

# ADWEEK

## PR TECHNIQUE: The ethics of entertaining journalists

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Published on August 23 2004

In building media relationships, knowing each outlet's rules as to what they accept and expect is key, but the 'gift' they still prefer most is a solid story.

Everybody likes a good time. Entertaining is fun. Entertaining journalists is a great way to build relationships with them. There's just one problem: That profession's ethical constraints - and the guidelines of its individual employers - often prevent the scribblers from taking anything from anybody.

Sometimes even a donut.

So how to schmooze and not abuse? How can PR pros woo journalists without stepping on their ethical toes?

The first step is to understand what those rules are. They vary widely. Some journalists won't accept a meal. Others get upset when you don't shower them with expensive gifts.

PR professionals say they usually don't keep official tabs on the approaches of individual journalists or media outlets. But one place to start may be the website of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. Search "codes of ethics" and you'll find a link to a page with a collection of various newspaper, wire-service, and organization policies.

For example, the AP dictates that its employees take nothing. The *LA Times* says reporters can accept a meal or drink "with the understanding that they will be reciprocated at company expense when appropriate." *The New York Times* writes that "whenever practical ... the reporter should suggest dining where the *Times* can pay."

In a poll of 50 US journalists, PR and marketing firm Incepta found that almost all (98%) do not expect meals, drinks, or accommodations to be paid for them by PR people. (That compares with all of the 30 journalists in Asia polled saying that they do expect such expenses to be paid for them.)

"The key thing for journalists is their credibility," says Aly Col-n, ethics group leader at journalism think tank the Poynter Institute. "If they do anything that appears to look like they're being bought off, they'll lose it."

In a recent article, Col-n lauded a *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist who mistakenly entered a raffle at a trade show and when she won - \$20,000 in first-class airplane tickets - immediately declined the prize.

Before getting into PR four years ago, Jonathan Jaffe, now president of Jaffe Communications in Westfield, NJ, was a reporter at the *Star-Ledger*. Jaffe tells the story of a PR rep from a local college visiting the newsroom with "this beautiful platter of food" to thank the paper for its coverage - only to be turned away. "The bureau chief took the PR woman into the hallway so she didn't embarrass her. She said, 'We do not accept food.'"

Jaffe adds, "Since that time, in doing PR I never give out food because for some reporters it's insulting to them. It shows you don't understand the news business. Instead of giving them food, I give them good news stories."

The situation often depends on the type of journalist. Business and political reporters may be the biggest sticklers. Fashion, travel, and food journalists are often the most libertine.

Ron Dresner, president of Your PR Department in Farmington, CT, held a media dinner in June for a food-industry client - no journalists objected to the free five-course meal, but then food is what they cover. Many freelancers and some

magazines covering travel will accept free stays in hotels, Dresner says. For a boating magazine, he adds, it's not wrong to take the journalists out on the Long Island Sound, for example.

Dresner sums up his general approach in one word: coffee. He says most reporters can accept a cup of joe and he often invites them to do that at a Starbucks (he bookmarks the chain's locations on his laptop). "They know a coffee meeting will not be long or costly," he says. For breakfast meetings, he says he either makes the point of letting them pay for themselves or takes the lead and pays for himself.

Indeed, one thing to keep in mind is that you can build a relationship even if you're not shelling out cash. Andrew Blum, PR manager at Chadbourne & Parke, recently had breakfast with a reporter who insisted on paying. "It was relationship building and it didn't matter who paid for that purpose," he says. "It was fine, it was a non-issue."

Each year, Blum invites journalists to sit at the New York law firm's table at the "Financial Follies" put on by the New York Financial Writers Association. He has had one reporter decline because his organization would not allow it.

But he understood. Blum recalls having to turn down a free flight from American Airlines for a junket when he was a reporter at the *Journal of Commerce*. "I've been on both sides of this and it's just how it's done," he says. "I do understand why they say, 'No, I can't do this. It wouldn't look good.' It's gotten tighter with these things."

Sometimes an event can pass moral muster if it has a clear benefit to the journalist's work. Tom Eisbrenner, president of Eisbrenner PR in Troy, MI, says that he has never had a journalist refuse to attend the firm's annual "Hacks & Flacks" golf outing for ethical reasons, though that may be why some simply don't respond. One purpose of the event is to forge relationships between journalists and executives from companies like Motorola and DuPont, he says, adding that he gets thank-you notes from the reporters mentioning the invaluable contacts they made.

There are other ways to help journalists that also forge good relationships with them. Text 100 has a program in which it has journalists come in once a month to talk to the staff about a topic and ask questions about the firms' clients, says Chris Barker, account director in Seattle.

**Being a good resource always helps. "I have a lot of sources I give media who aren't even clients, such as a retail-tech expert," says Roy Miller, VP of PR at Dallas-based The TransSynergy Group. "So they remember me because I'm giving them sources who give them good stuff."**

These considerations also enter play when giving gifts - even goo-gads with press releases. Some places will not accept anything. Others have a ceiling - say \$25 - on what they will take.

"When you look at who you are mailing to, you know certain organizations won't accept anything," says Barker. "Make sure you're respectful of that."

"Of course, many PR people say the way to a journalist's heart isn't through his or her stomach - it's through a good story. Consistently deliver good stories and relevant information in a timely fashion and that journalist will always pick up the phone when you call."

### Technique tips

**Do** investigate what the ethical policies of various media outlets are

**Do** remember that building relationships doesn't have to mean paying for meals and trips

**Do** offer what journalists really want: good sources and stories

**Don't** assume that a reporter can accept the hospitality you want to offer

**Don't** insist when the reporter refuses - it will only embarrass him or her

**Don't** think that any largesse a reporter accepts will result in a story

