

chapter two

The New Publicist

SPOILER ALERT: IT'S YOU



It wasn't that long ago when “scoring press” meant achieving a positive mention in a newspaper, a magazine, on the radio, or on broadcast television.

Historically, to break through to an influential editor, companies interested in attracting a wider following hired a professional public relations agency to offer expert advice and assistance.

As an editor, freelance writer, and contributor to national and regional consumer publications, I frequently found myself on the receiving end of such pitches and worked closely with publicists eager to bring fresh ideas and personalities to the attention of the public via the “press.” After years of being pitched by the pros, I began to see a dramatic shift happening. As opportunities for communicating and sharing stories opened up, more and more entrepreneurs—especially those in creative fields like interior design and decoration, architecture, landscape planning, and custom home building—were taking ownership of communicating their own stories and developing direct relationships with writers and editors like me.

Today, the publicity landscape for designers is vast and in constant motion. And design brands large, small, and in-between have discovered that dedicating an employee to managing the “company voice” via an ever-growing suite of social media channels has become almost as necessary to a successful business plan as hiring a project manager to supervise the day-to-day details of a major installation.

E-newsletters are essential. Podcasts are increasingly popular. Live streaming is the new frontier today and expected protocol tomorrow. Special interest publications are making a comeback. And designer show houses are huge business opportunities for designers and the savvy companies who sponsor them. Blogging has become a significant income source for some well-followed design minds.

These days, everyone is an editor!
And the new publicist is you.

Cross-marketing and collaboration capitalizes on the power of “we” over “me” in creating a larger audience for your work and ideas. At trade shows, design centers, and conferences around the globe, organizers and trade partners are tapping into the expertise, feedback, and enthusiastic following creative professionals have to offer.

Never have designers been more important to their industry’s bottom line. And never has direct communication played a larger role in creating opportunities for commerce—and for press.



Storytelling

STARTER KIT

Keeping up with editors and influencers can be a dizzying and time-consuming exercise. This is one reason why many seasoned public relations firms divide their pitching teams into two units—one digital and one traditional—and create separate strategies and fee structures for each. Whatever social channels you choose as your podium, it’s important to remember **four basic elements** that all successful design stories share:

CONSISTENCY | Comets, meteors, and shooting stars can inspire awe during the short time they are in view. But effective media strategies emulate the North Star. After a while, an audience begins to look for their favorite tastemakers and storytellers to be there for them, shining bright and bold, at regular intervals. Being consistent helps you to build a loyal and dedicated following.

BEAUTY | Creative people and design seekers are visually inspired. Know the make-or-break importance of photography. Only beautiful images make the cut!

POINT OF VIEW | Most designers we know are highly opinionated when it comes to style. That’s a big plus! Wishy-washy or contradictory communications do not capture the imagination. Share your vision.

CONFIDENCE! | Identify your core strengths. Then go on out there and “Do YOU!” People respond to an honest voice.

A good publicist...

... DOESN'T GET CONFRONTATIONAL WITH EDITORS. EVER.

At the end of the day, the big kiss of death is bad behavior. Editors know what they need and want. If they take time to look at your work and consider it, be grateful. I like to help my clients understand how you can not force a placement.

Most interior designers can relate to this scenario: They are designing a space and a rep from a fabric manufacturer brings a new collection and really pushes it hard. The designer knows immediately that it's not right for the project they are currently working on. The same is true for editors. They know quickly if it's right for them or they'll pass, leaving the door open for another pitch down the road.



A Publicist's Top 10 Tips

FOR WORKING WITH EDITORS

Experienced design publicists like Christine Phillips, of Viola! PR and Design (www.violaprandedesign.com), have the art of multiplatform marketing down to a science. Here are her top 10 tips to help you handle press relations like the pros.

1. **BE PREPARED TO RESPOND TO EDITORS' REQUESTS PRONTO.** Have all images, digital press kits, print collateral, and project fact sheets at your fingertips.

2. **SEND EDITORS WHAT THEY ASK FOR.** And don't add on extra pitches to cloud and confuse the issue and possibly ruin your chance of fulfillment.

3. **RESIST EXCESSIVE FOLLOW-UPS.** They know where to find you.

4. **DO NOT SEND IN SUB-PAR OR IRRELEVANT IMAGES.** Target the content of your pitch to the right media players: Editors of *Country Living* magazine, for example, probably aren't looking for cold, cutting-edge modernism.

5. **DON'T FUDGE THE FACTS.** If the room you're pitching was a show house set, if the project was completed three years ago, if the kitchen is IKEA, say so up front. Your long-term credibility depends on making sure the dates/info/design credits you supply are absolutely honest and accurate from the start.

6. **STAY IN YOUR HULA HOOP.** Don't try to insert yourself or get involved in issues that do not directly involve you or the client your project represents.

7. **KEEP YOUR MEDIA LISTS CURRENT.** Editors move around!

8. **DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS** with editors.

9. **TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS.** You know when something "feels right" or you're forcing issues. If you're spinning wheels trying to make your pitch fit a publication's mold, take it as a sign that the particular spot you're trying to squeeze into is not the right one for this particular project. There will be better spots and more projects down the road. Keep looking.

10. **TAKE REJECTION GRACEFULLY.** Always thank an editor for considering your project, product submission, or profile submission. So, it didn't work out this time. Next time might fill the bill!

MEET
Christine Phillips

violapranddesign.com • publicist • industry champion

In the quality-driven interior design industry, expectations on both sides of the publicist-client relationship are high. This PR professional delivers.



“I can’t gamble on having a client who is not prepared. I work with people who understand that PR is not a game—never people who are looking to stand on a podium before they run the race.”

Do you dream of hiring a publicist, someone to get your name out there, to wrangle more and bigger projects, to position your brand with the industry’s big names, to score press and a few awards, and maybe lock down licensing partnerships? It does sound wonderful, doesn’t it, to be able to hire someone to put you in the glossies and create buzz around your work?

Here’s what many new clients don’t realize: When you hire a professional publicist, you’re committing yourself and every member of your team to working even harder to communicate your message, benefiting every step of the way from your PR professional’s expertise and guidance. All eyes are on achieving your goals, not unloading them.

Christine Phillips, founder of **Viola! PR and Design**, specializes in the field of interiors (though her first love was fashion, a continuing obsession evidenced in her well-documented shoe collection). Christine champions her clients, including shining stars like designer **Barclay Butera** (*opposite, top*) and the positive growth of the interiors industry as a whole. Her candor about her expectations for clients is the best endorsement I could think of for the book you are reading right now, which is designed to prepare you for a day you need someone like Christine!





Hiring a publicist means you desire growth beyond your ability to achieve it on your own. It's likely (or advised) that you've already made an investment in your communications strategy, including bringing in help to manage your social media channels and serve as your firm's communications liaison. The next step is budgeting for extra support and direction from a PR professional.

Christine Phillips has more than 25 years of experience in PR and business development in the interior designer industry. Her generous and fun-loving spirit, her genuine appreciation for the close-knit editorial community, and her deep understanding of the practice of public relations have resulted in insights into a question that many designers ask themselves: *How would my business benefit from hiring a professional publicist—and how will we know when we're ready for that step?* Here's what Christine has to say.



Q&A

Christine Phillips

ONCE YOU SIGN A CLIENT, HOW MUCH TIME SHOULD THEY EXPECT TO BE SPENDING WITH YOU?

CHRISTINE PHILLIPS: At minimum, a weekly call. The clients I am most successful with, I talk to once a day or we're at least texting daily.

WHAT DO YOU EXPECT OF THEM?

CP: The work for the client is providing me all the creative materials and collateral that I need to promote them. Design editors are visually oriented and rely 99 percent on photography to make a decision. I have to *show* them, not just tell them. If I don't have strong photography to back up my pitch, editors don't care.

WHAT DO YOU NEED FROM A CLIENT TO PITCH A PROJECT?

CP: My shot list includes: front/exterior, foyer, kitchen, dining, all bedrooms, all bathrooms—you get the picture. The images must be professionally shot and by someone who knows interiors photography. No iPhone shots! If design clients want me to take a project to *Elle Décor* or the likes, this is what I need before going knocking on an editor's door. Also, I need information on what is in the room—the fabrics on the sofa, the lighting, the appliances, the rug... I can't do these resource lists for you, so there is a need for either good in-house support or a personal commitment to getting me this information so I can move it along, fast.

THE FIRST TIME YOU APPROACH AN EDITOR ON BEHALF OF A NEW DESIGN CLIENT, WHAT DO YOU SHARE?

CP: I present them with a simple electronic press kit, which includes a portrait/headshot of the designer, a bio, and a few beautiful images of great rooms that reflect the designer's point of view. The kit gives only a brief snapshot of the designer, but a lot of work goes on behind the scenes to make sure it makes a good first impression. If editors are interested, they will go immediately to a designer's website to see more, so, of course, we don't go to the editor until the website is pitch perfect.

ARE MOST OF YOUR CLIENTS PREPARED TO GO TO PRESS WHEN THEY COME TO YOU?

CP: No. I don't go to press right away with 90 percent of clients. Some need just a few tweaks to make their website sing. Others need a rewrite on their bio to tighten it up and make it more palatable to editors. Some need to start over. Others need a new headshot that projects more confidence or a stronger logo. The clients who are most successful with me are the ones who listen to me.

WHAT QUALITIES DO YOUR BEST CLIENTS SHARE?

CP: Well, let me just say that one of the reasons Barclay Butera is so successful is that, even though he may be pulled in a million directions, when I need him to call—*bing!*—he's there. None of this two-days-later business. Delays don't make me efficient. Deadlines mean something. If I can get back to an editor same day, it is a good day. Editors love that.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF A DESIGNER IS A GOOD FIT FOR YOU AND YOUR SERVICES?

CP: I offer a complimentary exploratory phone call (even though everyone wants to meet). I ask the designer to share their short-term goals and their long-term goals and why they need my services. I also ask what they think I can do for them. If someone is super nervous or if they ask excessive questions, then I often conclude they don't know enough about the industry for a full-blown publicist. I may recommend instead they'd be better off hiring a part-time person who works exclusively for them to help them start putting together collateral.