



Ed. Note.... In a recent edition of [Rain Today](#), the excellent online marketing magazine, I wrote the following article. In an excellent reply, public relations consultant Dick Pirozzolo sent the comments that follow this article, making some excellent points. I then replied with some points commenting on his comments, which follows as well. The correspondence is published here exactly as it took place. Your own comments are, of course, invited. (marcus@marcusletter.com)

A ROLL OF NICKELS AND A PHONE BOOTH

Anybody Can Do PR

If you ever get to thinking that public relations is so easy that anybody can do it, then spend a day on the receiving end – the editor’s desk. If public relations is so easy to do, how come so many practitioners do it badly?

From major corporations, and both small and large public relations firms, comes a stream of so-called releases and other material that’s so inept, and so primitive, that you must ultimately realize that those that do it right must have a vast array of skills, talents, and imaginative energy. It must be difficult, because how could it be simple when so many people do it wrong? And of course, the client pays the high price of doing it wrong.

Take mailing lists, for example. *The Marcus Letter* is a very carefully designed publication. It’s target audience – professional services -- is spelled out, its subject matter is abundantly defined, its thrust is far from secret.

And yet, each day’s mail brings releases about products or services that have nothing to do with anything in [The Marcus Letter](#). Liquor and perfume company pitches. A Fedex package containing a video tape and a paper kit for a computer football game (at least \$20 worth, sent to a publication that couldn’t possibly use it). Personnel releases to a publication that doesn’t include personnel news. Pitch letters for stories that are so irrelevant to what we do that I can’t believe that anybody over 12 years old is doing it. A press release from a fast food company announcing the appointment of the head of a “new guest satisfaction initiative in the role of Director of Customer Delight.” What about that basic

tenet of good publicity – know your target publication? Each year, hundreds – maybe thousands – of dollars in wasted mailing.

Press releases. In virtually a lifetime of doing this, one of the major tenets of public relations that I've learned is that a press release must cast your story in the same syntax as the major daily papers. You're competing for space against the papers' own reporters, and you'd better write your release in newspaper style. How, then, account for this, which arrived with the standard notation *For immediate release...*

Enjoying a great bottle of wine has never been easier. XYZ company (to protect the innocent, if innocence indeed there may be) is pleased to introduce Cellar, a unique wine-tasting program that brings the world's private cellar to your front door every month.

Makes you really want to stop the presses and tear out the front page, doesn't it?

What further complicates the situation is that journalism has changed, but a great many practitioners (not all, thank goodness) are still stuck in the past. They certainly seem not to have noticed that the old five *W*'s (*Who, What, When, Where, and Why*) have disappeared, as have the old pyramid structures (the most important paragraphs first, then on down). The exhortations to the old line journalists never to use the letter *I* (if you must refer to yourself, you're supposed to have used *we*) have fallen back into the woodwork. Where once the *New York Times* set the style for journalistic style, today that style is set by blogs and the internet. In fact, even the *Times* has conformed to the new style.

Now, the great universities teach courses in public relations, and I assume their graduates know better. But that may be a poor assumption, since so many journalism courses are taught by old retired journalists. Who then is doing this? Is practicing public relations so easy that anybody can do it? And where are the department heads and chiefs – the ones who used to say to the likes of me, "No, that's not how you do it. *This* is how you do it?"

No wonder so many editors hold so many public relations people in such low regard (but, fortunately, hold so many more in high regards. They know when good is good and bad is bad.)

I think that it's so easy to get into public relations that there are too few knowledgeable and aware people teaching too many newcomers. What we see now, in this rapidly changing communications world, is best characterized by the observation of that great philosopher, Yogi Berra, who said, "Ain't nobody here knows how to play this game?"

And what about the clients – the ones who are paying for expensive mailing pieces to editors who can't use them and press releases that no respectable publication will use? How much are they wasting each year? And what happens to respect for the value of public relations when all that wasted money produces so little useful result?

Maybe what's needed is a traveling exhibit – sponsored by PRSA or somebody – of outrageous public relations practices that embarrass all the good practitioners. A kind of a Grand Guignol of public relations horrors. Every editor in the business could send them new stuff every day.

Barring that, every PR person should be made to read both blogs and the New York Times regularly.

Then there's the time I was chatting with my old boss and mentor, Ruder & Finn's Bill Ruder about the changing nature of public relations. He said, "In the final analysis, public relations is an art form, and no matter what changes, if you've still got the art, you're still in business." As ever, Bill was right.

And I note, too, that the success of leading public relations practitioners, like Richard Weiner (another of my mentors) and Richard Levick and Larry Smith not only have the art, but understand change.

If Edward Bernays, the so-called father of public relations, could see these anachronistic practices, he'd turn over in his grave. But only if he could get a couple of columns on the front page of *The New York Times* for the stunt. He knew his craft.

...To which came the following reply....

From: Dick Pirozzolo [<mailto:dick@pirozzolo.com>]
To: marcus@marcusletter.com
Subject: good article on PR -- a few more ideas

Great Article.

Your story got me thinking what we need to do to be effective public relations pros in the 20-10 Decade.

10 Commandments of Great Public Relations

1. You are only as good as your clients, If they want to couch every statement of fact in convoluted corporate gibberish, the PR pro has an uphill battle to fight.

2. Contacts, not so much -- Clients who think all they have to do is get the right PR person with the right *contacts* and they will get coverage are a real disappointment. Look at it this way, If I could throw a few dollars at a PR firm and get into the Wall Street Journal and New York Times, I'd hire them myself! I have been in the business for 40 years. If there is a relevant media outlet and my client has a story, they get in. If not they don't. Period. And I never sell contacts.

Conversely business people, including PR people, who think they have contacts delude themselves. Their clients and employers create the contacts. When I worked for a big TV broadcaster I had contacts at TV Guide, when I worked for the Vietnam Government, I had contacts at the White House Press Office. I had the contacts because I had a client with information to deliver, It was certainly not my charm, wit and good looks.

3. The Internet, email and instant messaging have changed forever the way every business in the world is run, yet clients are often surprised to learn that the new technology has changed the way media and PR firms do business. The incessant phone follow-up with editors to "pitch" stories has become less and less effective over recent years. I do long for the days of writing one press release and tailoring my phone pitch to the specific needs of the publication -- be it consumer publication Wine Spectator or Wine Retailer, a trade magazine. The reality -- you have to send more written pitches, and they have to be tailored -- and newsworthy -- in writing. Clients -- even high tech clients communicate by email and texting and -- still expect PR people to get on the horn with Lou Grant or meet him at the local tavern after work to "plant" their story. The reality -- you might catch up with a reporter might get back to you on her Blackberry while she is watching her kids after-school soccer game.

Exception -- newsworthy events, celebrity appearances, news conferences -- you gotta call -- especially the TV news assignment editors!

4. Media database services contribute to the overflow poorly targeted releases. To be frank, it takes far more time to remove marginal publications from a distribution list than create the original list using these services. Despite my best efforts, I still get "Wadaryousendingmethisfor" emails.

5. PR by release is does not help the client -- Clients increasingly want to *Quantify* PR by press releases written and sent per month. To meet this demand, we find ourselves stretching to come up with new angles on old news. There is an old crude but true adage to describe PR -- "Doing good and getting credit for it!" Too many clients forget they actually have to do something newsworthy -- different from the competition -- before they can get coverage. A little more effort on developing and integrating a Public Relations Strategy into the corporate culture will pay big dividends in terms of consistency, quality and impact.

6. Print is better than any other exposure -- poppycock! -- We used to have a hard time selling the value of TV, because clients felt it was fleeting, not detail oriented and *important* business people do not watch TV -- except for sports and 60 Minutes. Today, we have trouble selling the value being present on the web and using the web to get reporters to come to our clients Let's face it, a reporter looking for a source is going to go where everyone else goes when they want to find out something -- Google! If your clients show up on Forbes.Com, and other websites, they increase the chance of getting editorial attention.

Never mind that the client's potential customers have Google and other key word searches set up to get the information that pertains to them, which nets highly targeted, direct exposure for the client.

7. Get beyond core media -- the best press is going to come from a core of media outlets serving the clients' markets. We work in the housing industry, for example, and maintain relationships with a cadre of shelter magazine editors -- both trade and consumer. We also push the envelope and are willing to develop new relationships. For example we got our log home manufacturing client covered in a six-part series by Field & Stream -- a related media but a little outside the core shelter press.

8. Basic Journalism still matters, but don't send out Journalism 101 looking releases -- Journalism skills matter -- you need to write in clear declarative sentences with no hype. News writing styles are changing, notably with fewer direct quotes and so is the way people get information.

To win attention in the Internet age, Get the news in the subject line in the email, preferably in the first four words, without any unusual punctuation or capitalization. Tell a little more in the headline and subhead. Then give 'em the story in three sentences, bullets can be preferable. Follow with the details and use lots of subheads. Eliminate silly quotations such as, "We are excited, (delighted) to have Bill onboard," says Bigly Big, CEO, in announcing the new Vice president. Eliminate *for immediate release* in favor of real information such as ""Super Bowl Tie In," "Pittsfield, MA tie in", or "Attention Golf Editors."

9. Look in the newspaper for news ideas. Read the news every day and ask, where does my client fit in? We represented a spell check software developer. When the National Spelling Bee was announced -- we created a spelling bee for adults -- ala *Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader* -- and sent it out in advance of the national competition. Lots of coverage! Use celebrities too -- we did a release on the words the Presidential candidates choose in their debates. Do the candidates who say "but" the most seem the most contentious? Candidate name recognition got us the coverage. And... don't forget humor, a Washington Post columnist did a syndicated story on our spell check client because the CEO could see that her business had a funny side too.

10. Use lists. People love to get information in lists. Three keys to romance, four cornerstones of success, seven sins of investing and, of course, the Ten Commandments of Great PR.

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...To which I responded...

Thanks. You make good points. To which I add the following comments...

1. You can't always pick your clients. You and I have both had some doozies. The best you can do is try to educate them, and to define expectations at the outset of the agreement. It works sometimes, but not always. Many -- probably most -- non-PR people know only the mythology of PR, not the realities. On the other hand, if they really understood PR, they wouldn't need us.
2. Exactly right. More mythology. On top of which, the cast of characters in the media always changes. It's not the contacts we have that mean much -- you couldn't persuade your brother to run a story that didn't fit his publication -- it's the skill in presenting the newsworthiness of the story. It's the skill in finding the newsworthiness in the client's business, and sometimes, the ability to synthesize that newsworthiness in the realistic context of the client's business. And don't forget, we're entering an era in which the print media is declining as the internet media replaces it. It calls for an entirely new kind of PR. If client's didn't understand the old PR, it's going to take some doing to get them to understand the new media.

3. Again, right on target, but you're still putting the onus on the client. No matter what changes in the business, the client is always there, and behind the curve in PR. But that's the nature of the business, and if you want to be in the client relations business, you either have to live with the context, or find a way to change the client.
4. As a publication on the receiving end of the business, I have to tell you that I resent being on the receiving end of releases from people who don't take a moment to understand what I write and publish. Lists may be convenient for the senders, but as an editor, I'm the market. It's supposed to function to please me, not the PR people. I know, as well, that some of the most successful PR people never use releases. They know how to develop the newsworthiness, and pitch it effectively on the phone.
5. See 1 and 2.
6. Again, I agree. The media world has changed and is changing. But knowing that is our business, no necessarily that of non-PR people. The job is to educate them.
7. Absolutely right.
8. Again, I agree. But it goes farther. I still see articles touting the now obsolete 5W approach to release writing, for example. If the story doesn't catch 'em in the first line, forget it. Don't PR people read newspapers any more to see how journalistic styles have changed?
9. See 8. Newspapers are always a good source, but there are others. I once came up with a bunch of ideas from reading the Yellow pages. Sometimes it helps to go back and read the media person's other stories to get a feeling for what the reporter likes, style, etc
10. Well, sometimes. One of many techniques. Depends on the story. Good writing always works, knowing the publication works, originality helps.

Ultimately, public relations is an art form, tempered by technique. The fact is that in the contemporary world of communications, much is changing drastically. There's an old vaudeville routine that goes, "Change your act or go back to the woods". In today's world, the practitioner who doesn't recognize the changes, and adjust, is lost.

Bruce