

MEDIA RELATIONS INSIDER

WHAT'S NEW AND WHAT'S WORKING TO INCREASE YOUR MEDIA COVERAGE

SUPPLEMENT TO BULLDOG REPORTER'S BUSINESS AND LIFESTYLE EDITIONS

PITCHING STRATEGIES

Make Sure Your Pitch Gets Read: Four Tips for Using Killer Subject Lines to Pique Reporters' Interest

Since a large majority of editors and reporters prefer to receive PR materials via email these days, the best way to catch a busy journalist's attention with your pitch is by selling her with a captivating subject header. This is, of course, no guarantee of impending coverage—your news still has to measure up to the tantalizing teaser—but more often than not, a compelling subject line will get your email opened. By the same token, however, an overly clever offering or a hyped headline that doesn't deliver can quickly land your company or agency on a reporter's black list.

So how do you find the happy medium between a drab announcement-oriented headline and an undeliverable promise? While there may be no easy answer, several leading PR pros offer the following examples of success catalyzed by standout subject lines—and share their secrets:

1. Amp up the drama—appropriately. One productive ploy is the use of dramatic flair that invokes an image and piques a reporter's attention—but this approach can backfire if your news doesn't live up to the hype.

"One of my most successful email pitches concerned an embargoed announcement about the release of a university report on New York/New Jersey port security, and the major flaws that had been found in the security structure of the region as of Sept. 2004," offers **Patrick A. Berzinski**, director of communications at **Stevens Institute of Technology**. "The subject line was, 'The Two Most Dangerous Miles in America,'" after the FBI named the two-mile stretch between Port Newark and Newark International Airport as the most dangerous in the country with regard to terrorist vulnerability. "But the [subject line] reference was credible only because a major funded report featured that quotation—from a source within a federal agency, no less," he adds.

"That grabbed the attention of the Associated Press,

which spread the story around the U.S., as well as that of *The New York Times*," he says. "In addition, several local television outlets made the release of the report their top news story of the evening. The piece was also picked up by a number a homeland security and national defense journals. [The source] Dean Hultin received numerous invitations to speak following the news coverage."

2. Let the news do the talking. Another winning ingredient in the subject-line example above is the conspicuous absence of a company or product name that would suggest a promotional angle. That approach also worked for **Ink inc PR** in its trend-pinning submission about the movie industry. The subject line, "Curses! The Aviator tops Best Picture nominees for swear words," got straight to the meat of the pitch with clever language and without alluding to itself or its client.

"At the end of February, with the Academy Awards less than a week away, Ink had the opportunity to garner media coverage for PSVratings, an organization that rates movies based on profanity, sexuality and violence," says Ink's **Kelly Bietka**. "Knowing that PSVratings literally counts the number of curse words, they discovered that 'The Aviator' topped the list of Best Picture nominees for swear words."

"The catchy headline grabbed the attention of editors, producers and reporters because it was short and timely, and it did not just seem like a standard news release sent to the masses that relies on the company's name recognition," she shares. The story was picked up by CNBC, the *LA Times*, *Boston Globe* and a host of others.

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3. Call out the most distinguishing component—and deliver on it. Professional speaker **Silvana Clark** got plenty of attention when pitching her daughter Sondra as an expert with the subject line, “15 Year Old Expert Gives Volunteer Tips.” The fact that the expert was only 15 was clearly the real grabber here, not that she was yet another fish in a sea of “experts.”

Even though the catchy header got a lot of “click” activity, there may have been no coverage if the pitch didn’t live up to the promise—i.e., that Sondra was a bona fide expert. So Clarke made a point of substantiating her promise right away. “The point of the release was to provide five-to-eight ideas on how teens can get involved in volunteer work,” she says. “After a brief opening sentence, I simply gave bullet points about Sondra, such

as that she was the author of five books, including one about volunteering ideas, that she had raised money herself for AIDS orphans in Africa, and that she is an experienced motivational speaker.”

Did it work? “She’s had articles written about her in over 20 magazines and newspapers, and she has appeared on CNN. This month, there is a short piece about her in *Teen People* magazine,” Clarke says.

4. Cleverly advance a reporter’s prior coverage. Of course, demonstrating some familiarity with a reporter’s body of work is one of the most potent tools for generating pickup. If you’re responding to one of a writer’s prior stories, play off the language or reporting used in the piece whenever you can. You’re virtually guaranteed to get your pitch opened.

PR STRATEGY

Tools & Techniques for Grabbing That Reporter’s Attention



1. Gather relevant clips, and then “rip & pitch.” “One technique that I’ve used to generate both industry and national coverage is something that we like to call ‘Rip & Pitching,’” suggests **Matt Batt**, national media relations manager for **Tech Image, Ltd.**

“The technique is relatively elementary in the PR world, but one that I have found to be extremely complimentary and successful in generating coverage for our clients. I read every business magazine and major daily, and rip out any stories that might have some relevancy for our clients. With a simple, ‘I read your story on X,’ I’m [able to] have our client in the door for at least an informational interview 60 percent of the time—very good for this work.”

“One example is a current pitch that I’m working on for my client, Society for Information Management (SIM), the leading network of IT leaders in the U.S.,” Batt offers. “SIM is currently working with colleges and universities across the country, conducting a study about declining IT enrollments. After accumulating a folder full of ‘rip & pitch’ items for this story idea, I was able to secure media interviews based on simple ‘I read your story on...’ customized pitches with *USA Today*, *Forbes*, *The New York Times*, *Chicago Sun-Times* and *Fast Company*. I sent out 12 customized pitches last week, and have heard back from eight journalists already.”

2. Use ProfNet and other resources to find out what reporters are working on. “My most successful approach—one that has gotten me ‘A-list’ clips like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal, Inc.*, *Fortune Small Business* and a long list of others—is to send appropriate, on-target responses to journalists actively looking for sources,” advises marketing expert and author **Shel Horowitz**. “Profnet (and its little brother, PR Leads—a less expensive repackaging of Profnet queries for individuals rather than agencies) is particularly useful in that regard. The best responses are brief, to the point, easy to scan, and directly relevant to the reporter’s query.” Visit www.prnewswire.com.

3. Use eye-opening language in your pitch. “My tip may be a shocker, but it works when used judiciously. It’s to use curse words,” offers **Dave Platter**, a principal with **Publitas LLC**. “I once got *New York Magazine* interested in a story about new lobby designs in residential apartment buildings—not exactly a gripping page turner of a story—with this line: ‘My lobby kicks your lobby’s ass.’”

But won’t spam filters catch and dump such emails? “Granted, with all the email filters these days you may have to get creative in spelling the curse word with non-letter characters, but that can even add to the effect,” he says.

Why do curse words work? “As overused as they are, they still pack an emotional punch that gets people’s attention and causes them to read on—almost helplessly,” Platter believes. “This technique works best when you don’t abuse it, but you should use it sparingly when you most need it.”

“After reading an *Information Week* writer’s piece on wireless technologies, and noticing that my client’s ‘space’ (in-building wireless) was conspicuously absent, I wanted to get the writer’s attention as a follow up to his article,” shares **Tony Katsulos**, president and founder of Dallas-based **Trinity Public Relations**. “To get the point across that there was more to the story, I used the subject line, ‘Other side of the wireless pillow,’ playing off the phrase, ‘Cool as the other side of the pillow’ the reporter used in the story,” he says. “I emailed the writer on a Friday evening, had interest on Monday, and achieved a one-page *Information Week* story about my client within a week.”

Even so, it pays to tread carefully with this approach. “There’s a huge line between a catchy subject line and something that’s silly, trite, overused, and/or cliché,” Katsulos coaches. “Think about what it’s like to be the reporter/editor you’re pitching—what’s going to catch your eye vs. make you roll your eyes? It’s like any other writing [skill]. Young pros often try to over-write by using big words, [while] experienced writers try to use as few words as possible. Cut down on the words, the syllables and the marketing hype, and you’ll have a higher chance of success. For subject lines, ensure that the reporter knows what you’re pitching, but don’t make it bland. Create an appetite [for your news]—e.g., ‘Other side of the wireless pillow,’ vs. ‘Another angle to your recent wireless story.’” ★

INTERVIEW TACTICS

Cut “Gotcha” Attacks Off Cold: Use These Tips to Keep Reporters at Bay—and Maintain Control

As incalculably valuable as getting media coverage for your client or company is, the actual placement can do more harm than good if a reporter strong-arms your source during the interview and wrings out damaging angles. The best thing to do in that situation is to not take chances with sensitive company info. But by the time a reporter smells blood, it’s often too late—unless your client knows when and how to bring things to a halt. But how to stop the interview without raising red flags about a topic your source seems to be ducking? Here, a handful of leading PR pros share their expertise:

1. Take control—and stick to your message.

“Make sure the client knows her messages,” advises **Dan Collins**, director of media relations at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore. “What are the major points you want to convey? Messages are like the rudder of the boat: They help keep you on course and become less likely to

be taken off course by unwanted questions or intimidation tactics. [Bridging phrases like] ‘Let me answer that by saying this...’; ‘The point I want you to come away with is this...’; and, ‘What’s really important here is this...’ can get your client back on track.”

“Above all, don’t get emotional, don’t get combative—that plays right into the reporter’s hands. Stay calm, serene and on message,” Collins adds. “Be positive and remain enthusiastic about your topic and it will be the reporter who comes off looking foolish.”

2. Do what reporters do—say “Time’s up.” “I have noticed on NPR that when the reporters want to cut off an interview because of their time constraints, they take charge and simply say, “Thank you for talking with us today,”” notes **Janelle Barlow**, president of Las Vegas-based **TMI US**. “It doesn’t matter if it fits with what the person just said or anything. They just say it.” Her advice: “Listen to them. All media people who are under time constraints learn how to do this

“Once you’ve done it a couple of times, it feels very natural, and the person watching and participating may notice that they didn’t get her full answer,” Barlow continues. “But at the same time, you signaled them in every way possible that this was the end—and part of their brain goes along with that agenda.”

If your source feels awkward slamming the door outright, she can announce she’s running out of time and suggest a follow-up interview—which allows time to prepare for the sensitive line of questioning. “Directly convey a five-minute warning, as in ‘Unfortunately, we have only a few minutes left,’” suggests **Karen Berg**, author and president of communications training company **CommCore Strategies, Inc.** “And then stick to your guns—at the end of that time, thank the reporter and stand up and say, ‘I can take only one more question,’ or, ‘I’ll be happy to answer any other questions you may have while you’re writing—so don’t hesitate to call me.’”

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Establish Boundaries Ahead of Time to Avoid “Gotcha” Attacks

Handling “gotcha” journalists during the interview is crucial in protecting your company or client’s sensitive information, but you should set boundaries before the interview begins in order to prevent attacks from taking place. Here are some tips for setting the parameters before the fact:

“The background work behind having a right time to end an interview should be completed before the interview begins,” says Atlanta-based **Professional Services PR** president **Bill Getch**. “Every spokesperson has a ‘Bill of Rights’ before entering into an interview, and the spokesperson or PR person supporting the executive interviewed has the right to dictate the following” before agreeing to an interview:

- Location, time and length of interview?
- What is the angle?
- Who else is being interviewed for this story?
- In which section of the paper/magazine will the interview appear?
- How much do you know about the company? The industry?
- How much time do you have?

“If you’ve done your homework, [your source] can be prepped with answers to every imaginable tough

question,” Getch continues. “You should also begin the interview by: 1) establishing how much time your executive or you have available to speak (20 minutes is plenty, particularly if you expect a contentious interview); and 2) summarizing what the content of the interview will be before the it begins. This should have been negotiated before agreeing to the interview.”

How to do that? Getch recommends you introduce your source to the interviewer and reemphasize the subject matter to be discussed. “Just say, ‘Executive X, let me introduce Reporter Y, who wanted to speak to you about trends in Z topic.’”

“If it looks like the reporter has set up an ambush, look to repeat key messages and ask for the interview to end if it’s near the allotted time,” he adds. “Or say, ‘Our understanding was that we were going to discuss topic X. You seem to want to discuss topic Y. If we knew this was your topic, we would have prepared to give you better information on topic Y. Perhaps we can reschedule.’”

Karen Berg, CommCore Strategies, Inc. president, agrees: “Whoever is the contact for the reporter should establish the timeframe before the interview,” she says. “If this hasn’t happened, it should be stated at the beginning of the interview how much time has been allocated.” Having said that, you can always extend the interview if it’s going well or you really do need—and have—a little more time. Again, simply state: ‘I think this is an important topic, so let’s continue a few more minutes.’”

3. Know who you’re dealing with—and prepare for the worst. “Of course, the best way to avoid ‘gotcha’ journalists and hostile interview experiences is for the PR person to have done her homework and know as much as possible about the interviewing journalist and her publication or outlet,” coaches Collins. “If it is a print reporter, what’s his normal beat? Do a Google search and look up past articles. Also, what’s the writer’s style? What types of stories does he prefer? What kind of publication is it? If the interviewer is with Geraldo Rivera on a special assignment for the *National Enquirer*, chances are you’re going to take a different approach than if it were with a just-out-of-college intern-slash-reporter for the local community newspaper. It’s the PR person’s job to know who these reporters are and their outlets so to avoid

putting a client a potentially awkward situation in the first place.”

4. Turn the tables with cooperative body language. “I teach my clients that there is no such thing as a hostile question, a mean question or a stupid question—but there is such a thing as a stupid answer,” asserts renowned media trainer **TJ Walker**. “I train my clients to rewrite hostile questions into neutral question during the interview and then to bridge back to entirely positive messages. I don’t think it is ever effective to end interviews just because someone doesn’t like the questions or the tone of the questions. The fastest way to tame a pit-bull reporter is to act like you are having the time of your life during the interview and that you are happy to talk all day long.” ★

—Richard Carufel