

The Sources *Hot*Link

Tips and Practical Ideas to Get Positive News Coverage

Number Thirty-two

www.hotlink.ca

November 2004

The Follow-Up Telephone Call

BY MARK LAVIGNE, APR



When I was a journalist, the inundation of information was mind-boggling. There was a constant incoming mountain of information. News releases arriving by fax, media kits arriving by courier, news wire stories provided by Broadcast News and their commercial counterparts, all followed by hundreds of phone calls made by well intentioned people wanting to know if I had received their information and was interested in their story. Sometimes these calls worked when their news was put into a tight sound bite. Sometimes I would scramble and dig into the blue box looking for a kit that seemed interesting after the “verbal sell.” But not usually.

And now that E-mail has significantly increased the flow of information into newsrooms and freelancers’ home offices, how can one follow-up telephone call cut through all the “noise”? What follows are some suggestions from two journalists in the field.

Marc Saltzman, who is one of North America’s most successful freelance technology journalists in both print and broadcast, receives between 150 and 200 E-mails per day, plus about 10 telephone calls per day. He hates the phone. “The phone ruins my writing flow, E-mail is much more conducive,” he says.

Which leads to follow-up call tip #1. Find out the journalist’s preference in communication. Is it E-mail, telephone or fax?

Saltzman also stresses that practitioners should “choose their battles” for follow-up calls. “Isolate the important stories.” He also notes that PR should do their homework. Don’t follow-up on an

inapplicable lifestyle story to a tech product journalist for example.

John Valorzi is the Business Editor at Canadian Press, which is the nerve system for the Canadian news business and one of a handful of newsgathering cooperative organizations that feed the world’s news outlets. He receives about 200 E-mails a day and gets between 75 and 100 telephone calls per day. He likes phone calls by the way, as long as they are worthwhile and provide context. “I don’t mind receiving (follow-up) calls, but more than half are from juniors who simply ask if I got the release, not from seniors who can debate things or tell me the context.”

Valorzi points out that two or three times a week he gets follow-up calls from practitioners wondering if a release is of interest when it’s actually been on the Canadian Press wire for three or four hours. He begs that we media monitor before we call.

He also begs for data that makes a story newsworthy. For example, if a product is being launched, how many jobs will it create, how much money will be spent on building the new plant. He notes *that* is worthwhile follow-up contact information that *will* interest him.

And he reminds us to do post-mortems on stories that bomb out. “Did it have hard edge, quantifiable information that lifted the release beyond just a product release? Before being called 100 times, the PR person has to understand that content is king.”

Mark LaVigne, APR, is Past President of the Canadian Public Relations Society (Toronto). He runs a media relations and media coaching firm based in Aurora, Ontario where he can be reached at (905) 841-2017 or mark.lavigne@sympatico.ca.

Tips for Making the Call

BY MARK LAVIGNE

- ▶ Find out the journalist’s preferred medium: phone, E-mail, fax
- ▶ Always ask if they’re on deadline
- ▶ Pay close attention to your E-mail’s subject line
- ▶ Don’t tease to enable a follow-up call as an excuse
- ▶ Don’t wait to the last minute to follow-up (a week before an event is perfect)
- ▶ Make sure the beat matches the content before you follow-up
- ▶ Provide a customized story angle or context in follow-up communications
- ▶ Pick your battles, don’t follow-up on everything
- ▶ Media monitor before following-up, you may have already made the news wire or Web site



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SOURCES *HotLink*

November 2004

ISSN: 1480-2821

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Sources HotLink is free to organizations listed with *Sources*. Subscriptions are \$20/year for those not listed with *Sources*.

Subscription orders must be prepaid. Visa or MasterCard accepted.

Editor: Lynn Fenske
Typesetting and Design:
Elaine Farragher/AlterLinks

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Publications Mail Agreement #1715615

When to Contact the Media

BY BARBARA FLORIO GRAHAM

The following is an excerpt from Barbara's book "Five Fast Steps to Low-Cost Publicity".

Daily Newspapers:

- Editors of special sections that appear once a week can usually be reached the day the section appears or the day after, after 10:00 a.m.
- News assignment desks should have a news and photo alert a week in advance of the event, with two follow-up phone calls, one a few days before the event, and the second early in the day of the event. These calls should be made before 10:00 a.m.

Magazines:

- Most monthlies should be contacted at the beginning of the month.
- Ask when their deadlines are for upcoming issues, and when the best time is to call.
- If you don't know the magazine, ask the receptionist whom you should contact and when.

Local Wire Services:

- In a large metropolitan area, ask if they have a daybook listing all the events planned.
- Get your material to them well in advance of your event and follow up with a phone call a day or two before to make sure your event is listed and to ask for a wire reporter or assignment editor to cover it.

Target Your Media Lists:

- Try to address your information to a specific writer or producer. To obtain these names, watch TV program credits, and note bylines on stories pertaining to your field.
- Don't forget to ask telephone operators, researchers, and secretaries, as they are the best sources

for this information. Check with them for correct spelling and pronunciation of names.

- Keep your pitch to one page, in a light, lively style.
- Keep the local angle in mind.
- Offer sidebars.
- Suggest alternate dates for interviews.

Timing:

- Watch key national trends to determine the best time to place stories in the media:
- Census reports can indicate how demographics and lifestyles are changing.
- Ads show needs to be filled and level of competition.
- Counter trends can also make good copy.
- Sales figures indicate consumer interest.



Barbara Florio Graham is the author of "Five Fast Steps to Better Writing", "Five Fast Steps to Low-Cost Publicity" and "Mewsings/Musings". Her web site is

www.SimonTeaKettle.com.

Let Sources provide E-mail distribution of your news releases

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Getting Ink for Your New Product

BY STEVE SLAUNWHITE

Are you launching an exciting new product? Getting editors to take notice isn't easy.

More than 70% of press releases received by business and trade publications are product-oriented. That percentage is somewhat lower for consumer publications, and lower still for broadcast media, but not by a huge margin. So the competition for editor attention is fierce.

How do you cut through the clutter? Applying the basics of crafting an effective media release is a good place to start. You need a strong headline, a captivating lead, an interesting hook, and a compelling presentation of the 5 W's. But if you want to really give your product launch the edge, here are some *additional* writing strategies worth considering:

Avoid being salesy

This may seem obvious, but even experienced PR practitioners can let their enthusiasm spill onto the page or screen, resulting in writing that is unintentionally promotional. Editors will snub a media release that appears to be a blatant sales message in disguise. So watch the tone.

Choose benefits carefully

In PR Writing 101 we learned to "Stress the benefits." But which benefits? Your new product may have dozens, or even hundreds. Here's a tip: Don't even try to highlight all the benefits. Instead, focus on those things that competing products either can't do or don't do as well. Not only will this make your media release easier to write, you'll be amazed at how fresh and newsworthy it will be.

Put it in context

Editors are constantly lamenting that most media releases they receive are not relevant to their

readers or viewers. So make it obvious that yours is different. Leverage the headline and the lead — the two most scanned sections of a release — to demonstrate *specifically* how your new product will change the lives, work or business of the editor's target audience.

Use testimonials

"But this is a new product," you may be saying. "No one has bought it yet!" That may be true. But you do have customers who have the problem your new product solves. So try to obtain an endorsement of the *solution*, if not the product itself. For example, you may be able to persuade a potential customer to say something like, "Wow. A new processor that makes widgets 22% faster will shorten our production cycle by 40%!"

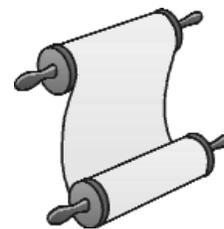
Shake things up

Does your new product challenge the industry status quo? Is it going to topple a few sacred cows? Editors love controversy. For example, vacuum cleaners were designed basically the same way for decades, until a brash upstart company invented the cyclone suction system. That industry hasn't been the same since. So if your new product is going to shake things up, highlight this in the press release.

In a nutshell, editors want the answer to one question: "So what?" How well your media materials answer this question will determine the success of your new product launch campaign.

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News releases that work (and those that don't!)



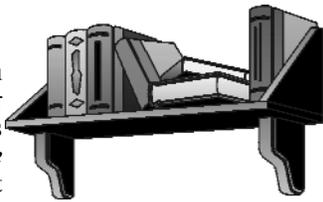
- ▶ **Do** make sure it is newsworthy. Nothing will shoot your credibility more quickly than sending out frequent news releases on unimportant topics.
- ▶ **Do** focus your approach. Target individual section editors of papers, industry and niche publications. Don't forget the powerful reach of community papers, especially when your subject matter is local.
- ▶ **Do** put yourself in the reporter's shoes. Consider the needs of the journalist as far as content, timing, style and length. In other words, Don't send a busy financial reporter a five page sales pitch on your new line of accounting calculators two days before the next "Moneysense" supplement to her paper comes out and expect any coverage!
- ▶ **Do** consider the advantages of "snail-mail". Although the fax machine has become an increasingly popular way to send news releases, many journalists report that they feel overwhelmed by the constant stream of faxes their offices receive. Using the mail also enables you to provide reproduction quality photographs directly with your release, a time-saver that could result in an article on your issue.
- ▶ **Do** include effective contact information. Clear, recognizable phone, E-mail and after-hours information for the appropriate person is vital to the success of a press release. Be sure to include reference to your *Sources* listing ("See our listing on page 256 of the current issue of *Sources*"). Journalists can turn to your listing in their copy and have a capsule description of your organization, reproducible logo, additional contact persons, branch offices and so on.
- ▶ **Don't** assume that writing a news release is straightforward! The style should be tailored to the subject matter of your release and the outlets you are targeting. Industries, media formats and even specific publications have their own style. Consider hiring a professional to help you navigate, especially if you are new to the world of media relations!

New on the Bookshelf

BY LYNN FENSKE

Allan Bonner, the crisis guru (page 181, *Sources* Summer 2004) recently updated his book *Doing and Saying the Right Thing* (Sextant Publishing, 2004, 135 pp., ISBN 0-9731134-1-3). This is the book in which he first introduced his trademark acronym SOCKO (Strategic, Overriding, Communication, Knowledge, Objective) as a powerful communications tool for capitalizing on the mere eight seconds devoted to the average news sound bite. Allan has enhanced the original by adding a highly relevant epilogue about crisis management in our post 9/11 "risk society". This book is a must for any media spokesperson, particularly those navigating rough communications waters. To purchase, contact the author at his web site www.allanbonner.com.

Guide to Media Relations by Irv Schenkler and Tony Herrling is from the Prentice Hall Series in Advanced Business Communications (Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004, 124 pp., ISBN 0-13-140567-5). It's exactly what a busy communications practitioner needs – a quick, concise reference book, not too long and not too simplistic, just a practical, reader-friendly guide to media relations. Written for both novice and seasoned professional, this book summarizes key concepts while offering clear, straightforward tools for maximizing



media coverage. The five main topics covered are: setting media strategy, developing proactive media relations, responding to media calls, dealing with financial media relations (specifically, how to issue

financial news) and handling the media in a crisis.

How to Make the Most of Every Media Appearance (McGraw-Hill, 2004, 200 pp., ISBN 0-07-141671-4) provides media training for the famous and infamous, from the perspective of an Emmy-award winning television producer. As executive producer of "Good Morning America", "The CBS Morning News", "Entertainment Tonight" and "The Dick Cavett Show", author George Merlis has learned a thing or two about mastering the media. While his tone is very showbiz and very Hollywood, with lots of celebrity references, his advice for handling interviews is undeniably first-rate. This book is especially relevant for anyone involved in sports, entertainment or high profile litigation. Chapter 7, entitled "Bushwacked: How to Survive an Ambush Interview and Win a Shoutfest" is a particularly interesting and informative read. You may not be facing an antagonistic serum but don't let that stop you from learning the techniques of diffusing an on-air attack or, as Chapter 11 suggests, getting ready for your fifteen minutes of fame.

Point and Click

Where do you turn when you need to write and distribute a media release? Check out these useful links:

www.cprs.ca is the website for the national office of the Canadian Public Relations Society. Here you can link to one of sixteen regional societies where you can then search locally for PR writers and media specialists to assist you with your latest information release.

www.newswire.ca links you to Canada News Wire (CNW) our nation's most comprehensive news release distribution service. At lightning speed, your time-critical news and information can be sent directly to the media via CNW's massive electronic network.

www.prcanada.ca is the home of Canada's only national online weekly publication featuring articles by seasoned, public relations professionals. Every possible PR topic is covered, with great emphasis on media relations. Be sure to read *Media Matters* by *HotLink* contributor Bill Carney, or check out the archives for articles relevant to your cause.

www.sources.com is still your best bet for obtaining concise and economical directories for creating your own distribution lists that are media and government specific. Sources can E-mail your news releases using its database of both print and broadcast media across the country.

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