. "If you don't know me, and it's a blanket pitch, you're not on the level. Then it's one keystroke, you're marked as spam, and I'll never see your emails again."

The Bottom Line: It's About Longevity and Love

Ultimately, said Shankman, the startups that are successful in the press are those who position themselves as sources, bringing journalists carefully crafted stories that are well-written and relate to the bigger picture, be that industry or world news. More than a simple review of a new site or app, a smart opinion can ensure more coverage in better publications and prompt more widespread user adoption.

And to any new tech company, he advises, "Don't go into a startup with the sole goal of making money. Those companies generally do not succeed. Go into it because you believe you have something that will solve a problem, and the money will follow."