WRITING FOR THE MEDIA

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PRCA PRACTICE GUIDES

WRITING FOR THE MEDIA

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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FOREWORD

PRCA Practice Guides are a series of uniquely practical and readable guides, providing public relations (PR) and communications professionals, new and experienced alike, with hands-on guidance to manage in the field. Written by experienced practitioners who have been there and done it, the books in this series offer powerful insights into the challenges of the modern industry and guidance on how to navigate your way through them.

This book sets out to help PR and communications get better results from their media relations, including a better profile in the media, and more pieces of press coverage that reflect positively on your organisation or client. In 1924, Basil Clarke, one of the first PR practitioners, said: '99 per cent of the copy sent to newspapers is doomed to the waste-basket'. Ninety years later Anthony Hilton, a distinguished and popular City Editor, said: 'The trick is to find the one release in a hundred which has something interesting to say'. Nobody wants to accept a hit rate of one per cent, and nobody needs to. Successful media programmes depend on three factors: knowing the media and knowing a lot about them; never issuing a 'story' which isn't really a story; and writing in a manner which the media appreciate. It is the third of these factors which this book addresses. Journalists are taught to construct stories and write English in a particular way; PR people, in general, are not. Learning how to emulate the media's own rules and style has an immeasurable effect on take-up.

The book is meant to be used as a practical guide and it contains numerous examples, checklists and quotes from eminent journalists.

Adrian Wheeler started out as a local newspaper reporter before training at a financial PR firm in the City. He co-founded Sterling Public Relations, a general practice agency, in 1976. This firm became the UK office of GCI Europe. As Chief Executive Officer of GCI UK, Wheeler led the company into the UK Top Ten and in 2000 and as Chairman of GCI Europe, he oversaw the development of a 28-office network with 53 multi-country clients. Since 2006 he has been a Partner in Agincourt Communications and a Non-executive Director at Liquid, London Communications Agency and Best Communications in Prague. He is a Fellow of the PRCA and a PR trainer who teaches clients and consultancies throughout Europe and the Middle East.

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INTRODUCTION

We have clients and employers (who pay us) and 'customers' (who don't). Our customers are the media: reporters, journalists, editors and publishers who decide our fate; if they use the material we offer them, our clients and employers will be pleased. If not, we will face a competitive review or a career appraisal sooner or later.

We all know that PR professionals perform a host of services which are nothing to do with the media. But most of us, most of the time, devote 60 per cent of our working hours to media engagement … writing material and trying to place it in media outlets which will make a difference to our clients' or employers' success.

Ten years ago there were 70,000 people working in the UK media and 30,000 of us. Now there are 23,000 employed in the media and 86,000 of us. Nick Davies has calculated that over 90 per cent of the material on TV, radio and mainstream news brands comes from PR departments and agencies (Davies, 2008).

Some of the people working in PR used to work in the media. The most eminent example is probably Colin Byrne, who retired from Weber Shandwick in March 2018. The least eminent is probably myself, who worked on the UK's first freesheet before turning to PR. But both of us, and hundreds of others, had the opportunity to learn the media's rules and conventions before we switched to public relations.

It matters. If you know how to produce material that complies with the media's own customs, your hit-rate rises dramatically. The media no longer have time to re-write and call to fill in the gaps. Unless you're Apple, Google or Trump, it makes sense to get it right first time.

The aim of this PRCA Practice Guide is to help PR people who *didn't* work in the media know more about the criteria journalists and editors use when they look at our stories.

The average news desk gets 400 items a day from PR firms and PR departments. One per cent gets used. This hasn't changed since 1924.

How can we make sure that *our* material belongs in that one per cent?

Note: People reading this PRCA guide may work in-house or in an agency. For the sake of brevity, I have used the word 'client' in this book to indicate the people we work for, whether that means an employer or, actually, a client.

GOOD MEDIA WRITING: THE BUSINESS CASE

William Zinsser, editor of *Life* and a media writing guru, said:

> *Executives at every level are prisoners of the notion that a simple style reflects a simple mind. The opposite is true: a simple story is the product of hard work and hard thinking.*
>
> *(Zinsser, 2006)*

There is a quotation attributed to Cicero, Martin Luther, Woodrow Wilson and Mark Twain along the following lines: 'I am sorry this letter is so long – I didn't have time to make it shorter'.

We know from our own experience that writing a terse, succinct account is much harder than putting the words down in a stream of consciousness. It takes a lot longer to write well.

So – is it worth it?

I think so. We are not writing for fun. We are trying to get stories about our clients' activities published by independent media with as little editing as possible. We want our clients' customers, staff, investors, neighbours (and other stakeholders) to read these stories and change their behaviour.

Editors have less time than ever. They delete most of what they are sent. Readers have less patience than ever. Even when they like a story, they typically only read half of it.

The point of our media writing is to plant *messages* in the minds of readers. That means our media material must first be *selected for inclusion*, then *survive the editorial process*, and then be *read – or consumed* – by people who like it, persist with it and ultimately change their ideas, opinions and actions as a result.

PR people are often accused of 'spray and pray'. The media don't like this. What they like is a story which is *intended for them* and which is written according to the *rules and conventions* that they learnt as trainees. Needless to say, the more powerful the media outlet, the more stringently its editors apply these rules.

If our media writing resembles our customers' own media writing, our success-rate will rocket.

Journalists and Editors – What Are They Like?

If you *were* a journalist or your sister works for *The Guardian*, you can skip this section. If not, it's useful to reflect on

who our customers actually are and why they are different from the rest of us.

You may have noticed that journalists are a lot more like each other than any of them are like us. We work in teams; they never do. They are 'solo artistes' like singers or painters. They compete every day with people like themselves on other titles and with colleagues sitting at the next desk.

At some point early in their lives they have decided that they don't want to be part of politics, fashion, business, finance or sport … instead, they want to be *outside* these areas of human activity, looking in and writing (or broadcasting) about what they observe. It's a strange way to make a living. It's also not much of a living; very few journalists make good money.

They are anxious. They always were, but more so with every month that passes. Journalists don't know if their title will exist in a year's time. They've all got friends who are now doing something else (which could be PR). As Andrew Marr says in '*My Trade*', it's a 'carnival of insecurity' (Marr, 2004).

There must be compensations. What are they? Expressing an independent point of view is one of them: 'speaking truth to power'. Simon Kelner put it nicely: 'I am a journalist, brought up to challenge authority, to contest the official version of events; to stand outside the establishment'.

Most journalists like to feel that they are champions of the public interest. They gravitate towards crusades or campaigns which expose wrongdoing and improve life for their readers and viewers. This is important for PR people like us; can we present our client's new initiative as something which will benefit millions? If so, we and the media will be on the same page.

Everyone working in the media is under pressure. Deadlines really are deadlines (unlike in most of the rest of the world).

Imagine being given a topic at the morning story conference; you are a general reporter, not a specialist, yet by mid-afternoon you must do your research and master the subject sufficiently to write a 600-word story which is authoritative, accurate, informative and interesting. Quite a challenge, but journalists do this day in, day out.

Lord Harmsworth (owner of *The Mail* and *Mirror*) once wittily said that journalism is a profession 'whose business is to explain to others what it does not personally understand'. Precisely. It takes a rare blend of abilities to be able to do this.

One of these characteristics is intense curiosity. You may have noticed how journalists often ask the same question three different ways in an interview. Clients can get annoyed, but the reporter is doing her job well – testing and probing to get at the real truth of the story.

Very few journalists are immune from the crushing effects of the twenty-first century media economy. Most are not doing what they dreamed of doing when they started out … pounding the streets, knocking on doors, *finding* stories … exclusives. Usually they do what we do – sit at a desk processing media material which streams in from people like us. Trade and technical titles are often staffed, these days, by an editor and one or two assistants. BBC regional news reporters used to travel with a crew of three or four; nowadays it's often just the presenter, on her own, operating her own camera and recording her own sound track.

No wonder the media revere Jeff Bezos, who bought *The Washington Post* in 2013 and employs 740 journalists.

How do the media feel about PR people? Sadly, they tend – in general – to disparage us. They depend on us for most of their material but they wish they didn't have to. They often blame PR for the economic plight of the media, which isn't really fair. All journalists know a few PR people they respect.

Why? It's usually because these PR people know what a story is and how to write it.

Learning to write media material which journalists admire – or at least respect – is, for most of us, the best way to our media customers' hearts.

THE ROI – MEDIA MESSAGES

PR works. That's why there are now 86,000 of us in the UK and why, according to the PRCA's 2018 census, the total UK PR budget is £13.8 billion.

Most people believe what they read in the media. Leaving aside un-branded, anonymous online 'news sources', we know that *real* media employ professionals to find stories, research them, verify them and present them to us in a manner we find useful and credible. We have IPSO to regulate our media; most journalists would sooner die than write anything untrue, but there are occasional exceptions, and even the best reporters sometimes can't read their notes.

There are cynics, like Roman Abramovich: 'A hamster is just a rat with good PR'.

There are true believers, like Michael Wolff: 'The media are a more influential force in our lives and in the world's changing beliefs than politics or governments ever were'.

There are normal people like my grandmother: 'There it is in black and white!'

Most of us, most of the time, believe what we read in most media. Hence the 'power of PR'.

I suggest it makes sense to be very careful about the *media messages* which our stories convey. This is because, knowing the immense influence which the media exert, we should treat opportunities for coverage like gold dust.

Sheer coverage is a bit like advertising. It can create 'awareness', which is a useful start, but it can do so much more. Awareness ('I know that brand') is the start of a process known as the *hierarchy of effects*, but it's only the start. When David Ogilvy, the Scotsman who more-or-less re-engineered the US advertising industry, wrote his copywriting rules he insisted that copywriters should arouse interest, provide information, trigger an emotional reaction and provide a 'call to action'.

You can see the result when you visit the dentist and leaf through 40-year-old copies *of National Geographic* or *Reader's Digest*. The ads set out to take the reader on a journey all the way up to trial purchase.

This rarely happens in the twenty-first century. Ads aim to create awareness, but that's it. The rest of the work is nowadays the province of PR.

I hope this makes sense to you, because it's where advertising and PR are like brothers and sisters rather than spitting cousins. The point of our work as media writers is (usually) to sell something, to change people's feelings about our client's planning application from hostile to neutral or positive, to get lines down the street outside the new restaurant on opening night … and so on; a business objective usually expressed in pounds, dollars or euros.

This is where carefully thought-out media messages make all the difference.

Most of us forget information fairly quickly unless it has a direct bearing on our personal lives. When we consume media our retention is even more fleeting – there is just so much of it. Knowing this about our ultimate audiences, how can we take steps to make sure, as far as possible, that they remember *something* about our client after they've read our coverage and moved on?

The best answer, I suggest, is to be careful, creative and ruthless when we are developing the media messages that our PR work is meant to convey. This is difficult. Here again, we are tackling exactly the same kind of challenge that confronts our colleagues in advertising creative departments.

If we ask a typical client or employer for the 'key messages' for this year or this quarter, we will usually receive a list of 20 or 30 vitally important statements about features and benefits. The list has been compiled by an email committee. It's no use: what we need are *three*. If we are very accomplished and diligent, *one* of these messages may stick.

Does this sound pessimistic? Try a simple test in the pub. Ask a friend to come up with *three* things they know about a famous brand – IBM, BMW, Chanel, Easyjet … they've got to answer quickly – we are looking for 'top of mind' recall. Most people can do this. Then ask your friend to come up with a *fourth*. Most people are stumped. (You can win drinks with this game.)

What this proves is that getting people to remember *anything at all* about a brand is an achievement. Knowing this, it makes sense for us to concentrate our efforts on projecting a *small* number of messages in any given campaign or programme period.

Political communicators in Washington say that the art of engagement means telling people your message, then telling them again, then again, then again, then again, then again … at the point where you yourself are bored to death, the message will just be starting to get traction.

Michael Dell has a brain like a computer but he knows that most people don't. His instructions to us at GCI were clear: 'there will be three media messages this quarter per