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November 8, 2004 Police Stories Focus on The Positive

By David Ward

With national security dominating the headlines, law enforcement officials across the country have enjoyed a swell of support from the public and media.

From the almost obsessive reporting in the 1990s on crime rates and instances of police abuse, coverage of law enforcement has come nearly full circle in recent years with plenty of stories not just on the latest crime-fighting gadgets, but on the positive role police play in society as well.

A great deal of this is simply the media mirroring the public's new-found appreciation for law enforcement in this current environment of heightened security. But credit should also be shared with Hollywood, which produces a steady stream of cop-centric movies and TV shows focused on the process of solving crimes.

'Because of shows like CSI, people know about the technology that goes into the protection of our country and our families,' says Jed Wallace, managing director/COO of MPH PR in Los Angeles. MPH represents VirTra Systems, whose virtual-reality technology is used to train law enforcement officials as well as the military. VirTra's evolution from a video game company has been covered by MSNBC, USA Today, Newsweek, and The Wall Street Journal, among others.

'The media is looking to focus more on the upside of law enforcement rather than crime statistics,' Wallace says. 'It's on how we're preparing the people responsible for keeping us safe.'

Shawn Whalen, SVP with Schwartz Communications, adds that many stories focus on real-world examples of how these products are used in action.

'If you can deliver a lot of anecdotes with officers saying we used this tool to help us solve this missing-person case, there's a great deal of reception from the media,' says Whalen, who represents LocatePLUS, which manages a database that gives cops access to information on over 200 million people.

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Tracking the headlines

Many of the companies pitching the latest law-enforcement technology often leverage breaking news stories to generate interest. Noting her client Firearms Training System has expanded its program to include training for raiding methamphetamine labs, Nancy Jackson, account executive with Atlanta-based Freebairn & Co., says, 'If there's a major headline on drug labs, it gives it more relevance when we pitch other media.'

While the admiration of the general-interest press is nice, the companies involved in law enforcement training and products say they are far more interested in reaching key trade outlets such as Police, Law Enforcement News, and Police Times.

'Our main focus is on the vertical press because they reach the people who are going to be buying these products,' explains Michelle Metzger, PR manager with Dallas-based M/C/C, which represents Raytheon Infrared.

'From the thermal imaging side, the cameras are getting smaller and cheaper and their applications continue to grow, so there's always things we can pitch.'

Of course, law enforcement coverage is a lot more than gadgets, and reporting is starting to include more stories on long-term police initiatives. 'There's a lot more interest in the nuts and bolts of law enforcement,' says Brian Coddington, account executive with Rockey Hill & Knowlton in Spokane, WA.

Coddington has been helping federal, state, and local law enforcement officials educate residents about Project Safe Neighborhoods, which targets gun crime by stressing the punishment that convicted felons face if caught carrying firearms. 'I wouldn't say reporters have been beating down our door, but they've been responsive when we can be timely with sentencing stories, for example,' he says.

Improved relations

While the use of outside PR can help in these public awareness efforts, Coddington says part of the reason law enforcement is getting better coverage is that many departments have altered their policies toward the media.

'The relationship with the media was perhaps a bit adversarial, and local law enforcement has worked hard to change that,' he says. 'The local sheriff department here now holds quarterly meetings with the media to find out what kind of stories they're interested in and what obstacles they've run into.'

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But Peter Dodenhoff, editor of Law Enforcement News, which is aimed at the cops on the street, says many police officers are well aware that the overall public and media support for law enforcement can evaporate quickly.

'The appreciation is there and they've probably earned more public sympathy for the added responsibility they've taken on post-9/11,' he says. 'But one bad news report can undo months and years of public support.'

PITCHING... LAW ENFORCEMENT MEDIA

- Use plenty of real-world examples of police incorporating the latest crime-fighting tools when pitching stories on law enforcement technology.
- General-interest news coverage is good, but trades such as Law Enforcement News and Police are read by enforcement officials, so make sure your PR strategy has a strong focus on the vertical outlets
- Leverage the public's fascination with law enforcement-themed movies and TV shows to pitch stories not just to cops and court reporters, but to feature writers as well.