

The Sources *Hot*Link

Tips and Practical Ideas to Get Positive News Coverage

Number Nine, Fall 1998

Tools of the Trade

Communication Arts – The Science of “Plain Language”

“Plain Language” is the art and science of producing attractive and readable documents that can be understood by their intended readers. Plain language writing is a process that considers the needs of the readers, the purpose of the document, the message to be delivered and the constraints upon the writer. Plain language as a method adopts techniques from market research, adult education theory, human ergonomics, usability testing and other fields to create “engineered communications”.

Why would you need to hire someone else to do plain language? Plain language requires the skills of a

- ▶ researcher
- ▶ writer or reporter
- ▶ editor
- ▶ educator
- ▶ information designer
- ▶ usability tester

Most organizations do not have these resources on staff. A plain language expert brings skills, training and expertise from each of these areas and more.

Janet Dean, Membership Coordinator of the Plain Language Consultants Network, says, “The people who deliberately apply the “plain language process” can be found in many government offices, in marketing and communications departments in business, and in legal departments and law offices. The key element that distinguishes plain language process from other approaches is the focus on the readers. Plain language process includes advance audience research and post-production document evaluation by the user and it may involve collaborative writing with sample audience members.”

Plain language consultants handle specif-

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How Many Spokespersons?

The last thing we want is to communicate a mixed message to our public. That is why some organizations have only one spokesperson. But in many cases this practice can be dangerous, leading to a lack of credibility.

Take the following scenario and apply it to your organization: at a regional medical centre, a reporter starts digging for information about why a certain medication is missing.

The reporter finds out that a former patient is the lead suspect. The reporter wants to interview the medical centre’s CEO and the chief of security. Instead, the medical centre has designated the public relations director as the only spokesperson.

If you had a family member being treated at this facility, who would you rather see on the news answering questions? If only the public relations director speaks, the public may think the medical centre is hiding something or has brushed the incident off. The public relations director should only be the spokesperson as a last resort.

Sure, there will be pressure to put on the public relations director to “do the talking, after all, that’s what we hired you for!” However, the best way to win over the public is for the real sources of information to show their faces.

The most seasoned PR pros know that even though they may give effective media interviews, a key to maximizing media coverage is to help reporters get to the source. The bottom line is that if you are responsible for the image of your organization, I recommend encouraging the experts to be available.

If those who have information are not available, reporters will try to find another expert opinion, possibly from another organization. That means a lost opportunity to tell your side of the story.

Speaking with one voice means your spokespersons should deliver the same message. It does not mean use only one spokesperson. If the news media representative knows your experts are available and reliable, you are more likely to be called and more importantly, to be believed.

Courtesy of Al Rothstein Media Services, Inc., specialists in spokesperson training and media relations seminars.

Phone: 1-800-453-6352

E-mail: mediabrain@mindspring.com

WWW: <http://mediabrain.home.mindspring.com>

Picking The Right Spokespersons

1. Who is the real expert?
2. Are they available?
3. Can they speak in simple terms?
4. Can they carry your message?
5. Can they handle hard questions?

For handy tips on choosing contact persons for your *Sources* listing, check out the article on page four, or call Tracey Parn, your Listing Co-ordinator at (416) 964-7799 or E-mail sources@sources.com

HotLink Lends An Ear

Do you have questions or comments about this newsletter, your listing in *Sources*, or any of the services *Sources* provides? Call us at (416) 964-7799 or sources@sources.com by E-mail. Your suggestions and observations are important to us!

Put Yourself in The Spotlight!

Display advertising puts your listing in the limelight every time a reader opens *Sources*. Deloitte & Touche, Citizenship & Immigration Canada, CN and many others use advertisements to direct journalists to their listings and also to raise awareness about their specific services like resource materials, hot-lines, media directories or World Wide Web sites. Call Graham Blair at (416) 964-7799 to find out how advertising in *Sources* can get you rave reviews!

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Communications Arts Continued from Page 1

ic communications projects when audience-comprehension is considered especially important. Some specialize in different fields such as health or law while some concentrate on user-testing, project management, or online applications. PLCN members also help organizations redesign communication practices to better serve the organization's mandate and meet the needs of the public, clients, and staff.

Cheryl Stephens, a lawyer by training and the PLCN General Coordinator, advises that there is no standard qualification for plain language consultants so potential employers should check the resumes and references of those who claim a plain language expertise. She says, "It is important to ask, in your request for proposals, for a description of the process the consultant recommends and the time frame to reach the final product."

Ensure that your consultant will work with you to become clear on these questions:

- What is your reason for developing the materials and what do you hope to accomplish with them
- Who is your target audience and what are their abilities, interests, and attitudes

- How will you evaluate the success of the final product or test comprehension
- What is your perspective or point of view on the issue you are presenting
- What formats can you use and why are your choices limited
- What are your budget and time constraints
- What skills and resources will be needed for the project

The next time you are launching a communication project, consider adding a plain language consultant to your project.

The Plain Language Consultants Network's listing appears on page 296 of the Summer 1998 issue of Sources.

Visit the Plain Language Consultants Network on the Internet at http://plain-languagenetwork.com/Organizations/IP_LCN, send E-mail to plain@web.net or contact Stephens and Dean's Plain Language Center in British Columbia at 604-5215457 or fax 604-521-8066.

What do you seek from plain language?

Assess a document by asking these questions:

- Will the reader refer to the document?
- Is it attractive?
- Is it legible?
- Does it appear interesting?
- Does it appear relevant to the reader's needs?
- Will the reader take the time to read the document?
- Is the information easily accessible?
- Is it well organized and understandable?
- Is it clear what action is expected of the reader?
- Can the reader understand the language and concepts?
- Is it clear?
- Is it concrete?
- Can the reader relate to the content?
- Does it answer the reader's questions?
- Is there too much or too little information?

Enhance Your Image in Novel Ways

Soft marketing supports and image enhancement strategies require as much consideration as any other portion of your marketing plan. How you go about this will depend to some extent on your type of business and also on your personal comfort level relative to the extracurricular activities. Here are but a few examples:

Service Clubs

Becoming a member in a service club is not something everyone enjoys. Such clubs do give you a great opportunity to meet other businesspeople, and few of us would argue the merits of the community work accomplished by these organizations.

The decision to go this route is obviously a very personal matter. A cautionary note for the newly self-employed: don't overextend yourself by taking on too many club responsibilities in the first year. There will be time enough to increase your participation once you have your company on firmer ground.

Chamber of Commerce/ Board of Trade

The advantages of joining either of these two organizations parallel what you can accomplish by becoming involved in a service club.

The Chamber of Commerce and Board of Trade focus specifically on business issues and networking. There is a great opportunity to acquire germane information from the guest speakers who tend to frequent their functions.

Before leaping into a decision, check with some of your business associates and maybe attend a few meetings to see if this is a good fit for you and your company. The cautionary note I raised under the service club heading also applies to this area.

Professional Associations

Joining a professional association can be an excellent way to meet a wide variety of other businesspeople who might utilize the services of your company. At the same time, such associations can provide a great

venue for you to keep current on what is transpiring in your field of endeavour.

Sponsorships

This is a more overt method of getting your name in front of the public. It is certainly not a route chosen by every consultant. One of my associates is involved in minor hockey, and sponsoring a team is his way to give something back to the community while at the same time putting in a good word for his company.

I know people who annually sponsor a hospitality suite during the yearly conference put on by their professional association. The list of examples is endless. You do need to bear in mind the cost, even more so while you are starting up your company.

Guest Speaking and TV Appearances

By becoming a consultant, you are saying you are an expert in a certain area. Take every opportunity to get your message across to various groups. Often you are not selling your services or products, but you are using a speaking venue as a means to illustrate your knowledge about topics relating to your business.

You might discover that the observations you have put forth in a recent proposal for service are easily transformed into an interesting and informative article.

If you systematically make yourself available as a guest speaker (*Editor's note: Congratulations! You are already doing this by listing in Sources!*), you will be amazed at how quickly people begin naturally to think of you as *the* expert. Public speaking can also lead to TV or radio appearances on business shows or as a panel member at a symposium. Speaking is not for everyone, but remember: it's important to make effective presentations.

Articles in Newspapers, Magazines and Journals

Getting your name in print is a good way to build awareness about your company. Not everyone is a professional writer

but stop and consider just how many times you have been asked to prepare a formal written document.

Before you put pen to paper or fingers to the keyboard, take the time to review some of the newspaper or magazine articles written by your peers. You might discover that the observations you have put forth in a recent proposal for service are easily transformed into an interesting and informative article.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Do a little rewriting and editing and send your article to a couple of potential users and see what happens. You might want to start off small by offering your work to an organization that has a newsletter relating to your type of business. If you know someone in the publishing business, phone and get some input.

Reprinted with permission from From Starting to Marketing... Your Own Consulting Business by Reg Pirie. Reg Pirie is an independent consultant and author. You can find his listing, Ink Ink Publishing, on page 260 of the Summer 1998 issue of Sources.

Oops!

You may have noticed an error in your address when you received your last issue of *HotLink*. No need to fear, we do have your correct address in our database. Unfortunately, a problem occurred at our mailing house, throwing many postal codes out of sync with their addresses. Our apologies for any confusion or delay this may have caused. Thanks very much to all of you who took a moment to bring the problem to our attention.

The Sources HotLink

Keep your media info up to date

By now, all organizations listed with *Sources* should have received a package containing a printout of the information included in your current media listing, together with a form asking you to update, confirm, or renew your listing information.

In order for changes to your media profile to appear in the next print edition of *Sources* (Winter 1998/99), we need to receive them by **October 23, 1998**.

Submitting changes by the deadline will ensure that journalists have the latest information on your organization.

Please sign and return your form even if there are no changes in your information.

If you need help with any aspect of your listing, please give us a call at *Sources*. We'd love to help.

Tracey Parn
Listings Co-ordinator

P.S. If you have lost, misplaced, or didn't receive your package, don't worry! Give me a call at *Sources*, a.s.a.p., and I'll fax you another one.

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News from Sources

"I Love Sources! It's an Exceptional Resource."*

Well, Fall has arrived, bringing with it crisp weather and new beginnings. Back to school has affected us at *Sources* – Jacqueline Peeters, formerly one of your listing co-ordinators, has set sail for new things at the University of Toronto Law School. Coming on board is Sherry Mayes. Her experience as an editorial assistant will be a valuable asset to *Sources*.

Speaking of things new, *Sources* was contacted in the beginning of September by Canada's new daily newspaper, the *National Post*. They wanted to be sure their offices were well stocked with *Sources* before they begin production. At their request, we couriered over 50 "start-up" copies to their editorial department. In the same vein, I recently spoke to Lee Turner, projects editor for *Forever Young*, a lifestyle magazine. He called desperate for a recent copy of *Sources*. His outdated issue, bearing a sticker reading "Lee's Bible, Do Not

Touch" had finally given up the ghost. I sent Lee sufficient copies to satisfy all the voracious reporters on his staff and keep *Sources* thefts to a minimum! At present, we are fulfilling about 10 new requests a week from freelancers and publications who call begging for the current *Sources*.

It's a busy time of year for everyone, but one thing should not slip off your to-do list. Make sure that your *Sources* listing reflects any changes your organization has undergone in the past six months. A moment now will save endless frustration on discovering that journalists have been calling for you at an out-of-service number!

Have a healthy and productive Fall!

Kirsten Cowan
Editor, *The Sources HotLink*

* Excerpt from a journalist's request for the latest *Sources*.

Getting the most from Sources

Connecting directly with Canadian journalists

Contacts are the people you've selected to respond to journalists. Many organizations funnel media calls to their public relations departments. Others select contacts possessing expertise or choose contacts from each province. Some organizations include only their main phone and fax numbers. It's up to you to decide what is most appropriate for your organization.

Generally you'll get more for your media relations dollar by including as many contacts as appropriate. A generous 15 contacts, each with full co-ordinates, are included with your listing.

A contact can simply be a name and phone number. We recommend: name, title, mailing address, phone number, fax, E-mail, World Wide Web address, an after-hours number and cellular phone number. The more communication options you provide the more your *Sources* listing will appeal to journalists.

Canada has five time zones. Additionally, the media often call after regular business hours. The easier you are to reach the more likely they are to

quote you. Respond as promptly as possible to media calls. If you've listed your E-mail address check it at least daily.

Ensure all your contacts in *Sources* are at least aware of, and preferably briefed about, handling calls from journalists. Review internal policies for handling media calls. Check out the article on telephone procedures in *HotLink 7* – "The Virtual Storefront" for tips on handling media calls.

Monitor your media relations activity. A person in your organization should be given responsibility for keeping track of media coverage. You may be getting more calls than you realize. Each is an opportunity to get your message heard. And clippings and broadcast mentions can be valuable promotional tools.

For help with contacts or any other aspect of your *Sources* listing, call Tracey at (416) 964-7799. For great advice on factors to consider when selecting spokespersons for your organization, take a look at Al Rothstein's article on page one of this issue of *HotLink*.

The Sources *HotLink* – Fall 1998 Phone: (416) 964-7799