



# Putting your products to the test

► Service journalism's rise means that more types of items than ever are being reviewed. By *David Ward*

While high-profile reviews can make or break a product, for some categories getting that third-party validation used to be a challenge. Now, thanks to the growth of online product evaluation sites—as well as the commitment of traditional print and TV outlets to more service journalism—it's not just the latest tech product or cool, new car that gets a review. Every new product from mattresses to mascara can pretty well count on getting a grade, though it's often no longer in a single-product story.

"You're seeing a lot more roundups than before because there are more things in every category," notes Julia Beck, president of Forty Weeks, a maternity and parenting marketing specialist.

For that reason, M. Booth & Associates VP Josh Rosenberg suggests the PR groundwork for any media review process should be an ongoing practice.

"You should already be a resource for them in a category, even before they do their reviews," he says. "And, obviously,

you must be proactive because there are certain times when outlets are likely to cover one category versus another."

Jay Lemke, associate media relations director at Carmichael Lynch Spong, adds, "You're in a much stronger position if you have a really good relationship with the editor. You can explain to them that this is or isn't your client's top-of-the-line product, and should thus be reviewed accordingly."

But a relationship only gets you so far, he adds, noting that getting reviews in some categories simply requires more legwork.

For client Select Comfort and its Sleep Number beds, CLS increased its chances of getting media validation by delivering beds to the editor or reporter's home and storing their old beds for them for 30 days.

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—*Julia Beck*  
President  
Forty Weeks

"If you're not going to make it easy for them," says Lemke, "they're not going to do it most of the time."

Getting a review is one thing—getting a good one is quite another. Beck notes that in most situations, reviews end up being one or two reporters' subjective opinions.

She adds, however, that you can increase your client's chances by learning all you can about the criteria that will be considered in evaluation. "Most reporters will give you an idea of what they are looking for," she says.

Occasionally, great rapport with an editor can help tilt the process in your client's favor, though it's unlikely to turn a bad review into a good one.

"If the relationship is really strong between the editor and the PR firm, an editor who finds a product ineffective or displeasing may give the firm the courtesy of feedback and give the publicist the option to have that product review omitted," says Katherine Rothman, CEO of New York-based KMR Communications, which specializes in beauty PR.

Nikki Walker, account supervisor with Pierce Mattie Public Relations' ethnic beauty and luxury division, says that along with great products and good relationships, it's also vital to manage your client's expectations. That includes letting them know the type of reviews they're likely to get in the current media environment.

## Technique Tips

### DO

- Make getting reviews an ongoing process by building relationships with the media well before they evaluate your client's category
- Stress to clients who want single-product reviews that roundups and side-by-side comparisons are just as effective in providing third party validation
- Pick just one or two traits you want the item to be recognized for

### DON'T

- Forget art. Editors like to review products that photograph well. A great picture enhances your client's chance of getting evaluated
- Overload reviewers with details; focus only on the product qualities that make it stand out from competitors
- Look for reviews for products that don't deserve it, such as a new model that differs little from last year

"Usually a client will come in and say, 'I don't want to be reviewed next to my competitors,'" Walker says. "But we explain to them the reality of editorial: if an editor is doing a story on products to help a woman maintain curly hair, you're going to be reviewed right alongside the five products they're on store shelves with."

Given the media's tendency toward roundups, as opposed to individual reviews, Lemke says you need to highlight only your client's strongest features.

"A lot of products have many different attributes," he explains. "It's important to boil those down to as few as possible." ■