



## **PR Tactics**

*(Impact Award winner from the Business Marketing Association)*

### **Writing instruction helps PR pros break through to the media**

**By Jack E. Appleman, CBC**

There's a wealth of talent in the PR profession. We've got specialists in Web development, viral marketing, blogging, VNR production and more. Some PR firms have begun distributing high-tech press releases with logos, videos and links to blogs and other product information. PR pros have embraced technology and continue to devise new ways to communicate with the media, clients and prospects.

But can they effectively deliver their information? In other words, can they write well? Not well enough, according to feedback from some journalists I recently spoke with. One complained about press releases with jargon and corporate-speak. Another said that he gets many releases with leads that are "too cute" and lack news value.

The biggest faux pas among PR writers is the failure to immediately convey their essential message. Simply said, they don't get to the point soon enough. The techniques needed to solve this problem can best be demonstrated with press release leads and headlines, and the skills learned can easily be transferred to pitch letters, Web copy, brochures, articles, new business proposals and other documents. Let's look at the process for developing a press release.

### **Think like the media**

Before you start writing, put yourself in the shoes of the editor, writer or producer. Forget the hype from your client who believes this product or service will save the world, and figure out the legitimate news angle. Then visualize how that article would come across in a magazine or what your guest would discuss on a talk show. Ask yourself if this story would intrigue the audience.

## Lead with news

Once you've developed a viable story idea, craft the words that will entice journalists or producers - among the most impatient human beings on this planet. You could argue that many of them have short attention spans when responding to your phone pitch. It's no different when they're reading your press release. One editor put it bluntly. "If the copy doesn't excite me within 20 words, I won't read the rest of it."

An effective lead can mean the difference between placement and frustration. It could also mean the difference between a high-profile feature and a hard-to-find blurb. The best advice: Convey the news quickly. Below are two leads for the same story aimed at a technology editor.

1. *A new, revolutionary multi-core server is now available from ABC Technologies, according to an announcement made today. The server uses advanced processor technologies, and it better facilitates enhanced data transmission capabilities, especially with speed, which can now be five to 10 times greater. ABC's design of the server was based on the needs of small employers, who, in telephone surveys, indicated that speed was the number one concern.*
2. *ABC Technologies today disclosed details of its new multi-core server designed to help small employers transfer data up to 10 times faster.*

Though the first lead contains legitimate news value, it's loaded with no-no's that would turn off most editors. The first is the cliché "revolutionary." Next is the wordy language laced with jargon: "better facilitates enhanced data capabilities." And the copy takes too long to explain the news, frustrating journalists to the point of moving on to another release. The second lead is written in simple language that clearly explains the key benefit: "transfer data up to 10 times faster."

## Break through with compelling subject lines

Before getting the media to read your lead and hopefully the rest of the press release, you've got to get them to click on your subject line. To write a compelling subject line, put yourself in the place of that journalist. Picture this scene:

A stressed out editor stares into a computer screen, hastily scanning hundreds of subject lines, most bound for deletion. How will yours survive and be considered for a story? In the words of Jim Morrison of the Doors, you need to "break on through to the other side," where editors, writers and producers click through to the text of your release.

Take time to construct words that convey news and intrigue journalists or producers. For example, if you were a business editor for a daily newspaper, which subject line would you be more likely to open?

1. XYZ revenues increase 10 percent in first quarter of 2006 as CEO looks to bright future
2. XYZ's 10 percent revenue hike means 2,000 to be hired by Nov. 1

The second one frames the news in terms of the big picture, explaining that the revenue hike will bring 2,000 new jobs unlike the first vague subject line

## **Consider PR writing instruction**

If you suspect that the writing at your firm falls short, solicit the opinions of account supervisors and other senior executives. Should they confirm this problem, identify which individuals need to improve their writing. Then select an instructor, either one of your senior account people who writes at a high level or an outside instructor, preferably one with experience in the PR profession.

A writing workshop could help PR pros at all levels. A session for senior executives could focus on writing to entice high-level journalists and on making new business proposals stand out from competitors.

To minimize the ego problem, announce to all appropriate staff that the workshop is available to them. Then supervisors could recommend that others who report to them to enroll. This way, at least some who really need it will volunteer for the workshop instead of being drafted. For those who must be drafted into the workshop, explain that it's an opportunity to take their writing to a new level. Stress that most PR pros - at all levels - could probably benefit from a writing workshop if they had the time.

Working with the instructor, develop a questionnaire for those enrolled in the course. Ask which documents are most problematic, their biggest challenges as a PR writer and what they want to learn at a workshop. Request sample documents from those registered for the course, anything from press releases and pitch letters to Web copy and client activity reports.

Sit down with the writing instructor to review samples and identify common problems so that workshops can be tailored to the participants' needs. Decide whether a half-day or full-day training would work best, and limit the size of each workshop to 20 people. Try to incorporate one-on-one meetings with the trainer, which can prove critical in addressing the individual needs of each employee.

## **Evaluate and follow up**

Immediately after the workshop, ask participants to complete written evaluations. Then, in the next few weeks, ask for their reactions on how much their writing has improved and whether additional group or individual sessions are needed. Talk to the instructor about how to monitor the employees' writing progress, perhaps through e-mail or phone.

In the rush to crank out press releases, pitch letters, Web sites, activity reports, new business proposals and other copy swiftly, many PR executives overlook the quality of writing at their firms. If that's the case at your agency, consider writing instruction tailored to the needs of your employees. It could make a huge difference in how effectively your messages are delivered to the media, clients and prospects, which could go a long way in improving your bottom line.

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