

WRITING FOR RESULTS

Subject Lines and Leads That Editors Will Notice

Some emails are the seeds of national news stories. Others never cross a pair of eyes. Successful correspondences share one highly visible feature — a subject line that cannot be dismissed.

“The subject line is the launching pad for your email,” says Jack Appleman, writing instructor, coach and author of the Amazon top-selling book *10 Steps to Successful Business Writing (2nd edition)*. “It sets the tone and can make a memorable impression.” In the case of pitch-writing, a gripping subject can make or break a nonprofit’s shot at much-needed coverage. Editors want to see potential value, and they want to see it quickly.

Appleman’s objective is to teach people to get better results with their writing. In the case of nonprofit communications teams, he urges them to prepare concise, clear messages that will resonate with members of the media, and that process often begins inside a cluttered inbox.

“The purpose of the subject line is to grab an editor’s attention and persuade them to continue on to your pitch,” Appleman says. “It won’t necessarily tell the entire story, but it should intrigue the journalist enough to open the email.”

It’s a mistake to throw away your subject line by offering dull facts, irrelevant information or an unclear request. Be specific about what you want with those precious first words. Here Appleman shares a list of do’s and don’ts that nonprofit communications professionals can use to create subject lines and leads that editors will notice.

DO:

- Tell the gist of the story within the subject line.
- Keep subject lines short and sweet, abbreviating words when it makes sense.
- Mirror the headline format of the publication you’re pitching.
- Where possible, convey the problem and solution in your subject line.
- Offer tailored subject lines that are relevant to each recipient/publication.
- Lead with an impressive or exciting stat, if available.
- Tie your nonprofit into a bigger, newsworthy trend.
- Keep the energy high with a compelling lead that expands on the subject line.
- Be explicit — explain exactly what you want from the recipient.
- Be clever, focused and persuasive.

DON'T:

- Become longwinded.
- Present too many ideas in the lead.
- Lead with dull points or information that isn't newsworthy.
- Be too presumptuous — your pitch is unlikely to be an instant hit with everyone.
- Overhype the story with baseless superlatives.
- Overuse exclamation points.
- Be disrespectful.

Never underestimate the power of a strong introduction. "Writing compelling subject lines is one of the most valuable skills for any communicator," Appleman says. ◆

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