

To get PR right, listen to journalists venting on X/Twitter

JJ Jegorova & Mauro Battellini, Co-founders of Black Unicorn PR, looked at hundreds of journalists' pet peeves on X/Twitter to understand the regular mistakes still being made by too many PRs.

We're going to share one of PR's darkest secrets with you. Journalists think a large proportion of what they get from PR practitioners sucks.

And it's not just a case of the usual resentment between hacks and flacks, or "biting the hand that feeds". They have good reasons for feeling that way. For over six years we have been collecting a dossier of journalists' "pet peeves" on X/Twitter, the vast majority from journalists in tech, and we have now assembled a chamber of horrors totalling 300-plus gruesome exhibits.

Lack of basic professionalism

A huge number of journalists' pet peeves, well over a third, are about a basic lack of competence. Clearly that's not great. But for those of us deeply concerned about this lack of professionalism, there's some consolation in knowing that for most real pros a lot of the hating has nothing to do with them.

A crucial factor here is that there is no operating licence in PR. You don't need a degree or formal training to start, and anyone with a laptop and the internet

can give it a go. Result? The world is full of “PR amateurs”, people lacking basic know-how.

Another core issue is the intense pressure that comes into play from bosses. This may force some PR practitioners to behave in a way that they know or suspect will be counterproductive. Bosses have been known to push old school sales playbooks that they are more familiar with, and want re-enacted in PR.

Exhibit A. A typical example is an irrelevant pitch to an editor as a result of a lack of even the most basic research – about the publication or the journalist, or both. This can result in highly amusing – and equally frustrating – mismatches between what’s offered and a journalist’s pitch. How about the recent example of a “spray and pray” pitch about the health benefits of kimchi to a cybersecurity specialist?

me: cybersecurity reporter

my inbox: pic.twitter.com/2DyM8EyApJ

— *Carly Page (@CarlyPage_) February 21, 2024*

Speaking of spray and pray, a lot of peeves are about mail merge. It’s not a great tactic to start with. Journalists do prefer a personalised approach. On top of that, getting the formatting wrong or forgetting to remove the [NAME] placeholder make a lot of journalists feel hopeless.

Embargoes and exclusives

Two really important PR tools in startup PR are embargoes and exclusives. The inappropriate use of embargoes for mundane news stories is another way to hack off a hack. And you might think that “exclusive” implies single use, right? But a lot of journalists complain about double exclusive pitching. Surely a great way to hack two people off at once (and destroy the opportunity to access their channel of communication in the future). And don’t get us started with embargo pitching using different times for different publications.

Get your timing right

Timing is everything in music and comedy, as well as in PR. Various state-of-journalism reports by PR software vendors discuss the latest trends in PR and media and preferences of journalists. Including the best times to email journalists. But it seems not everyone is reading them. Journalists complain that even legit pitches and follow ups are being sent on Fridays or holidays. Quite often, news is sent too late in the day to be looked at properly.

Astonishingly, and unforgivably, some PR practitioners have been known to pitch stories that are not only old but have also been previously covered by other media outlets days before. What were you thinking?

Don't act like a buddy if you're not

Journalists are not fooled by insincere flattery, nor do they want you to be overly pushy. Some report being followed up five times or more on a single pitch, including on evenings and during weekends, even after getting a “no”. One especially harassed hack reported 17 follow ups for one email!

Worse (yes, it can get worse) follow ups can creep into personal realms, like WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook or even dating platforms! Let's just say, journalists don't enjoy that.

Crossing the line

Ethical issues we saw reported as pet peeves include attempts at green- and pink-washing. This not only makes journalists feel like they are being used or considered a part of companies' marketing machinery, it outright disgusts them. Journalists – correctly – see themselves as independent third parties with no obligation to businesses. They need to and want to maintain journalistic integrity. So don't even consider asking a true journalist to add a hyperlink for SEO purposes.

The worst ethical cases we've encountered were offers to arrange a commercial agreement, with money changing hands in exchange for articles passed off as earned media. Other examples include attempts to use tragic events, such as war or a famous person's death, as “PR hooks” for something trivial. Remember that journalists have some of the strongest moral compasses out there.

Making it hard for journalists to do their jobs

Unsurprisingly, attempts to interfere with interviews are also annoying, as is asking to see articles before they are published or for edits unrelated to factual errors.

Sharing PDFs instead of text makes it harder for writers to extract the quote they want. And why attach bloated photo files instead of just a convenient link to a cloud folder?

Often, the basic hygiene elements needed for journalists to consider writing about startups are not in place. For instance, a professional-looking website, or polished LinkedIn accounts for the founders. And incomprehensible press releases full of jargon or hyperbole are not going to help either. Speaking of hyperbole, don't be tempted to mask weak news with strong language. One journalist we know colourfully describes using this sort of copy as "slinging shit".

Most journos lament the banality of images sent — repetitive poses, attire, backdrops — and an overrepresentation of middle-aged, white men. Photography does have a cost and can be time-consuming, however it can have an outsized impact with many journalists.

Probably the greatest tech founder team photo of all time. Dear other founders: This is now the standard you have to meet. Take a bow, Woola.

<https://t.co/UzWZzrgQ72> pic.twitter.com/4r6ghLlkrz

*— Mike Butcher (@mikebutcher.bsky.social)
(@mikebutcher) December 21, 2021*

It's called "earned media" for a reason

Shrinking ad spend and reductions in editorial teams means journalists are extremely time poor and, when the PR annoyance-counter reaches a certain point, they turn to X/Twitter.

This level of busy-ness raises the bar even higher for PRs wanting to help journalists, requiring from us the utmost attention to detail. After all, it's called "earned media" for a reason.

How you earn it is by listening to what journalists want and deliver it in the best possible way, consistently. That means fighting the good fight and playing for the long-term by developing relationships with journalists and adapting to their individual needs. That's what divides PR professionals from PR amateurs today and in the future.

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