

Guest Trifecta: Toni Harrison + News Releases, Pay for Plays + White Burgundy

SPEAKERS

Lexie Smith, Toni Harrison

Lexie Smith

Hey guys Lexie here, travel enthusiast, lover of puns, pizza and wine connoisseur and the founder of THEPRBAR inc. and you're tuning in to the pitching and sipping podcast, from behind the scenes interviews with the media, to honest conversations with other PR pros to a look at inspiring brands and entrepreneurs that are rocking the world of PR, in this podcast, we talked tips while taking sips, and talking about all the things that make those and the world of PR tick. Let's get started.

Today we are talking with Toni Harrison, Founder and CEO of Etched Communication and Managing Partner and President of the Ten 35 Agency. Toni has managed award-winning public relations (PR) campaigns for a diverse client roster that includes Fortune-ranked organizations, global consumer brands, governmental entities and community-based nonprofits. As a former journalist, she also has an in-depth understanding of the 24/7 news cycle and unmatched expertise in helping clients navigate crises and high-profile interviews. In 2013, the former CBS reporter created Etched Communication, an award-winning agency that also serves as the PR division of Ten35.

In the episode to follow We talk about news Releases, How to Meet the Media, Pay for Plays - are they worth it, and end on a topic and piece of advice I encourage my listeners to really take to heart. Toni and I also have a similar beverage pallet, so basically what I'm saying if you're listening to this Toni, you can come Pitch and Sip with me any day. Alright, let's get started.

So I met Toni, when we were both panelists during a Women in PR virtual event. I'm going to bring up the topic of that panel in a bit and talk all things PR but first, I'd love to get to know a bit more about who you are outside of the office. So Toni, where is home for you? favorite hobbies? pets passions?

Toni Harrison

Sure. Home is Houston, Texas. I do spend a lot of time in Chicago. So in non pandemic times, I am back and forth between Houston and Chicago almost every week. I have an office in both cities outside of that office, though. Wow. I it's hard to it's it's hard to put into a list if you will, because I really enjoy almost anything that ends in ING. I enjoy swimming, I enjoy reading. I enjoy listening to music and dancing just around my house as I'm cleaning. You know, anything that really feels feels my, my creative and energetic vibes. If I have to pick a favorite hobby, it's probably scuba diving. I love going under the sea. It's while most people find scuba diving as something that sounds maybe a little scary, or at least daunting. I actually find it exceptionally peaceful when you're under the water. And it's it's it's hard to describe but it is incredibly peaceful. So if I could do anything like whenever I wanted, that would be it because it also means I'm probably on the beach.

Lexie Smith

Right? You know, what's funny is my husband, scuba dives. He is married to someone who's probably biggest fear is being in the ocean. So I have tried to drown him when snorkeling in Hawaii. That's how bad I am. But I love the beach. So I don't understand you but I'm married to one of you.

Okay,

Toni Harrison

okay. Well, it's it's something I will say if you have the fear, it is very hard to enjoy just because the breathing underwater, it's different, right? But if it's something you think you if it's just the ocean, maybe try a Clear Lake or we have lakes in Texas where people scuba dive and enjoy true

Lexie Smith

because it's really the shark factor that that gets me it's very irrational, but it's very real. Yeah, concept. I think it would be beautiful. Hence why I still try to snorkel just anyways doesn't go very well for me.

Um,

Lexie Smith

okay, so let's focus in on your career. Please catch my audience up to speed high level on your quote unquote, resume. So everything that led up to today, then we'll talk about today.

Toni Harrison

Sure. I have spent time on in the newsroom in front of the camera as well as in the boardroom. So my career looks a little bit like this. The cliff notes are graduated from undergrad University of Texas at Austin hook em horns, degree in journalism, went into PR in Los Angeles, loved it, absolutely loved it. But had an itch for the newsroom. I did study journalism. So I went to graduate school to study television and film at UCLA. And from there, I started a career in TV news, which I really, really enjoyed. It was a great experience, but I definitely preferred my time on the PR side. So I jumped back into PR after four and a half years in news. So it was it was good. I learned a lot, a lot that I can apply to today. My experience in PR is intentionally diverse. I have a background in specialty and multicultural communication. But I do have a short stint where I work with a legal software firm, which sounds as sexy as it is. That was very intentional. I really wanted the experience of preparing a company for IPO and working on a different side of PR for the knowledge and the expertise. And so I did have some time away from the multicultural space in the tech space. But most of my background is in multicultural PR and crisis com.

Lexie Smith

So I mean, clearly you're a rock star and that just tees you up perfectly to talk about Etched and Ten 35 So yeah, tell us so tell us what that all led to what are you doing today? Tell us about your companies. Sure.

Toni Harrison

So my company I started a public relations firm Etched Communication. It is now part of Ten 35, which is a comprehensive communication firm that does paid, earned and owned. But Etched started in 2014. And my most recent position before starting edge, I was at a firm in Chicago, a very large, well known awesome clients love every single thing about it. Families in Houston, my father was very sick, I lost my mother very suddenly. And it's me, it's the dog. It's a career, guess what we can move. So we came back to Houston. And to be honest, I love my hometown. But in terms of PR, I could not find some place I wanted to work. Yes, we have the largest agencies in the world have offices in Houston. But the industries here were very oil and gas or medical, which are great, but didn't quite peak my energy and enthusiasm, especially coming off large consumer brands, and robust multicultural programs for, you know, brands that all of us know very well. So I said, You know what, I think I'll just freelance take on projects here and there. Start something of my own. The agency I left in Chicago, actually sent my first client to me, they wanted me to stay. They said, we'll figure it out. And I said, You know, I just can't do the job that justice I want to do do it. It's very hard. I had a lot of people reporting into me, and demanding clients and pre pandemic video conferencing wasn't what it is today. So 2014, kind of a didn't seem like quite a seamless transition. So Etched was born. And my first client was sent by my former agency, it was a client, they were just, it wasn't a large enough assignment for them. But they thought it'd be perfect for me. And we took off from there. And here we are now. Now we have an office in Houston and Chicago. As I mentioned, I partnered with my two partners who had an advertising agency and we formed Ten 35. And we are rocking and rolling and loving every single second.

Lexie Smith

So what a compliment that an agency you leave, sends you a client. I mean, that just speaks volumes to you as a person and professional. So major kudos, how large is your team today?

Toni Harrison

Today, the Ten 35 team holistically, we're right at 30. And the public relations team specifically is seven. And the other team members of course, we have operations, which is HR finance. We have a full service creative team, and a full service research and Strategy Team.

Lexie Smith

Amazing. And you kind of teed me back up to the PR topic. When I first started off, I mentioned where we met, which was as panelists of a Women in PR event. And I want to catch her in Yeah, we I want to catch everyone up to speed a little bit on that topic and why you just stood out to me, above all else. So first off everyone, the panel topic was Are press releases dead. And if I remember correctly, you were the very first person to speak on this. And your answer was phenomenal. Because you started by educating us all on a vocabulary change. Do you remember what that is? So what should we instead call a press release and why

Toni Harrison

We should call a press release a news release. Because that's what it is. So to give it so to give the history. The term press came way back in the day won't even try to guess the year as well before I was on this earth. There was physically a printing press to print something you pressed the machine pressed the ink onto the paper. So it became called, it became a press release. Why? Because it was initially geared for the press. That was the major form of media back then. And that is why the media

was called the press because of the machine. We no longer use a printing press and the media is no longer limited to just print. The purpose of a release today is to put messages and information out there but not just any message or information. It should be newsworthy. The purpose of the release is to drive coverage to communicate with reporters. So they will in turn, take the story to their viewers, listeners readers with that, your goal is to write a news release and deliver news versus a press release. Because you're no longer delivering to the press, you're delivering to the newsroom.

Lexie Smith

It's so logical when you say it like that. But for sure my brain has been trained. I don't even know from where maybe internships first jobs University for press release, but ever since I met you, I make a conscious effort to change that word. So now let's let's answer the question, in your opinion, and is the news release dead?

Toni Harrison

Whoa. Okay. It's, it's somewhat loaded,

Lexie Smith

very loaded.

Toni Harrison

ie the traditional news release that's maybe taught in textbooks that might be dead. The way we use news releases have used them in the past is dead. The idea of a news release in general is not dead. It's how we use it. So a news release becomes a very important touch point for communicating with that particular reporter. It is not what's going to drive the coverage. It's it's akin to a thank you card, or brushing your teeth, you have to do it, you should do it. But it's not what's going on brushing your teeth is not the only thing that's going to keep your mouth healthy, right? Same thing with a news release, you want to write it, you want to have it out there, you want a very easy, concise way for an outlet to understand what it is you're communicating or your message or your product or your event or whatever that is. But what's going to make them cover it or say yes, let's conduct the interview is not going to be that news release is going to be your personal follow up with them, your personal pitching, understanding the context of what they cover, and how they report it and making your release jump germane to that. So I'd say the traditional school of thought of if you issue a release, you'll get news coverage that is dead. But the news release overall, it's not dead, but you need to repurpose it and use it solely as one tool in your toolbox.

Lexie Smith

Okay, so let me follow up that by asking On that note, should a company any time they have something newsworthy, write or release? Or does it get overdone?

Toni Harrison

It definitely gets overdone. If you think about it, think about it like this. Every time you issue a release, you're essentially asking a reporter for something, right? I'm issuing this release because I'm asking you to cover it. I mean, if we just kind of strip it down, okay. Let's pretend you. Let's let's take this and make it lunch. Would you ask a reporter to lunch every single week?

Lexie Smith

That's great. I love that. I'm gonna use that, by the way. No, you wouldn't. You shouldn't. You'd be a creep, you get blocked.

Toni Harrison

Because Because what it's the only news that really happens every single week is breaking news that we don't predict, or some dramatic. I mean, you look at what we're living through right now with a pandemic. Yeah, that's news that breaks every day. But in terms of a news release, there is such a such thing as overkill. It's it's like it's like calling to ask someone out on a date, every single week or to lunch every single week. No, shoot your shot the right way. What is newsworthy? What needs to be communicated? What do reporters want to cover? And what does their audience need to or want to see and hear?

Lexie Smith

Right, so obviously, if there's someone listening right now, and you know, they're they have a PR firm, the PR firm can direct them on when is and is not appropriate to issue a news release. However, for my founders out there, maybe doing the more DIY route, is there some sort of barometer or way they can gauge when they should or shouldn't use a news release?

Toni Harrison

Yes, so one, I would say definitely have a content strategy. Even if you don't know how Exactly what you're going to say outlining a plan so that, you know, hey, here's how I want to communicate my different messages. And so that it can be somewhat methodical, as well as strategic and what what stories you're telling and when, what you're trying to bring the audience in on. Now, to that point, your audience really does make a difference. The answer to a b2c company who is pitching other businesses would be very different than a consumer product. Somebody sometimes it's important to let the industry guide that if there are certain moments, meaning, hey, it is National daughter's day, and you have a product that's a mother daughter game or something like that. Looking at those things to help guide your content is very, very helpful. Because your content is really about your audience. One thing that we don't do enough of is focus on the audience. And that's one thing we try to do as, as the agency, you know, as for us as Ten 35, an Etched. What do they need, want or don't know that you can supply that looks very, very different depending on different industries. But the content strategy, no matter the industry is what's going to help guide you there and get you there. I will say there are also some ways to put out information that isn't necessarily a news release. So a news release should be news; news is timely, unreported, it's what's different. It's what is in proximity to us, there's a clear way to define news. But sometimes we just have information we want to get out there. I will give an example of a dentist, I work with a cosmetic dentist. And there are certain times a year where there's a huge surge holidays, because of all the photos. Valentine's Day couldn't think of it and Valentine's Day. During those times. It doesn't necessarily make sense to say hey, I'm a dentist, here's a new ad, the cosmetic dentists get the best smile for the holidays. But putting out content not in the form of a news release. But hey, five tips for a golden glowing smile for your holiday selfies. Now, that's not a news release. But if I know reporters who typically cover that type of news, I may just share it with them. And with a little note, especially if it's a reporter, I'm trying to develop a relationship with that way it's here's

something that may be helpful for your holiday coverage, but not be please take my story right now right now right now, that's sometimes can serve as a balance. It's not a release, but you can still get some information out there and maybe Garner coverage.

Lexie Smith

Love it, and you just spoke to something that is a really, really important part of PR, and that is relationships. And I know you can speak to this from both sides, because you've been both in the seat of the journalist and you are now in PR so high level, what are some of your best tips for cultivating relationships with reporters and writers? Anything we should do or avoid?

Toni Harrison

Yes. Okay. What must you do? I feel like I hear this at every single panel session, but I'm going to say it again. Know, the reporter their outlet and their beats. Anytime you want to develop a relationship with a reporter, you must know them. They do not have time to waste in their day, any more than we do. And if you think about it, we have fewer reporters today than we did in the late 70s. Do you know much more content we have. So what that says his reporters are also the understanding their dynamic helps you understand how to develop a relationship with them. They're very busy. Sometimes they're putting out two or three stories a day because of the digital world. Anytime that you know exactly what they write and can almost write a little bit of the story for them in your pitch. You're that much closer because you've now you're now providing value. You're now a resource who's helping do my job better, versus someone approaching me telling me what I can do for them? It is all in the delivery and the approach, right? So approaching them know exactly what they cover and make your pitch relevant to that. And then in your delivery, make sure you show them the value to their viewers, readers listeners, not why they should cover this for you. An example is the sentence that says, We think this would be a great article for you, or we think it's the perfect time to talk about this. Well, of course, you think that you're supposed to think that

Lexie Smith

right

Toni Harrison

your listeners, your viewers, your readers will really benefit from not learning about this product as the temperature gets colder, because it is immediately helpful in the winter months.

Lexie Smith

It's about them.

Toni Harrison

There you go. Yep. And real quick, just for those listening that might this might be the first time they've heard this term of beat. What is a beat? Oh, sure. Okay. Each reporter in the news, most of the time, the some of this is changing, especially following or amidst the pandemic, as we see newsrooms going through furloughs and layoffs. So also understand reporters are having a very hard time right now. The ones who are still in many of the newsrooms have seen a lot of their colleagues, be let go recently. So that that is one thing that's happening. But typically, most reporters have a beat, the easiest way to

describe the beat is that is the topic they cover the most. So the reporter who has the education beats, covers education. So when you see the education reporter or the food reporter, that's the food beats beat, loosely equals top.

Lexie Smith

Perfect. Okay, so I'm going to switch gears a little bit. And I want to talk about something that has been brought to my attention quite a lot as of late, meaning I'm seeing it everywhere. And that is pay for plays. I don't know if I've been under a rock or all of a sudden the paid media bandwagon is hitting my personal network. But I'm seeing an overload of businesses opt into these paid media opportunities. So I'd love to hear your take on this, are pay for plays worth it. And maybe let's back up a second what is a quote unquote, pay for play? Let's go.

Toni Harrison

Okay pay for play would be when you pitch a news outlet, and they say, Oh, this would be a great topic, we'd love to cover it. The article will cost and I've heard everything from a range of \$500 for one article, or it's up to \$20,000, because we do an article and we do an interview. And it's, so it becomes no longer the traditional to the traditional route of PR was that it was earned. You had to pitch the reporter make it newsworthy, and then hopefully, you'd make it into the story. Advertising is paid, right? You buy the ad, it goes away you want it. What we're seeing is the merging now, where it's a reporter, kinda, but they sort of want to sell you, I've had this happen the opposite way as well. Typically, a news outlet will tell you, they should. Ethics should demand that they tell you on the front end, we only cover pay for play. So we can continue talking if you're interested in paying. I'll get to my thoughts on that in just one second. But just recently, as recently as last week, we finished an interview, it was a great interview with the client and the reporter sent sent us a draft which I thought was really interesting. I said reporters usually don't send drafts but Okay, I guess he just wanted to check makes really nice. editor. And the editor then writes back and says this is a great article, but seems more like a paid piece. We'd be happy to run it for this cost. Um, so what are my thoughts on that? My thoughts are the Blurred Lines of PR and advertising are a serious disservice. Here's why. If I can pay you to run anything, that means the credibility, the authenticity, any of that is out the window, it really doesn't matter. Because if I can pay for it, I can be slanted and what have you. Also, I'm sorry, but it's not journalism, and it's not news. Then it's paid content. It's an advertorial. So we only see editorials all the time, every now and then you'll see an article and maybe way at the top or at the bottom and frame print and grayed out, maybe italics a little bit, it says advertorial that's pay for play. I think it also does a disservice to consumers, or, you know, just the market in general, because now, are you getting real fresh information? Or are you just getting an ad disguised as news, that's sort of what pay for play is?

Lexie Smith

Yes. And quick side note, I at 7am, this Saturday went on a rampage on my Instagram stories for THEPRBAR about some of my thoughts on this topic. Because like I said, I've been seeing everywhere, what I've been seeing lately, is media, quote, I'm doing air quotes, media companies, reaching out to a lot of coaches, saying, pay us and we'll get you into Yahoo, we'll get you into medium. And what they end up doing is they pay and put a press release onto a wire that then gets syndicated on to an outlet like Yahoo Finance. And now these coaches are saying, Oh, I was just named by Yahoo Finance as top x. Anyways, to wrap up my tangent, there's so much smoke and mirrors in that and it's

not authentic. Right, I'm not not passing judgment, I just there is a difference, I think is what I'm getting at.

Toni Harrison

One, one quick tip, whenever a release is issued that way, and it says I was just named this by Yahoo, try searching for that article in Google under the news tab, you won't find it. It's not coded the same way pay for play is not it does not appear in searches the same way as actual news content. So that's also a big difference in the difference in the results on the back end. I think it's it's it's becoming more common, why revenue streams,

Lexie Smith

right,

Toni Harrison

that likes me to make money. If I had a news director once when I was in the newsroom, who said, hey, guess what all of you reporters and anchors, you're actually overhead. You're not making us any money. The ads are what make us the money. And so I think that's what when the did when digital came in. And it's like why we need to have more content and get it out there. This really became a business model, which is why I think it's a disservice to the industry and the information. I understand it. Business is what it is, and we got to keep moving. But as a true journalist and someone who has, I have a BJ a Bachelor's in journalism, so I'm, I'm pretty traditional with the journalism and ethics in journalism don't allow pay for play.

Lexie Smith

Yeah. And I think from my standpoint, as an educator, I just want people to be educated on understanding what these are and what they are not. And anyways, I could agree and probably have a whole episode on on thoughts. But thank you for clarifying that. I think you just pointed out something that I've been very passionately trying to share as of late, and I know where we're coming kind of close to the end here. I have one more kind of really important question for you before I wrap up with a fun question. Okay, here we go. So, earlier this year, you were kind enough to weigh on an article that I published on, it was called How to publicly navigate communication topics surrounding racial inequality, diversity, inclusion, and more. Amongst all of the insightful thoughts that you did share you ended by mentioning the following statement. Using your voice is the first step towards action. Can you provide a bit more context on how founders other publicists are really anyone listening can or should speak up on such topics?

Toni Harrison

Sure. So for our industry colleagues in the PR industry, I would say we use our voice, if you will, sometimes it's the clients message coming out of our voice. We use our voices every single day to sway media sentiment and news conversations. You cannot tell me that at a time like this we cannot also use our tools, our resources and our relationships to sway us content in the direction of progress. So that's there. So all of us, we don't have to learn a new skill. That's what's so beautiful about what we do to make a difference with what's going on right now, we don't have to learn a new skill, we can use our media relationships, our ability to write our ability to present, to really, really make a difference. For

the For everyone else, whether you're a founder, whether you're a CEO, or a board chair, making decisions where an executive team leadership requires what us to lead. And a lot of times whether your company is large or small, everyone under we can say, Hey, we don't do top down management, all of that great. But people by default, still look up to whom, to the founder to the leader, if you are not walking the walk, or talking the talk, or at least making it something that people should feel comfortable addressing. That's the problem. The problem now, it with what's going on, is the lack of communication and collaboration. I can't see how any of us are going to progress past what we're seeing right now. If you look at just recently, we saw the CEO of Wells Fargo, make a comment about he couldn't hire more black candidates, because they weren't in the pool. He didn't have the right pool of candidates, right there. If he had communication and collaboration internally, I'd like to think he would not have made such a statement. Hopefully somebody would have told him you can't say that. But the point is, that communication and collaboration is how we will start to tare down the walls we're faced with and why that's so important to PR is because we're the ones doing the scripting, we're talking to the media to pitch the story and determine the angle and we're scripting our clients right. And for the clients who are delivering it, you are the messenger. So for all of those reasons combined, we need to focus on progress, not problems and opportunities, not obstacles, and to do that communication is required. And communication requires us to talk and to understand one another and that is why silence just won't work right now.

Beautifully said and I know you're just grazing the surface here. What I will do is I'll include this article in the show notes for anyone listening, you can read more of what Toni had to say and others on the topic because it is really really important. And not to shift from a really serious important topic to one that's a little less serious, but hey, this is the Pitchin' and Sippin' podcast so naturally, we're gonna shimmy on over to this question what I which I always like to wrap up with So what can we find you sippin' favorite beverage can be alcoholic or non alcoholic?

Toni Harrison

Oh What are you going to find me sipping it is definitely going to be wine. I am in an oenophilia. I love wine. I study wine. I'm so upset with what's happening in Northern California right now. So it would definitely be wine now in the summer I live in Houston as we opened with so it is extremely, extremely hot. So that is usually a white burgundy. Or a rose a champagne. Red wine is actually my favorite. And I like red wine blends. It's just too hot in Houston in the summer but again a nice blended red wine. Delicious

Lexie Smith

I mean I love everything you just said and then some yeah I'm a temperature and a time of day person. So if it's hot out I want rose or white wine yeah evening relaxing I want some red steak night I want some red. So

Toni Harrison

Let's go get happy hour

Lexie Smith

I know right there we go. Back when the world is you know a little more open and you are in so I'm actually I don't know if you know this I'm about an hour north of LA but next time you head over to California we'll have to meet up for someone I would love it.

Toni Harrison

As soon as it's safe to do so you will

Lexie Smith

When the World semi resumes back to some form of safe normalcy. But on that note, I could literally keep you here all day but I know you have 1,000,001 things to do and clients to serve and be brilliant with. So I just want to say thank you so much for joining us.

Toni Harrison

This is great and congratulations to you on launching this podcast. You are visionary. And I am so delighted to know you and to count you as my colleague and great for you to like, this is awesome.

Lexie Smith

Thank you so much. That was so nice. All right, on that note, I'm going to go right. Yeah. Thank you so much, Tony. Have a great rest of your day.

Toni Harrison

Thank you. You too.

Lexie Smith

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