



PROVE IT! PODCAST

HOSTED BY DEBBIE ALBERT

Episode 116:

The Importance of Relationships in Media Relations

Guest: Alissa Michaels, Michaels Communication

This is Prove It. A podcast for impatient business owners, overwhelmed marketers, and PR practitioners with no time for podcasts. In just 10 minutes they answer 3 questions and offer proof of what's working in marketing communications today. Here's Debbie Albert, President of Albert Communications.

Debbie Albert: On this episode of Prove it! we're going to look at the importance of relationships when it comes to media relations. My guest today is Alissa Caplan Michaels the president of Michaels Communications, and in my opinion, she is one of the best media pitchers I know.

Here's what you need to know about Alissa and then check her out at her website Michaelscommunications.com. There's a link to her site on her podcast page on our site.

So, Alissa is a hard news journalist by training. Before launching her own firm, she was the in-house communications lead for Columbia University and for the Wexner Heritage Foundation. Prior to that she worked for ABC News, helped launch their online news division. I won't tell them that that makes you *really old*, Alissa.

Alissa Michaels: I know.

Debbie: Okay. She's also worked for the *Des Moines Register*, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency and the *New York Times*. In essence she really does know her stuff. So, keeping this to ten minutes may be a challenge as you're about to hear, because Alissa has a lot to say. She is not shy about saying it. She has the spunk you need to successfully pitch a story. So, listen up and I can



PROVE IT! PODCAST

HOSTED BY DEBBIE ALBERT

assure you after we finish recording this podcast, she and I will spend another hour on the phone talking about other things. So, Alissa welcome to Prove It.

Alissa: Thank you for having me.

Debbie: We only have ten minutes. Let's get started. Let me start with the first question. You've had a long career on both sides of the telephone, as I like to say, you've been a journalist and a PR person pitching stories. **So, tell us what constitutes a true relationship and how you build trust with a reporter over the years?**

Alissa: I always find these types of questions interesting, because people are often looking for a magic formula, and guess what? There is none. As in any relationship what's required is a genuine give-and-take with both sides asking difficult questions, and it also requires face-to-face interactions not just emails or 10-second phone calls, so that means an investment of time.

As a journalist I had a lot of meals with sources, as a PR person I still have a lot of meals with them. So those who are at the top of their game are interesting people in their own right and I feel like it's worthwhile to get to know them as people. Meals also allow people to be a little bit more relaxed, let down that in the guard, you know, they're getting finished cutting their teeth, they're more willing to be themselves.

Debbie: Right.

Alissa: And it also requires separated trust. So, my longest relationships from news and in PR are with people who are really good sounding boards and they also are my friends.



PROVE IT! PODCAST

HOSTED BY DEBBIE ALBERT

Debbie: And I'll throw in something also. I have also found that when you have a relationship like that, whether you have a story to pitch or not, you can call them just about something off them and vice versa.

Alissa: Exactly. That's exactly right. And I actually probably shouldn't say this, but I have journalist friends from pretty well-respected publications who call to bounce something off *me* to make sure that it sounds right for their story and it has nothing to do with me or my clients.

Debbie: Right. And I've also had people call because they want to know who I know who could be part of a story even though it has nothing to do with me. It's all about relationships, I think.

Alissa: Absolutely.

Debbie: **Can you talk at all about what happens if a client asks you to be not forthcoming or maybe to share something with a journalist that is somewhat disingenuous, have you ever been in a situation like that and how do you handle it?**

Alissa: Okay. Unfortunately, yes, I have been, it's not as frequent as those outside the business can would have everybody think or maybe how PR people also known as flax are depicted in media, but it, it still occurs and the short answer is that lying is bad idea and I feel that being disingenuous is a form of lying. Journalists aren't fools and when I was a working journalist, I always knew when a source was trying to miss inform me or, you know, trying to pull one over on me. And so, as a PR person, you know, it may seem like an easy fix in the moment but it can result in long-term permanent damage, because my feeling is the truth always surfaces at some point. It can level a company's reputation as well as your own. So, it's not worth it.



PROVE IT! PODCAST

HOSTED BY DEBBIE ALBERT

Debbie: Absolutely your own.

Alissa: Not worth it. And difficult conversations with a client about the risks of lying are worth it. And I had one client in particular, I can't name the client, but who wanted me to lie and I refused to do it. And our relationship was suspended for a while because I wasn't comfortable working and once we were able to repair it, but lying is wrong, period.

PROVE IT!

Debbie: I'm with you on that. I've also and I don't know if you've been in this situation where a client has asked me to place a story that would be, that would put a competitor in a bad light and, and I haven't, and that's a line I won't cross either. I mean, I've said to them flat out that this is not kosher, I'm not doing this.

Alissa: Right. And it comes back to haunt both you as the person as the, you know, as the spokesperson and it comes back to haunt the company, you don't play dirty.

Debbie: Agreed. That's the right way to say it. So my third official question is, **why. Why is it important that public relations practitioners understand journalism today in this very partisan 24-hour breaking news world, and let me add to that question that, so many people today who are in PR never were on the journalism side and the world of journalism today is under attack and so if you can talk about the importance of PR practitioners really understanding what journalism is and the integrity that's involved in it, that would be really terrific?**



PROVE IT! PODCAST

HOSTED BY DEBBIE ALBERT

Alissa: That's, okay. That's an excellent question. As you know we live right now at a time that seen an accelerated constant flow of information um in news cycle we've also seen the downsizing and sometimes elimination of traditional news, newsrooms which creates greater demand on the journalists who are still there. And an increased use of hyperbolic emotional language as currently demonstrated by the top tiers of their own government.

Those of us in public relations must understand what journalists are up against. I also think in certain subject areas that I handle, I still do my own legwork to stay informed and I think this is important for PR people to routinely voraciously consume news from a range of sources including primary documents, and if you can read another language, read other publications and other languages - some of them have English language editions, but it's, it's always interesting to read other viewpoints even if, you know, you personally disagree with them that's fine it's just to read get full perspective, and I think that it's important for PR people not to just be reciprocal. I don't know if that's the right word, but like a vase of information but rather they need to come to collect their own information come to their own conclusions.

Debbie: Right. Right. So, we're up to the Prove It part. We're talking about relationships and the importance of integrity and journalism and public relations, **so can you give us an example of how you've worked your magic with a successful high-level media pitch, you don't have to share a name, but how a relationship came into play and I think we should add, you still need to have a good story, right?**

Alissa: Yes.

Debbie: [laugh] **How a relationship came into playing you are able to successfully pitch a high-level media outlet and get a story for a client?**



PROVE IT! PODCAST

HOSTED BY DEBBIE ALBERT

Alissa: Okay. Well I have several stories but I'll tell you this one and it's one, I believe you're somewhat familiar with. I can't mention the client, but maybe I can mention the publication.

So, you know, given the restraints that journalists have as I mentioned; sometimes it requires creativity on my part. So, I had a client who wanted a story pitched immediately to a major publication because they thought it was a great urgency and importance and it wasn't.

Debbie: [laugh].

Alissa: I don't know how I stepped it.

Debbie: I know. Okay.

Eileen: A major, a major global news outlet is not going to see it that way and, you know, you don't have to understand that and not sound rehearsed or disingenuous when pitching it. So, it was more of a soft feature piece. So, what I did was the following.

I had served as a source for this publication not that long before this and again, remember the talking about the relationships and having a meal and after the story this story was published where I was - a major source, I went out with the reporter, because I thought she was intelligent and interesting and all these things, and we had some things in common as well. So, and we stayed in touch after that at one point then I told her my challenge and she directed me to the appropriate editor at her publication which was, okay, everybody who hears the podcast, keep it just to us.

Debbie: [laugh] Well, you know, millions are listening.



PROVE IT! PODCAST

HOSTED BY DEBBIE ALBERT

Alissa: With the input of this editor and another outstanding reporter, I was able to create what I call a sideways pitch. So that's kind of getting into a, the client into a story sideways but still getting been in there. So, I used my client story to pitch a broader trends piece and so the article that ran featured my client very prominently along with photos and everyone was lost.

Debbie: Oh, that's an excellent story. That's a win. **Was the client was thrilled?**

Alissa: Um, it took longer than we/he/they had hoped but I think in the end, yes. Because it-it was a major placement, it wasn't easy and-and I was pleased to. I mean it has to and I have to be happy with the results as well. So yes.

Debbie: Right. Well, I mean often I get that with clients as well they think something they're doing is unique, unique. And I agree that it's often better to pitch it as part of a larger story where there might get a prominent mention like you did, but they're still a part of the story. If the *Wall Street Journal* ran a piece just about your client, it's called a commercial.

Alissa: Right. It's called [crosstalk], an advertisement.

Debbie: Right. That's what, it's hard to explain that to clients sometimes but I think that's an excellent example of how you did it.

Alissa: Yeah.



PROVE IT! PODCAST

HOSTED BY DEBBIE ALBERT

Debbie: Well, go ahead, give us something else.

Alissa: No. I'm keeping it, I'm keeping it as short as possible.

Debbie: I know I can't believe it. We're really done our ten minutes, you gave us all the examples of the importance of a relationship, you proved it, so I'm going to wrap it up. I'm going to thank everyone for listening. If you have thoughts about the episode, please leave your comments on our page. If you want to be a guest, let us know. If you have ideas for other episodes, let us know, and please stay tuned for more episodes of Prove It to gain even more clarity in what's happening in marketing communications today. Thanks for joining us.

You just listened to Prove It a production of Albert Communications find a transcript of this episode and more about this feisty creative team on the web at AlbertCommunications.com.

End podcast