

Vol 23, No 3

WRITING CONTESTS



WRITER'S MARKETS

WRITERS

Journal

THE COMPLETE
WRITER'S MAGAZINE

WRITERS' Journal
P.O. Box 394
Perham, MN 56573-0394

**Public
Relations
Tips**

**Quick
Queries**

**Start Your
Own Magazine**

Plus:

**Agent's Corner
Poetry Critique
Effective Screenwriting**

Public Relations Tips from an Editor

How to Solicit Space from the Media

By Amy Cicchese

I've spent nearly five years in different positions at the same wonderful weekly newspaper. I now roost as editor.

On a recent vacation I had time to recall some of the phone conversations I've had with public relations professionals and obvious newcomers to the public relations field. I flinched at the memories of how abrasive and short I could be. I often qualified my anger and frustrations with a muffled, "Don't they know I'm busy?" after I hung up, or "Are they crazy? We would never print anything like that."

While researching the art (and it is an art) of public relations for a novel that I'm writing, I realized how many public relations people are doing it wrong—continuously breaking the rules of publicity. As the person on the receiving end of these frequent blunders, I thought maybe I could help.

I realize that this article could never stop the eager beavers with their follow-up calls, asking, "Did you get my fax?" when what they really want to know is, "Did ya get my fax? Are you gonna use it? Is it gonna be on the front page?"

For those of you in the business who want to generate publicity for yourself or who are self-proclaimed experts, I've compiled a few tips for you.

Know my name

It may seem trivial, but it's the first thing an editor sees on the envelope when shuffling through mail, or on the cover letter when flipping through faxes. On a tough day, there's nothing more annoying to me than seeing the name of my predecessor on a little white label from a database you compiled three years ago. It shows me that you haven't done your homework.

Simply calling me "Editor" is fine, but it conveys laziness. Just like at home, I'm more apt to open mail with my name on it before I'll open a piece addressed to "Homeowner" or "Current Resident."

Also, if the publication has multiple editors, make sure you're sending information to the correct editor,

whether it be a sports editor, community news editor or features editor. You don't want your information misplaced in the shuffle.

Hold the phone

If you're calling to get the correct spelling of my name, you're on the right track. You don't need to talk to me, though, to get that information. Editors are busy people. Their working lives revolve around deadlines—deadlines that have to be met to put a publication out on time. If you need to know an editor's deadline, mailing address, e-mail address or fax number, it's best to get that information from the receptionist or assistant.

If you have a specific question, these qualified people know to transfer you to the editor rather than attempting to answer the question themselves. Also, when you talk to the receptionist or assistant, find out if the editor prefers press releases e-mailed or faxed.

If you'll be sending frequent press releases, know the publication's deadline and most importantly, know which days are best to call the editor. If a newspaper goes to bed on Wednesday, it's obviously not a good day to call. Keep track of this information in a database or three-ring binder. If a magazine wraps up the third week of the month, avoid disturbing editors during that week. When we're busy placing the finishing touches on our masterpiece, we don't want to talk and, unfortunately, we don't have time to listen. **EXCEPTION:** Breaking news is always interesting to me.

3-2-1 contact

If you do happen to get hold of my direct-dial number, which I guard with my life, don't abuse it. If I'm not in the office, leave a message for me, but keep it short! Your name, phone number and a brief sentence will let me know the subject of your call.

If it's an earthshaking, time-sensitive issue, and I may need to contact you immediately, leave me all the numbers where I can contact you, including an "after-hours" number.

What's news?

What a publication identifies as newsworthy all depends on that publication. A business publication is obviously not going to feature the same articles as a Christian newspaper. Therefore, it is important to gather pertinent information on each of the publications to which you will be sending press releases.

First and foremost, know the publication's mission, then tailor your press release to reflect that mission. Is it a weekly newspaper with a goal of delivering community news to a certain area? Is it an eclectic tabloid focusing on music and movies? Is it a computer magazine offering the latest updates in technology for computer users? Think about the subject you want to publicize and make that clear.

Second, know the coverage area of the publication. By sending me a press release about an event that's occurring outside of our newspaper's coverage area, I immediately know, once again, that the PR people did not do their homework. They've just wasted my time.

Most importantly, make sure your press release doesn't sound like an advertisement. Know the difference between advertorial and editorial.

It's important to understand that I can't promise you anything, and I don't favor advertisers. Most editors with ethics don't. If you advertise with our publication, great; but your ad does not guarantee you editorial space. If you want control over the timing, placement and exact wording of your message in a publication, take out an ad.

The 5 W's

Hopefully all public relations people have at least dipped their toes into the journalism reservoir to know that an editor wants the who, what, when, where and why of your press release right off the bat. This isn't a mystery story where the suspense builds. If I get the information I need in the first 10 seconds of reading your press release, there's a good chance I'll continue on for the details. To be news, your press release needs substance.

Check your facts!

Proofreading before sending out information is a given, but you'd be surprised how many public relations professionals slap a press kit together with little regard for correct spellings of names. It's too late after the publication comes out, when Margie Sampson is calling because her name ends in "sen" not "son," to change anything.

Also, double-check financial information, phone numbers and quotes. With quotes, nothing's worse for an editor than having someone call up and say, "I never said that."

To grab an editor's attention, you might also consider sending photos—if warranted. Stories with photos are viewed twice as often, according to what I've heard from readers. However, don't simply grab a snapshot from your archive of photos without knowing its source. Do you own the rights to the photo? Does a photographer need credit if the photo runs

in a publication? This is an important detail. A lazy public relations person could lead to a publication's being sued for copyright infringement. Check your photos!

Punctual PR persons

There's nothing I like better than a public relations person who is organized and on-the-ball. If you have a piece of information that's newsworthy, send it to me while the information is still fresh.

On the other hand, there is nothing more annoying to me than having a PR person call the day before, or in some cases hours before, an event. As I've said before, we in the editorial business work on deadlines and move at a fast pace, but not everything is spur-of-the-moment and we do like to plan ahead when possible. So, if you call me Monday morning to tell me there's going to be a ribbon-cutting ceremony Monday afternoon for the new senior center addition, don't be upset if I don't send a photographer to your event. You haven't given me enough notice.

Mind your manners!

You have a job to do and so do I. Everyone in the public relations ring has an agenda: to give positive attention to your subject. When you talk to an editor, write a letter, or leave a voice-mail message, understand that this publication owes you nothing. If they choose not to print your press release, no matter how earthshakingly important it seems to you, that does not give you the right to question the editor's education level or shout obscenities. Watch your tongue! This is one bridge you don't want to burn, as you'll more than likely send press releases to this publication again. You don't want to be remembered as the "crazy guy," or "wacky woman" who flew off the handle."

Instead, ask the editor if the news you've submitted is a topic he/she wants more information on, or if it's something the publication could use at a later date. Oftentimes, the reason your press release wasn't published is simply a matter of space constraints. If you've followed all the rules, don't take it personally.

Here are a few useful Web sites to help you on your journey to perfecting the art of public relations:

PRSA—Public Relations Society of America

www.prsa.org This site offers information on individual chapters, education and links to other useful sites.

PRSSA—Public Relations Student Society of America

www.prssa.org This organization has a goal of cultivating a favorable relationship between students and professional public relations individuals.

■ *continued on page 15*

■ *Column Writing for Dummies from page 11*

something most neo-columnists don't know and that information alone is worth the price of the book. Think about the paper you will be saving by not putting words in long skinny columns.

A good column—one that is read by two or more family members, plus a friend, and at least one representative of the public-at-large—must be clever, decisive, insightful, and have a touch of humor. The newsstand is the place to find examples of such columns.

To get you started I will hereby provide an example of a clever, insightful, decisive idea that, unfortunately, has no element of humor, otherwise I would have used it myself. Here is that example: "Only self-assured, confident, intelligent people are willing to be seen reading a Dummies book. The genuine moron buys the full 1250 page, Advanced Neo-Cortex Microsurgery, and attempts to compensate for his inadequacies by learning every detail."

If you don't think that was a clever insight that is destined to change the course of human thought patterns, it is possible you are not alone. So come up with your own special idea: perhaps something about the connection between overeating and overweight. You can point out that both have 10 letters, they share the letters o, v, r, g, t and i, and each has two e's. The letters they do not share spell hawn. The significance of that should be discussed.

In your special column you might prefer to compare bipolar disorder and limousines. Or apples and oranges. Whatever your special insight, you must discuss it for approximately 50 sentences.

Don't worry if you find you have nothing much to say; you can simply repeat yourself in different words, or phrase things in a different order. Not having a great deal upon which to expostulate is a predicament that can be overcome by varying your vocabulary. Don't worry about repeating yourself in different words—even if you have nothing much to say.

As you near the conclusion of a column, and the end is in sight, it is important to realize your reader's attention is drifting—SEX—and you must use a literary technique to regain that attention. This device might be an apt metaphor, an allusion—SEX—to something of universal interest or an adroit alliteration.

My final, and perhaps most important, piece of advice in Complete Column Writing for Totally Brainless Imbeciles is that you make the best possible use of your last sentence by ending the column with it.

Jim Couper amuses us from Kelowna, BC, Canada. ✍

■ *Public Relations Tips from an Editor from page 13*

Institute for PR

www.instituteforpr.com With a goal of improving the practice, this organization offers programs, research and feedback on public relations.

International Association of Business Communications

www.iabc.com This association focuses on providing products, services, activities and networking opportunities to help people and organizations achieve excellence in public relations and other forms of communication.

Amy Cicchese writes from Palm Bay, FL. ✍

Complete Book Manufacturing Services

- Composition • Printing • Binding
- Storage & Fulfillment • AtlasBooks.com

800-537-6727



BookMasters

2541 Ashland Road • P.O. Box 2139
Mansfield, OH 44905

e-mail: info@bookmaster.com

Website: <http://www.bookmasters.com>

You can publish your book...

For a 96-page, 5½ x 8½ book, you could print 100 copies for as little as \$4.85 per book, or \$2.00 per book for 1,000 copies. Call or visit our website at www.gorhamprinting.com to request a free 64-page book with information and prices.



GORHAM PRINTING
A GREAT LOOK FOR YOUR SHORT-RUN BOOK

334 HARRIS RD, ROCHESTER, WA 98579 • 1-800-837-0970