

For example, handling a call with your CEO is fine, but remain invisible. As one of my clients told me when I piped in during an interview: “Yes, Richard—we know you’re there. Thank you.”

In addition: “See the reporter as a client—not just the guy who is paying you. Be attentive and helpful. Take notes when you find out what a reporter’s particular likes or dislikes are. If he hates receiving faxes, for example, then plug that detail into Outlook.”

**4. Many in the media are downright jealous.** “Of course, PR people aren’t solely to blame for the disconnect between our professions,” concludes Laermer. “A lot of it comes down to total abject jealousy. It’s not just the money and expense accounts. Many reporters crave the freedom and security PR seems to offer. They love the idea of a life devoid of deadlines and hierarchy. They like the thought of working in an industry with a lot of bandwidth—i.e., doing a lot of different things, like media training, writing releases, pitches and even crisis communications.”

His point: “Journalists think you have a life—especially those who are burnt out. They’re unhappy because they’re bored and broke.” Several tips for coping with reporters with this particular state of mind:

- **Be available 24/7.** “It’s important to let reporters know that you’re working hard—for them and your [client]. Let them know it’s not all fun and games. There’s no reason to tell a reporter that you just got back from Hawaii and have a great tan,” Laermer jokes.

The point: “One of the things that gets a reporter’s blood boiling is calling a PR person during the holidays when they’re on deadline and nobody picks up. Give reporters your cell number, tell them to call you at home—and bend over backwards to be accessible. Being there 24/7 goes a long way toward building goodwill.”

- **Show appreciation.** “A lot of PR people actually wish they were journalists,” believes Laermer. “There’s a certain pride and ethic to it. Leverage that by being appreciative of the line of work your [target reporter is in]. There’s nothing wrong with saying, ‘It sure must be fun/great/tough to chase the news. We have clients who’ve never been in a newsroom and who really value what you do.’”

- **Don’t kiss up.** “But be careful,” Laermer warns. “Reporters hate flattery. Simply be gracious about working together,” he advises. “Good relationships with reporters can last for years. It’s enough to simply call the reporter when you see a good story or notice that he’s moved on to another paper.” ★

## ► Press Releases

# Is Your Copy DOA? Three Ways to Breathe Life into Your News

“While most PR people and communications trainers focus on key messages, reporters prefer to focus on people and how the information they’re gathering affects those people,” says **Karen Friedman**, president of **Karen Friedman Enterprises**. “Releases should do the same—they should explain what your news means to the reader, not the company.” Her tips for nailing this elusive WIIFM (What’s in It for Me) factor in your writing to increase pickup:

**1. Shorten the headline—speak to benefits in the subhead.** “Just like a newspaper, if your headline grabs us, we’ll move on to the first few lines,” says Friedman. “But most releases don’t even get that far. That’s because PR people often write from their own perspective and talk about *features*.” She offers this example from an actual client: “X Airport Breaks All Time 12-Month Passenger Record in First Months of 2004.”

What’s wrong with that? “People don’t care about you, your product or any kudos you won—they care about *benefits*,” Friedman says. “They want to know what your news will do for them. A better—and more punchy—headline might have been, ‘X Airport Shatters All Time Record.’ This could have been followed by a benefits-oriented subhead like, ‘More Passengers Means Lower Ticket Prices.’”

**2. Simplify the lede—dumb it down for readers.** “Your lede should support the headline by stating what’s new, unique or compelling from the news consumer’s perspective—not your company’s,” Friedman continues. “This lede read, ‘January through November, X Airport drew an unprecedented Y number of passengers—a dramatic increase of Z percent from last year.’”

The problem: “People can’t remember those numbers in one sentence. Better would have been something like, ‘Passenger traffic at X Airport increased Y percent last year. That’s more than double any increase in the past five years.’” Friedman’s advice for simplifying ledes:

- **Eschew data stew.** “Avoid starting out with long sentences full of mundane facts. Try not to numb readers with numbers,” she suggests. “For example, round off figures and break long sentences into two.”

- **Dare to write simply.** “Think of the reader and simplify. For example, don’t write academically—shoot for an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level,” Friedman says. “There’s nothing wrong with writing in phrases. Similarly, avoid words with three or more syllables.”

- **Say it, don't display it.** "Write like you speak—always read your copy aloud. If it doesn't roll off the tongue, it won't jump off the page."

**3. Breathe life into the body—personalize or perish.** "The release goes on to quote the airport's director," adds Friedman. "That means nothing to most readers. More powerful and credible is to quote a customer—someone who uses your service and who can provide a human element. In this case, a traveler could have said something like, 'Coming through X Airport is great—I got my bags faster and my ticket was \$45 cheaper.'" Her advice:

- **Plug in anecdotes.** "Look for ways to personalize releases through real life anecdotes and people. Do that by quoting customers and offering real-life examples people can identify with."

- **Evoke emotion.** "People don't remember details and facts—they remember how they felt. The best copy creates an impression in the reader by using quotes that convey passion and enthusiasm. That's why reporters are always asking, 'How do you feel?'"

- **Apply the "so what" test.** "Finally, write like a reporter thinks," Friedman suggests. "Ask yourself, 'How are people going to relate to this? What does it mean to them? What would it mean to me if I were the [average news consumer] reading this?'" ★

## ➤ **Crisis Checklist**

# How to Respond to Bad News Without Setting Yourself Up

"Merck received kudos for appearing open about the Vioxx recall when that story broke a few months back," recalls Nils Bruzelius, deputy national editor in charge of science and medical coverage for the *Washington Post*. "But they weren't as facilitative as people think. They called about the news conference at 9:00 a.m. We don't start until 10:00 a.m.—so we were scrambling." His point: "Think about what reporters need and then provide that. For example, give us a heads up sooner and be more responsive—even if it's bad news."

Larry Smith, president of the **Institute for Crisis Management**, agrees—in part. He offers this checklist for addressing bad news without setting yourself up:

- **Don't overreact—respond strategically.** "Being responsive doesn't mean you should speak to everybody," Smith says. "Stop and identify the audiences you really want to communicate with. For example, Merck may have only wanted to reach out to [Vioxx buyers]. If so, their key audiences may have been people who read AARP or visit WebMD. Once you've established your core audience,

then consider branching out to rebuild your overall brand—but don't throw the net too far in the beginning."

- **Don't prattle—stick to message points.** "Every company needs to have a plan for when things go wrong," Smith says. "Part of that is devising strategic messages that can be delivered over time—instead of just answering every question [according to media need]. In the case of Merck, good bump-and-run messages might have been to communicate that the company was trying to do the right thing, to extend sympathy to the people affected and finally to commit the organization to cooperation with investigating authorities to find out what went wrong."

- **Don't pull back—fill the void.** "Merck started out positive in the first weeks. It appeared that they responded quickly when they were convinced there was a link between Vioxx [and health hazards]," continues Smith. "A big part of that was conceding that there was a problem and saying that patient safety was paramount. But then ads starting showing up in papers from lawyers looking for plaintiffs. At that time, Merck began to get quieter."

His point: "Don't be afraid to talk to the media—drive your messages home every chance you get," encourages Smith. "The longer you put off facing difficult media questions, the more convinced the public becomes that you did something wrong."

- **Don't bloviate—offer reparations.** "The American public will forgive you if you screw up—but not if you refuse to take responsibility," ventures Smith. "This is the biggest media mistake made during accidents and recalls."

His point: "What people really want after you admit a problem is the details of how you're going to solve it. Apologies might be fine on the first day—but the headline after that should show your [organization] voluntarily taking measures [toward resolution]. This will help take the 'gotcha' out of the story. So will calling that reporter before he calls you. Getting out in front of the problem makes it harder for him to beat you up." ★

## ➤ **PR Fireplug**

# Holiday Malaise at Walgreens? How NOT to Respond to Crises

"When Walgreens double billed customers who used credit and debit cards this holiday season (December 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>), it became apparent that the company was unprepared to deal with a crisis," relates media trainer and PR vet **Tripp Frolichstein**. "As a result, people were overdrawn or hit with fees."

One of the retailer's unsuspecting customers was **Neal Gendler**, a reporter with the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*