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Fine Tuning Your Public Relations Writing How to Get Your Story Picked Up by the Media

By James T. Yenckel

A. Opening:

As many of you know, I was the chief travel writer for The Washington Post for 16 years, until I took early retirement to freelance about four years ago. One of my responsibilities was to open, read and assess the mail daily. At The Post, a major newspaper, that meant wading through a foot-high stack of press releases every morning. On Mondays, after the weekend, the stack climbed almost two feet. When I returned from an assignment or vacation, I faced boxes of unopened mail. As a free-lance writer with a weekly newspaper column and duties as the contributing editor of a national travel magazine, I continue to get heaps of press releases—although now the stack is measured in inches not feet.

I tell you this to give you some idea of the challenge you face in getting the media to make use of the material you are sending them. At The Post, I was a full-time travel writer. Very few other newspapers have full-time travel writers. Many newspaper travel sections are staffed by a single editor; the lucky ones have an assistant or two and a copy aide. My experience with travel magazines is that they, too, are lightly staffed. Your message, therefore, is going to get limited attention. If it is to succeed, it has to immediately catch the eye of an editor or reporter.

When I tackled those stacks of releases at The Post, and when I'm going through my business mail now, I read quickly, giving each item only the briefest of look. I didn't have the time to read them through, to study them, to examine the photos. One brief look, and it was decision time: Keep or trash? And on to the next release. Face it, this is how most (if not all) editors get through the volumes of mail they receive. At The Post, I was looking for items for our news briefs column, items for our business travel column and items that I could expand into a story for my weekly Fearless Traveler Column, which generally ran about 1,500 words devoted to a single travel subject. If something caught my eye, and we used it, the item might be picked up by The Los Angeles Times/Washington Post News Service and be distributed world wide to 500

newspapers. When something like this happens, you've hit a bonanza: Tens of thousands of dollars of the best kind of publicity—recognition in print by major publications. Just before I left The Post, I wrote a column about a travel safety newsletter that detailed in a monthly issue all the ways that an American abroad might become victim of a street crime, and how to avoid these schemes. Overnight the newsletter received 3,500 paid requests for a copy of that issue—and many new subscriptions.

The good news for those of you in the travel industry is that we actually want the mail you send us. We are always on the search for travel news we can pass along to our audience, because we know people are looking to us to keep them abreast of developments. We're on your side; we need you. But you've got to be quick about catching our attention.

B. How to Handle the Media

Before we get into the actual task of writing a "keeper" press release, I want to talk about some difficulties I've encountered, as recently as a few weeks ago, that can kill even the best-conceived press release. Believe me, I'm talking to you here from long experience. Much of what you send us—to be frank about it—is not front-page news. Our choice of what to print or not is arbitrary. We don't have to use your item. If we run into problems, we'll pitch your release and use somebody else's. I do it all the time. Some of this is going to sound like I'm popping off with gripes I have with public relations and tourism information people. But really, I'm just trying to show *you* how to keep an editor on the hook.

1. Answer press inquiries, and the sooner the better. Here's a common scenario; it always baffles me why it happens. An organisation spends hundreds, maybe thousands, of dollars and hours of time to prepare and distribute a press release or press kit. It wants publicity for its product. I read their material and go "Wow!" I can use this. I just need a few more details to get it into our round up of news briefs. If I get some good answers, maybe I can turn it into a full-blown story. I call the firm and run into a solid wall. It happens over and over and over again.

What do I hear? "You have to talk to our media representative or the president of our convention and visitors bureau." But, I'm told, he or she is unreachable. At a meeting, out of town, on a vacation, home ill. Can I talk to anybody else? No, the absentee spokesperson is the only person authorized to speak. I leave my name and number, and start looking for something else to put in the paper.

Please remember, editors and writers have deadlines—sometimes daily pr even hourly. They very often need an answer now, and if you don't provide it, you don't get coverage. Another scenario. An item about your product or tour is just minutes from going to press, but an alert copy editor spots a problem and calls for clarification. If the editor can't get an answer immediately, the item gets dropped and something else is substituted. It happens all the time.

If you've committed to a big promotional mail out, keep somebody on duty for a week or two who can answer questions. Don't everybody disappear at once. If you're in a meeting, tell the receptionist to page you. I can't count how many times I've sat frustrated at the other end of the phone, saying to myself "This press release probably cost them \$10,000; their goal was to catch the attention of the press, and now they have. But all their efforts are wasted, because nobody is available to answer maybe just a single question." I shake my head in amazement, and move on.

2. Make sure the information you provide is accurate. Years ago I learned an embarrassing lesson. A city convention and visitors bureau sent out a press release promoting a big museum

show that listed hotels where one could stay and get a discount on the admission fee. I ran a couple of the phone numbers on the list without first checking them, and you guessed it. Readers trying to call the numbers couldn't get through. They were wrong numbers. The press release had typos or outdated numbers in it. Now, of course, I check all phone numbers. A disappointingly large number of press releases, perhaps produced in haste and without double-checking, contain errors. If I encounter an error, I'm apt to trash the item. Consider double-checking phone numbers as I do by calling each number I print, using the number that is in my copy.

3. If you provide a public information number, and I pass it along to my readers, make sure the people who answer the phone are well briefed. It is all too common for a newspaper to run a story about a special rate at a hotel chain, and when the public calls the number the reservation clerks have never heard of the special rate. Because this has happened so often, I call the phone numbers first to see what answer I get. If the clerk can't confirm the package, I reject the item.

Just the other day I got a press release about winter whale-watching from a nearby Department of Convention and Visitor Development that interested me a lot. It was, I figured, a "keeper" because I didn't know winter whale watching was possible here in the mid-Atlantic. The release promoted winter whale-watching packages and gave a toll-free number for the city's whale hotline. I called the number, which turned out to be a city tourist information office. The person at the other end of the line—a volunteer, I suspect—was completely baffled. She knew nothing about whales. She could tell me about dolphin watching, however, she said. She put me on hold for a moment, and then came back with this information: "We won't be doing whales until January. You can call back then." Into the trash. I'm not going to tell readers to call a number that will only waste their time. You lose. Be sure you have your act together; get everyone coordinated.

4. Get real. This is a sad/funny tip. Sad for you. Funny, in a sort of perverse way, for me and my media colleagues. Again and again, we're sent big, fat press kits—often from a convention and visitors bureau. They're very fancy, full of photos or slides, maybe even a video. Pages and pages of press releases. Profiles of the big chiefs. Packed with attraction brochures. But, discouragingly, rarely do they contain any useable news. Nevertheless, invariably they say, "For your files." Who's kidding whom? What files? We media folks find this very funny. Do you mean that two-foot high stack of decaying matter on my desk? Most publications don't have much filing space, and they certainly don't have a staff to do the filing.

How did I handle press kits? How do I handle them now? I pitched them into a couple of cardboard boxes under my desk. One box for cities, states and countries; another box for tour companies and travel products. When a box overflowed, I emptied it and started over. Every great once in a while, I remembered something I could use and burrowed inside the boxes.

To save money, I suggest you send out press kits only to those of us who make a specific request. I do use them, but not as a factor in deciding whether I want to do a story about your destination. For example, I marketed a story idea about Phoenix to a major travel magazine—not because of a press kit, but because I knew it as a warm weather alternative to Florida and the Caribbean in the summer. Before I flew out to Phoenix, I phoned for a press kit and found it useful. In sum, mailing out press kits indiscriminately can be a waste of your time and mine. When I was going through the Post's morning mail, I often tossed them into the box at my feet

without even unsealing the envelope. Yesterday, another former travel editor confessed much the same to me

5. If you're lucky enough to get a travel editor or reporter on the phone, take advantage of the opportunity. When I respond to a press release, it may be just to verify the information. But very often, your release has sparked an idea I hope I can turn into a column. I want to get more details on items you have mentioned. Time and again I'm told, "We can fax that information to you," or "Do you have access to the Internet? All that information is on our web site." This response annoys—no, it angers me. I feel I'm being treated as a nuisance. You want to get me off the phone as quickly as possible. And yet, very often I'm your best customer. You are trying to sell me on your project, and I'm the avenue to the publicity you want. Why would you want to dismiss me so quickly? As a reporter for more than 40 years, I know that I can often get a better story by talking to a source. Anecdotes that never made it into a press release come spilling from your mouth—the sort of anecdotes that mean the difference between a ho-hum calendar item on a back page or a terrific lead story that gets picked up all over the country. You get to elaborate on material you had to skip over for space reasons. My appeal: When you catch the interest of a publication, go out of your way to provide the information it is seeking. It really is in your best interest.

C. How to Write a Press Release That Will Catch Attention

Now we get to the heart of this session. Based on my experience, these are the things that will give your material the best chance for getting used. For nearly three years until recently, I published a travel newsletter, and I used these principals preparing a monthly press release to about 75 local newspapers and radio and TV stations. My purpose was to get my newsletter mentioned in the press and to get me on radio and TV to discuss travel and my newsletter. By anyone's measure, I think I was very successful. One result is that I became the travel editor of a local national public radio outlet, and I was asked to write a weekly travel column for a chain of six suburban newspapers here. So I feel I have a good, practical understanding of what works in a press release—both from the point of view of a recipient of press releases and a writer with a product to market.

1. Keep it brief, and keep it simple. Get the news on one page, if possible. Two maximum. Yes, a press release can be several pages longer, provided the subsequent pages are solely back-up material explaining the news you've outlined in the first one or two pages. Single side sheets, please, for our convenience. You don't want to overwhelm an overworked editor. A few paragraphs or a page are all they are going to read before making a decision. As it often happens, by forcing yourself to write tightly, you do a better job of organizing your material. Clarity, not cuteness, is what you are striving for. Clarity, clarity, clarity. The end result is that you stand a better chance of getting it picked up. Try to provide enough information so that an editor can develop at least a brief item from it. But what you really want is to get a reporter or editor to call you for a bigger story. Note: Neatness is appreciated, but it doesn't count for much. An editor is looking for news; if your release has news I can use I don't care whether you have a plain or fancy logo, plain or fancy paper. Indeed, I'd be happy to read a hand-written release tossed at me in a crumpled ball—provided I read right at the top something I wanted to pass along to my readers.

2. Get the news at the top, and toss the self-serving puffery. This may sound like self-evident advice, but many press releases manage to bury the interesting stuff deep down in the text where it may never be read by an editor. Put a headline at the top of your release with the big news—just as newspapers do. Put the news in the first paragraph, or at least no deeper than the second. When I'm sorting through the latest batch of releases, I'll read maybe the first two or three paragraphs. If I can't figure out what you're promoting, into the trash it goes. To conserve space, eliminate the non-essential material. And that tends to be self-promoting quotes from the owner or president of the travel firm sending out the press release. Example: "Our tours offer the best value on the market," said Jane Jones, president of XYZ Tours. No self-respecting travel editor is going to print a sentence like that—it cheapens the content of your release--so don't waste space with it. Use the boss' quotes only if they provide solid, factual information rather than biased opinion. Example: "We are the first travel firm to offer in-line skating tours of China," said Jane Jones, president of XYZ Tours.

3. Be creative in writing. Write with flair as you might see in a newspaper. Use active verbs and zippy, eye-catching leads. One release I saw recently began this way:

"In an effort to strengthen its British market, the State Office of Tourism has signed a one-year contract with Global Marketing of Great Britain. "

This is not a lead that's going to excite anyone, though it tells precisely what has occurred. I suggest putting more zip into the lead, as in:

"In the British Isles, everyone's dreaming of a vacation in our state. Well, that's the hope anyway of the State Office of Tourism, which has just signed a contract with a high-powered travel marketing firm in Great Britain to spread the word of the state 's charms. "

4. Make it clear—near the top—how your product or program is unique. I want to know why I should feature your product or event or attraction, and not someone else's. What's new with your product? How is it different from similar products? What developments have prompted you to send out this release? The news may be a special discount rate you are offering. A new museum opening in your community. A new tour or cruise you are originating. An off-beat walking or driving itinerary. As an editor or reporter, I'm looking for signs of trends, something a little different. One morning when I was opening The Post's mail, I came upon a rather simple press release describing a new travel firm called Grandtravel—tours for grandparents and grandchildren. At the time, it was a novel idea. I called the firm, talked to the founder and did a story that went out over the L.A. Times/Washington Post News Service. Grandtravel credits me with getting their business underway. In sum, we media folks are looking for content, something solid we can pass on to our readers.

5. Provide fresh ideas—even one will do. Travel editors are constantly faced with the challenge of finding new ways to feature annual events in their pages. Fall foliage. Thanksgiving. Christmas. The ski issue. The golf issue. Many of you have the same challenge, promoting annual events. You will earn an editor's gratitude, and lots of publicity, if you can supply ideas for new angles to these annual stories. You do the brain-storming. Ask yourself, How can a product or event I'm promoting be used as the basis for a fall foliage story in my hometown newspaper? Instead of scenic drives, suggest scenic hikes, romantic inns, golf among the leaves.

In western Maryland, there's a now booming outdoor recreational area ringing huge Deep Creek Lake. One day, before the lake became so popular, I got a letter from a new innkeeper at the lake. She said it was time for The Post to take a fresh look at the getaway possibilities the lake offered Washingtonians. Well, we've written about the lake many times, I told her. But did I realize, she responded, that her new inn was just one of about eight inns that had formed an association of Inns of Deep Creek Lake? Why not feature the inns of Deep Creek Lake? Good idea, I thought, and did just as she asked. Happily for me, it sparked a series: Inns of Williamsburg, Inns of Annapolis, Inns at the Beach.

For you, a new angle might just be a twist in the way you describe an event. Let's say you are trying to promote your community's 53rd annual Halloween Pumpkin Toss. A typical release might say, "Our 53rd annual pumpkin toss gets underway next month better than ever. "Ho hum, into the trash. Instead try something like "Who cleans up after our town's pumpkin toss when everyone has gone home? For 53 years, it's been the town's biggest mess. And what happens to all that smashed pumpkin?" An angle like that, describing an overlooked aspect of your annual event, or whatever, might be precisely what sells it to a travel editor.

And don't forget to guide an editor to the results you want. Don't be shy about telling an editor high in your release the sort of story you think your product or program deserves. Editors are busy and can't think of everything. You guide them. IE: "Our pumpkin festival would make a fine lead to your annual fall foliage issue; see the leaves and test your tossing skills, etc, etc." This information might be provided in the form of a note attached to the release.

6. Target your release. Know to whom you are sending it. By this I mean, don't waste postage sending out a release about a community event, normally attended only by the local folks, to newspapers across the country. It's a good bet that nobody beyond your immediate neighborhood is going to pay any attention to them. As a writer/editor for national publications, I'm looking for stories that have a national impact. Writing for The Post or for a magazine like Arthur Frommer's Budget Travel, I have to ask: Is this something I can recommend readers spend big money on to see—airlines tickets, lodging, meals, etc. What I'm trying to say here is that the local press and the national press see things differently, and you might want to do a different press release for each of them. Keep in mind that you may tempt a national reporter by promoting your region—not just your community or your event. This means you could turn out to be just a couple of paragraphs in a bigger story, but that's better than nothing. For example, I couldn't sell a magazine editor on a story about Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. But he snapped up an idea about a story I called "In the Footsteps of the Founding Fathers;" which featured Washington's Mt. Vernon, Jefferson's Monticello, Madison's Montpelier and Monroe's Ash Lawn-Highland—All four presidential mansions, the homes of four of America's first five presidents, are within easy driving distance of each other in Virginia. For a national publication, propose something like this of your own. Highlight your attraction or community by highlighting other nearby attractions.

One more tip in regard to targeting your audience: Keep an eye out for bylines in the media. Which writers seem to focus on those aspects of travel you are promoting? And then send them a press release in the form of a personal letter. This sort of ego-stroking can be productive.

7. Skip the gimmicks. It makes you look dumb. I've received press releases that have come rolled up in huge boxes of inflated balloons. Press releases accompanied by samples of a local product, such as nuts or raisins. A press release in a bucket of sand—from a beach resort, of

course. Sure, they catch my eye. But I assure you that these gimmicks don't earn you any Brownie points. They are a waste of your money and my time. At The Post, we always gave any freebies, like chocolates, to a charity. Some of the gimmicks may amuse us; mostly you become an in-house joke. This is definitely not the attention you want. In the end, what we are really looking for is news, that is, a press release with content.

8. Aim your message at the media, not at the traveling public. In your press release, you are not trying to drum up ticket sales. You are trying to catch the eye of a travel editor. I don't want to know how much fun your pumpkin toss is going to be; that's a pitch for the folks you want to show up. I want to know the details about when, where, what and how. This is a fine point, but it is something to keep in mind as you draft a release. Tell yourself, I'm trying to get publicity for my event, and I have to convince an editor he or she should provide it.

For example: In a press release I got recently, the lead sentence reads: "Spirits will soar when the 12th Annual Hot Air Balloon Festival takes off again." That's the sort of thing (trite and ineffective as it is) you might put in an ad for ticket sales. For a press release, you want a lead that provides some element of news to attract an editor's interest. As in: "The largest number of balloons ever will take flight." Or: "For the first time, a balloon capable of around-the-world flight will lift off."

The chairman of this meeting advised me that many of you have been told time and again to write press releases so that they can be put into a newspaper without any re-writing. This is fine—although at The Post we went out of our way to rewrite anything we put in the paper. Just be sure the release does not offend an editor's sensibilities; that is, it provides news not puffery.

D. Critiques

In preparing these remarks, I reviewed a number of press releases submitted for critique by members of the audience. All had problems that put their usefulness in jeopardy.

1. Be focused. One convention and visitors bureau was promoting a group of 20 historic sites that had banded together to tell the story of the Revolutionary War. But the lead of the release focused on the grant of \$250,000 to get the project going. As I read the release, it seemed to have a split personality. On the one hand, the announcement about the grant might interest local business editors. But it's not going to excite travel editors across the country. For them, you would want to highlight the unique fact of so much viewable colonial-era history in a compact area. My suggestion is to put out two press releases, one for local business editors and another for travel editors. Each has a different interest in the story.

2. Be creative. Another release involving a tour company began by announcing the availability of the new 2002 brochure. Not red hot news, for sure. But buried a few paragraphs down was mention of a package of new multi-sport tours, spurred by a phenomenal growth in demand for such trips. Now that's news. It's a trend in travel, and editors are eager to spot trends. I suggest leading the release with a quick, snappy glimpse of a multi-sport trip (hiking, biking, rafting, canoeing) and then adding, "This is just one of several exciting new programs unveiled in the company's new 2002 brochure." This is how I would have written the story for my paper. I think you would have a better chance of getting media play for your release.

3. Provide sufficient information. In the release cited above about Revolutionary War sites, a list of the 20 places was included t h i s historic house, that historic monument. But even I, a history buff, didn't recognize many of them. To help the editor—which means giving yourself a boost provide plenty of background material. I suggest each of the 20 should have been

identified by a short phrase. Maybe the editor wants to mention three or four in a story. But if he or she has to track down the information, the story may not get written. Don't let this happen; provide the details.

4. Keep your material lively. In one release, the author described a romantic getaway package, simply listing what was included for the price: three nights' lodging, a three-course dinner, a horse-drawn carriage ride. I suggest peppering up the paragraph with a series of active verbs. "Stay two nights at a three-star inn. Dine at one of the area's gourmet restaurants. Catch a theater performance. Go for a horse-drawn carriage ride." This is writing a release the way I would for a newspaper item. This gives your list more pizzazz, while at the same time highlighting how much participants get for their money.

5. Bury the self promotion. A surprising number of press releases begin with the name of the issuing organization, as in: "The Great Neck and Wappingo Area Convention and Visitors Bureau announces xxx." You instantly put your reader to sleep with this lead in. Bury your lengthy name in a subsequent paragraph and get the news up front. Also, if you must get the name of the boss of your organization in the release, attach the name to a quote that has some meat to it. Too many quotes are simply hot air, saying nothing.