

Cover Story

Nowhere to hide

In a 24-hour news cycle, does the Friday Night News Dump still work?

Back in the days when news was only delivered via the morning paper and the 6 o'clock newscast, it was easy to drop a "bad news" story at a Friday afternoon press conference, knowing that few journalists would cover it, and even fewer people would hear about it. Sneak a press release out on Friday with news about a disgraced CEO or lousy earnings, and it wouldn't make much of a dent in the next day's news.

But does that strategy still make sense in today's 24-hour news cycle, where updates come every few seconds? In late February, The Washington Post reported that George Bush's administration—dubbed "the Friday Night Presidency"—has made an art of dumping bad news on Friday evenings. Want to muffle unflattering news about declining household incomes? Release the stats on Friday, and the coverage will be diminished.

Has the administration's strategy worked? Do media pay less attention to Friday night news bombs? The Post opined that the Bush White House has used "the trick so routinely that it is losing effectiveness."

In the PR world, the Friday tradition still exists, but may only work part of the time, say media relations professionals. In fact, there are many reasons to avoid the Friday Night News Dump.

"My recommendation is to not try to bury bad news on a Friday afternoon after the close of the market," says Devin Sullivan, senior vice president at The Equity Group in New York. "We live in a CNN-world where news is reported and accessible 24/7 via television, PC, cell phones and Blackberry devices.

"Investing in a company requires faith in its leadership. Even the perception that management is trying to sneak something by the shareholders would, in my opinion, break that trust and compound whatever damage the disappointing news might cause."

Many PR people point out that the Internet has changed the rules about bad news timing. "While Fridays still remain the day of choice to pare staff, announce bad earnings or no dividend—with the hope it will only make the Saturday paper, if that—the world is quickly changing because of the Internet," says Andrew Edson, president of Andrew Edson & Associates in Jericho, New York.

"More and more media have interactive editions that often scoop the print version," he

says. “Deadlines mean less because more people are getting their news feed from the Web, and more journalists are accessible via e-mail than ever before.”

In fact, says Edson, dropping bad news on a Friday to keep the buzz down might have the opposite effect. “While PR people may still counsel the distribution of bad news on a late Friday afternoon after market close, that strategy is no longer the safe out it once was,” he explains. “Bad news, too, has a way of getting in the Sunday paper or, better yet, a second life on Monday.”

Claude Gruener, founder of Austin Ink in Austin, agrees: “If the story is particularly bad news, regardless of whether it was released on a Friday or not, you can be assured coverage will still be going on Monday morning.”

In some cases, a Friday announcement can dampen ongoing coverage of your story, which can be a good thing, says Winter Prosapio, vice president of marketing for Sports Clips, a national chain of haircutting franchises.

“The news will still be covered, but you don’t always get a week of follow up on stories,” says Prosapio. “People don’t give the news the same level of attention on the weekends, so even though the coverage is there, the audience is not as strong. It also gives companies time to work behind the scenes to manage fallout.

You are, though, in danger of the dreaded Full Sunday Newspaper Blow Out, which can be worse,” he adds.

Alan Marcus, president of the Marcus Group in Secaucus, N.J., also wonders if hiding news on Fridays can have the opposite effect from what’s desired.

“The problem with issuing any kind of news release on Friday is that it’s now anticipated to be ‘bad news,’” says Marcus. “We’ve actually counseled clients to move the release date to avoid this presumption.”

What’s the alternative, if Fridays are to be avoided? “There is no good day for bad news,” Marcus says. “The best advice we give is to issue it unvarnished in a timely manner. Hide in plain sight. Make certain that the client communicates with its various publics, including employees, vendors, customers and the investment community in an appropriate manner.”

No audience on Saturdays?

Conventional wisdom used to be that no one consumed news on Saturdays. Readers and TV viewers presumably took a day off to gear up for the Sunday papers and pundit-laden talk shows. That logic doesn’t hold water now, says Marc Jampole, principal of Jampole Communications in Pittsburgh.

“That still may work if the audience is the general public, because fewer people read

newspapers on Saturday,” Jampole explains. “But there is no depreciable decline in newspaper readership on Saturday for people who have high incomes, run businesses, are interested in the stock market or have a lot of education. In addition, if no one else is dumping bad news, then your bad news may get ‘enhanced’ coverage if you release it on Friday afternoon.”

Harry Bosk, founder of Bosk Communications in Baltimore, also believes it’s misguided to think that no one’s paying attention to news on the weekends.

“Conventional thinking is that we don’t pay as much attention to the news on the weekend,” Bosk says. “If you release a story on a Friday, there are going to be fewer people who will read it on a Saturday or hear it on the news. The faulty logic with that is that if the story is big enough it will be carried over into the beginning of the week, or explored more on Saturday so it can be written about for Sunday. And we know that’s the day of the week with the biggest circulation.

“Also, some folks mistakenly believe that news outlets have fewer staff on the weekend. It’s true—unless you have a crisis.”

There’s no doubt, however, that newsrooms aren’t as packed in the off hours, says Karen Friedman, head of Karen Friedman Enterprises, a media training firm in the Philadelphia area. And for this reason, she says, Friday-evening announcements can land much more softly.

“Weekends in newsrooms are typically understaffed and often worked by less senior people,” says Friedman, a former TV reporter. “When news hits late on Friday, it will be covered, but news organizations don’t have the troops to do as many sidebars and follow-ups. Therefore, the story doesn’t get as much fast play as it would if it was released on a Monday, for example.”

(On the flip side, the lean weekend newsroom can be advantageous to your pitching if you’re trying to land coverage for a somewhat boring piece of news, explains Andrew Shea, health communication specialist at Missouri Patient Care Review Foundation. “I’m a big fan of releasing mundane but important news on a Saturday or Sunday, because television stations are usually desperate for good stories,” Shea says. “And if you can work it right, you’ll get your client on the Sunday night news, which can be a great opp.”)

A big argument against waiting for the Friday-night window is that when you do, you may lose control of the story. For this reason, Darleen DeRosa, a senior vice president at Porter-Novelli in San Francisco, counsels her clients to announce sooner rather than later. “How quickly can you get the news out, so that you can control the messages?” DeRosa says. “As soon as you’re aware of the bad news, you should marshal your resources.”

Otherwise, she explains, the competition will beat you to the punch.

This was the case a few years ago when HP and Intel had to announce a delay in the development of a microprocessor, for which Porter-Novelli was handling the PR. The announcement was made without waiting for a Friday Night News Dump, because “any delay could have been seen as a lack of confidence,” she says.