

# Measuring Media Understanding Ensures A Winning Strategy

Company: **MetLife**  
Agency: **David Michaelson & Company, LLC**  
Timeframe: **2001-2003**  
Budget: **\$20,000**

David Michaelson knows how to face a challenge head-on. In a recent group of studies conducted by **David Michaelson & Company, LLC**, for insurance giant **MetLife**, content analysis took a new turn by examining not only what was in media reports, but also contemplating what was missing from them, as well as what was misreported. The discovery of this information vacuum spawned a new tactic for media relations at MetLife.

At the heart of the studies were the baby boomers and their imminent foray into the world of retirement. To a large extent, the focus of employers, the press and the financial services industry had been on saving for retirement. But consumers were finding it difficult to gather accurate information about how best to avoid outliving their nest eggs.

Insurance companies have always been in the business of retirement, using annuities as a key way for people to purchase insurance. But, says Michaelson, “The media were misrepresenting a lot of the issues.” The challenge for MetLife was to get the media to

write more about the product concept, and in the right way.

Toni Griffin, director of public relations for MetLife, says, “Before we could tailor the strategy, we wanted to conduct research to find out what reporters were saying and how to craft specific messages pertinent to the campaign. Often, PR practitioners design a strategy with key messages to convey without getting the lay of the land about a particular service or company. We did the research hoping this will become more important to PR practitioners in future.”

During presentations that released the survey findings in New York and Washington, a finance reporter from **AP** put the challenge in a nutshell. She asked, “How can we expect our readers to understand these products when we don’t understand them ourselves?”

Between 2001 and 2003, Michaelson’s company looked at what the media was saying about personal finance from four different angles - specifically, what the media reported correctly, what they said that was partially correct but could be seen as misleading, what they said that was completely wrong, and most importantly, what they did not say that they should have said. Analysis focused on all articles on income annuities that appeared in the top 25 major market daily newspapers, personal finance publications and personal finance columns at major business and news magazines.

The key findings indicated that three out of four of the stories on annuities came up short in supplying needed information. At least one serious error or omission surfaced in 74 percent of the articles, largely in the areas of perfor-

mance and costs. The survey also revealed that the stories were more likely to leave out important information altogether than to include wrong or incomplete statements.

According to a white paper written by Michaelson and Griffin, a sea change has taken place in the coverage of income annuities in major consumer media over the past four years, largely as a result of MetLife’s efforts. An analysis performed in 2004 demonstrated that this growth includes an increase in how much coverage was being provided, as well as a boost in the accuracy of the reports.

In 2004, more reporters covered the story (a 45 percent increase) and their coverage was measurably more accurate: 53 percent of the stories contained errors, compared with more than 60 percent between 2001 and 2003.

MetLife’s takeaway in this instance was an acknowledgment that it needed to focus its media relations efforts on the reporters and publications that were perpetrating the errors and omissions.

“If you take the traditional approach of looking at what was actually written, you get an accurate view of an inaccurate story,” says Michaelson. “The barn door is open.” To ensure the horse doesn’t bolt, you need to ensure correctness and accuracy of your messaging. **PRN**

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## DO IT YOURSELF?

Until recently, many content analysts did not assume that erroneous reporting could be a major factor in the failure to achieve a program’s communications goals. Content analysis tends to focus on tonality rather than simple reporting accuracy. This makes it impossible to implement a corrective media strategy, which in turn further muddles the message that is getting out to the public.

Studies conducted for **MetLife** on annuities and long-term care insurance concentrated on accuracy of coverage, producing measurable improvements in the quantity and quality of its media coverage in those areas. But it’s not the easiest or the least expensive process; researchers and coders must have in-depth knowledge of the subject of the studies in order to recognize errors and gaps in information.

“You have to rely on experts,” says Toni Griffin of MetLife. “When we relied on David [Michaelson] to do our research, we had our own product experts and met with David to carefully identify how to code the research. The company experts need to collaborate with researchers.”

Personal finance is a complicated subject for reporters, but MetLife felt it was imperative for writers to understand the topic of annuities. Griffin says reporters “should immerse themselves in the subject matter to write about the topic and help their readers make important decisions.”

While retaining an expert to conduct this kind of research upfront can be costly, Michaelson and Griffin stress that the return on using this method of analysis is well worth the cost. And Griffin notes that even small companies can undertake this kind of effort, if the scope of the study is not prohibitively large. **PRN**