

# The Sources *Hot*Link

Tips and Practical Ideas to Get Positive News Coverage

Number Thirty-one

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September 2004

## Using History to Write Powerful Leads

BY STEVE SLAUNWHITE

One of the toughest jobs in marketing and PR communications is getting your target audience to read what you have written. After all, if your press release, brochure, web page, backgrounder or feature article isn't read, it fails totally. No readers, no results.

That's why writing an effective lead is so crucial. The lead – which, in most cases, is the opening paragraph – will either hook the reader, or produce a yawn.

There are several lead-writing techniques. Some writers prefer the hard-news style of Who, What, When, Where and Why (the 5 Ws.) Others open with a provocative question, a fascinating fact or statistic, or a familiar problem or issue.

But there is another technique that is very powerful, yet often underused. I call it the history lead.

I originally learned this approach while studying the work of renowned copywriter Pat Farley. While writing a sales letter to promote Sotheby's Auction House, she created a fascinating parallel between attending an auction and the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb. Here is her lead:

*When archaeologist Howard Carter first opened King Tut's tomb in Egypt, he knocked only a small hole in the barrier and then peered through. Leaning over his shoulder was Lord Carnovan, his sponsor. After a while, Carnovan asked impatiently, "What do you see?" Carter answered in a*

*hushed voice, "I see things. Wonderful things."*

*Every year tens of thousands of "wonderful things" pass through the door of Sotheby's...*

Isn't that an irresistible opening? Doesn't it make you want to read on?

Of course, a history lead isn't always the best choice. But it can work well for an astonishing variety of communications.

Here is a lead I wrote for a PR article featuring the *J.F.J. de Nul* dredger. (Note: A dredger is a ship that clears the sea bottom to make way for larger vessels.) Originally I tried the standard 5 Ws approach:

*Constructed at the IHC shipyards in the Netherlands in 2002, the J.F.J. de Nul is the most advanced self-propelled cutter suction dredger ever built. Her 6,000kW cutter drive – 30% more powerful than those currently in use – is capable of dredging from a depth of -6.5m to -35m.*

Not bad. The opening clearly conveys the facts. But I thought it was a bit tired, even for a technical audience. So I decided to dip into history to make the lead more enticing. Here is the result:

*When Caesar conquered Egypt in 48 B.C., he used dredgers to clear the way for his ships into the Alexandra Harbour. No one knows for sure what these dredgers looked like or how they worked. We can speculate, however, that if the Roman engineers who built*

*Continued on Page Two*

## Media Relations: Rules of Engagement



When dealing with the media, always remember to:

- Be accurate.
- Be accessible.
- Be consistent.
- Be helpful and polite.
- Don't speculate or "pretend" to know the answer.
- Treat media deadlines as your own.
- Treat media representatives equally. Don't play favourites.
- Address a person, not a title.
- Know the media's requirements.
- Be professional.

## Using History to Write Powerful Leads

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*them could see into the future, they would be astonished by the size and power of the J.F.J. de Nul.*

Better? I'll let you be the judge.

Where suitable, I've used the history lead in everything from press releases and presentations to ads and sales letters, and it has almost always improved readership. So the next time you come across an interesting historical tidbit, keep it in your back pocket. You never know when you'll need it to write a better lead.

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*I apologize to Barbara Florio Graham for not publishing this article accurately in the June issue. Here it is in its entirety with the bulleted list of what constitutes a good letter to the editor. Lynn Fenske, **HotLink** Editor*

## Letters to the Editor

BY BARBARA FLORIO GRAHAM



The Letters page is one of the most popular sections of any newspaper, and is therefore an ideal way to keep your name and your core message in front of the public.

Use every possibility that arises to write a letter to the editor, and urge your supporters to do the same. The general rule is that one letter on a subject is usually ignored unless the Letters' Editor feels it is especially significant. Two or three letters on the same subject cause the Editor to put them aside and consider running the best one, and five or more letters amount to a mandate to publish at least one.

Letters must be personally written, as form letters with different signatures are quickly recognized and discarded. Letters should be brief, typed and signed, with the full name, address, and telephone number of the writer typed beneath the signature. Addresses and telephone numbers are not published but are essential so that the Editor can verify that the letter is authentic. If you're especially concerned about including this information, put it in parentheses and indicate clearly "Not for Publication".

Give each of your supporters your identifying statement, along with a descriptive paragraph containing a few more significant details (such as the date of the organization's founding, some recent accom-

plishments, a high-profile sponsor or honorary Board member). These should be used in every letter, although the rest of the letter should be in the writer's own words.

Begin each letter with a reference to the news or feature article which provoked the comment, along with its date of publication, and try to make a positive comment, even if you follow it with reservations.

### A good letter to the editor:

- begins with a positive or neutral statement
- is fair and moderate in its criticism of the paper or reporter
- avoids strong pejorative language concerning the issue on the opposite side of the paper or the reporter
- uses simple sentence structure and active verbs
- employs laymen's language
- offers some new information of interest to the readers
- keeps to one major point
- is not longer than 250 words
- closes politely, perhaps suggesting a possible course of action for the paper or its readers
- is typed with full name and title below signature along with complete address and telephone number

*Barbara Florio Graham is the author of "Five Fast Steps to Better Writing", "Five Fast Steps to Low-Cost Publicity" and "Mewsings/Musings". Her web site is [www.SimonTeakettle.com](http://www.SimonTeakettle.com).*

## Farewell and Hello

Dorothy Piniarski, **Sources** invaluable Listings Co-ordinator, is leaving to pursue her interests in photography. We thank her for the wonderful years she was with us and wish her all the best in her new career.

We welcome the new Listings Co-ordinator, Natalie Cajic and look forward to working with her on the Winter 2005 issue of the **Sources** Directory.

**The Sources HotLink – September 2004 Phone: 416-964-7799**

# How to Build a Media List

BY MARK LAVIGNE, APR



The first part of building a media list is strategic – determine whom you are targeting with your message.

Often your desired target audiences are diverse so this should be clearly defined before beginning to build your media list.

This requires some research on your part. Mainstream news media such as daily newspapers and network television will often get to many of your target audiences. But don't overlook the many vertical, very targeted media outlets such as magazines, cable TV shows and E-mail newsletters that can reach your target audience(s) more directly.

Ensure your media messages are in multimedia format suitable for television, radio, print and on-line media outlets so your message gets to your target audiences in a variety of ways. The old advertising adage that you must hit a target audience with a message up to seven times before it is fully "received" definitely still applies in our information- saturated world.

The next step is getting in touch with a variety of suppliers out there who sell media lists in hard copy or electronic form and can customize them to your needs. Product offerings include one-time list purchases, hard copy media listings booklets and subscribing to web-based list services that are constantly updated. These are not inexpensive, but invaluable to a successful media relations campaign.

It's always a good idea to purchase lists from a number of different sources, especially if you're starting out in a new client relationship in a new media niche. To ensure your media list is as complete as possible, plan on calling and confirming information at key media outlets.

My tactical philosophy is to get the news out in a variety of ways. I recommend combining direct E-mail dissemination from your own service provider (with your name on the E-mail) with the use of paid



wire services and snail mail services available from various suppliers to the PR industry. Aim to hit the target media in at least three ways, via direct E-mail, via paid news wire and via snail mail (print

media kits or CD-ROM's). This way you will definitely ensure the targeted news media have seen your message. When purchasing media lists, make sure they contain phone and fax numbers, E-mail (the best are those that go directly to the journalist and not to general in-boxes) and snail mail addresses.

Finally, you should update the list constantly. Utilize E-mail bounce backs as a warning you have wrong information. Keep up with the list services, and never underestimate the power of an old-fashioned phone call to the media outlet's reception desk.

*Mark LaVigne, APR, is Past President of the Canadian Public Relations Society (Toronto). He runs a media relations and media coaching firm based in Aurora, Ontario where he can be reached at (905) 841-2017 or mark.lavigne@sympatico.ca.*



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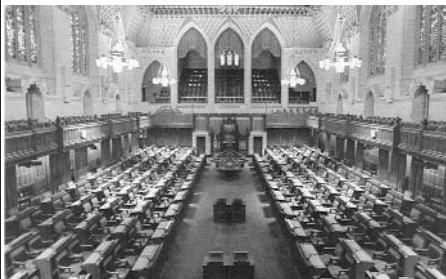
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## In Print: Maximizing Coverage in Community Newspapers

BY LYNN FENSKE

*As a publicist, I've established a pretty good track record for getting local events featured in community newspapers. People often ask me, how do you do it? To answer that question, here (once again) is my best advice –*

When it comes to getting news coverage in community newspapers, presentation is paramount. The newspaper's editor(s) need all the help they can get since staff members are always pushed to the limit. Even when student interns are available to help out, there is never enough manpower or time to follow up on every story lead or to attend every special event. So to maximize your profile and get your story or event covered, submit what the editors want, when they want it.

Here's how:

- Be accurate in content and delivery. Submit your information to the appropriate person listed on the newspaper's masthead or in an up-to-date media directory (like *Media, Names & Numbers*).
- Always submit information in the proper format of a news release or advisory. To do so, consult an appropriate "How-to" book, view press releases online ([www.sources.com](http://www.sources.com), [www.newswire.ca](http://www.newswire.ca) or [www.cp.org](http://www.cp.org)) or hire a professional PR writer. (The results garnered by a professionally written press release are well worth the expense.)
- Answer all the key questions of who, what, when, where, why and how – briefly.
- Submit your press release or advisory via both E-mail and fax. Follow up by telephone if you can. Never mail press releases, you can easily miss deadlines this way.
- Every community newspaper publishes instructions on where to submit information. Follow them, particularly when it comes to calendar listings for an upcoming event. Event listings are usually directed to an editor working independent of

the newsroom. However, provide enough details, written in news release style, and your calendar listing may, at the discretion of the editor, become a nice "filler" article.

- Honour the geographical boundaries of the newspaper. Remember, they are serving a specific community. Anything taking place beyond their "territory" will not receive coverage.
- Be aware of schedules and deadlines. Some community newspapers are published two or three times a week, others monthly. For calendar listings, get the information in as early as possible – up to four weeks in advance of your event. Calendar space is limited and often assigned on a first come, first served basis.
- Always convey any opportunities that exist for taking photographs and be specific about the time and location. Photographers are usually assigned to cover several events in one day. If you do not specify the scheduled time for a presentation, ribbon cutting ceremony or the presence of a local celebrity, etc. then the photographer may inadvertently arrive too late.
- Maintain a positive attitude and be trustworthy, accurate and timely in your delivery of information. In other words, be someone the editors can look forward to working with and can depend on.
- Be sensitive to the pressures and deadlines of newspaper publishing. Don't make demands on the editors. They have enough pressure to deal with, often being responsible for several editions per week.
- Establish a good working relationship with editors. They rely on people like you to help them stay informed of all that is happening in the community.  
Now go get those headlines.

*Lynn Fenske is a freelance PR writer and editor of the Sources HotLink newsletter. She can be reached at (416) 232-0652 or [lfenske@sources.com](mailto:lfenske@sources.com).*

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