

Today's "New News" Environment: Successfully Meeting the New Demands for Getting Your Message Out

Presentation to the Media Relations Summit
April 13, 2004
Toronto, Ontario

These notes and additional information for this panel will be archived online at:
<http://www.davidakin.com/speeches>

Biography of presenter:

David Akin is among the first of a new generation of journalists, holding concurrent positions with Canada's most-watched network news program and Canada's leading national newspaper. Akin is National Business and Technology Correspondent for CTV News with Lloyd Robertson and a Contributing Writer for The Globe and Mail's Report on Business. Akin joined CTV News and The Globe and Mail in August, 2001. Prior to that, he was a member of the inaugural staff of the National Post, where he was a senior technology reporter. Akin was the 2003 recipient of the Excellence in Science and Technology Reporting award from the Canadian Advanced Technology Association. Akin studied history at the University of Guelph. Based in Toronto, he and his family live in Oakville, Ont.

Online:

Full contact information is at: <http://www.davidakin.com>
Akin maintains a blog at <http://davidakin.blogware.com>

"First it was the tech meltdown. Then, the war on terrorism grabbed the headlines. In a news environment dominated by an uncertain economy and global unrest, how can media relations professionals create stories that find their way "above the fold" and on the nightly news? Hear and learn directly from this panel of experienced journalists how your stories can be crafted to compete with the news that is dominating today's media."

Determining what is and what is not news

There are a few things a PR person can do on his or her own to make this determination. But at some point a PR person is going to have to make contact with a journalist and get to know that journalist. It's always best to do this before you have news to report.

Before calling a journalist, the best way to determine what is and what is not news is to read the publication regularly or watch the news program you're targeting. It's apparent, though, from the quality and nature of the pitches I get how poorly informed PR professionals about the content and format of the most watched network television news program in the country or the most widely read national newspaper.

I get frequently pitched, for example, to do product reviews or product news on CTV National News and yet, had the publicist watched our program – as a million Canadians do every night – it would be apparent that we never do product reviews and we do stories about new products only in rare circumstances. A publicist reading *The Globe and Mail* would see that product reviews are rarely done in that publication and would never have seen my name associated with a product review. Product news is frequently done but, in the Report On Business anyhow, it's often presented in a way that connects a product to the financial health of the company or as part of an overall trend in a particular sector. A publicist reviewing the content at globeandmail.com would see lots of product reviews and lots of articles about individual products but, again, would never have seen my byline on product reviews.

Page 1 of 3

David Akin Presentation to Media Relations Summit
April 13 2004

After you have a sense of what is and what is not news for a particular title or broadcast, you need to have some intelligence about individual reporters and assigning editors and producers.

Find out ahead of time how and when these folks like to be contacted. Time of day is crucial. Both CTV and the *Globe* have worked up initial lineups for that night's broadcast and the next day's paper by mid-morning. In my experience, it's tougher for a marginal news item to fight its way into a lineup if the news is released later in the day. The earlier we have it, the more likely it is news.

The bottom line:

CTV National News does seven or eight stories a night. That means the news item you're associated with has to be one of the eight things that happened in the entire world that Canadians would find most interesting that day. It's a very high barrier to get a story on the national news. There might be 20 stories in the *Globe's* Report on Business, a slightly lower barrier to clear but it still must be significant. So ask yourself: Is what I'm pitching going to be more important than developments in Iraq, the ongoing travails of Air Canada, an SEC investigation of Nortel or an outbreak of avian flu?

The answer is usually going to be no. Your client needs to be made aware of that. I get between 300 and 400 press releases and pitches a week. I will take three or four of those to either an editor or a producer and maybe one or two becomes the seed of a news item for broadcast or print.

That doesn't mean the reporter you were thinking of for the story shouldn't be contacted about it. What you're pitching may work in another story or it may spark a different angle which includes an element from your client.

Let's take a look at some examples of what became news and why:

- Launch of Toyota Prius
- Bill Gates in Toronto
- Moontaxi launches PureTracks

Monitoring the current news to find a "hook" for your story

This, it seems to me, is a great way to get your client into the news even if you have no news to announce but it takes some vigilance and imagination.

An example:

On the first Friday of every month, Statistics Canada releases the latest employment figures. For CTV, we need real people to be at the heart of this story. We can't just talk about numbers. That means we need to find people who lost their jobs or just found one; we need to find companies who are hiring or companies that are firing.

On the first Friday of every month then, I'm often looking for these folks. Smart PR folks who have recently hired people will seek me out, to let me know their new hire and that new hire's boss can talk to us about their experience. Here's a good opportunity, then, for that business to briefly make the national news.

The key here is you have to be quick, you have to be imaginative, and you really have to know your reporters.

The University of Western Ontario does a great job in this respect, sending out a mass e-mail to reporters and assignment desks offering up experts who can talk about the main news story of the day.

Determining what the media and your audience is looking for - and integrating it into your messages

We are not interested in a story that is pitched to us because “it involves a Canadian success story”. I get way too many pitches sent my way insisting we should do a story because it involves “Canadians”. The fact that Canadians are involved may help but first, we are looking for something more:

1 – Firsts. Usually a global first but sometimes a Canadian first.

2 – Broad appeal. We are national newscast and a national paper. Our bottom line litmus test: Is this interesting to Canadians? Will it hold their attention for a minute or two and prevent them hitting the remote. At CTV National News, I’m up against Law and Order reruns and Jon Stewart’s The Daily Show. That’s some stiff competition!

3 – Biggest, smallest, highest, longest, strongest – Items that push measurable and quantifiable extremes. “Best” is rarely a qualifier that gets us going. Best is a marketing term, not a public relations term.

Creating press releases that grab the attention of journalists and editors

The most important characteristic of press releases is that they arrive at the right time and in the right format. You can trust us that, as professional journalists, it’s our job to know what news is. You just have to get the information to us at the right time and the right place.

Assignment desks at both the Globe and CTV are constantly watching press release wires as well as news wires like The Canadian Press. If editors see something interesting, they alert a reporter. Most reporters are too busy to be watching such wires all the time. They rely on direct contact with a PR person for a press release, usually through e-mail.

If you can, give a reporter you have a good relationship advance notice of your release, particularly if it’s one that you think is important. Can you negotiate the timing of this release so that the reporter can give it his or her full attention? What we love: A press release given to us Friday for embargo on Monday.

If the release is coming by e-mail, no formatting is required. Ever. I’ve never known a reporter to decide to do a story because the press release contained coloured letters and fancy fonts and some words which were bolded or italicized. All that formatting only makes the distributor look like a salesman and turns reporters off. Even more importantly, special formatting wastes bandwidth – an issue if you’re accessing a network from on the road, over a cell phone, or from a handheld device – and even if it does get through, you’re making assumptions about the software your recipient has to properly display it.

Never send unsolicited attachments. As a precaution for viruses and other security hazards, more and more organization are stripping attachments from e-mail messages before they get to a reporter.

So: Plain-text e-mail with no formatting and no attachments is always best.

What about jargon and technical terms? My advice is to use clear, plain language but sometimes it will be unavoidable to use industry-specific terms. You may lose some journalists, particularly general-assignment journalists, but don’t forget that specialist journalists are paid to know the jargon of the industry they’re covering. Our business is an extremely competitive one. If I miss a story and my competition gets a story, my editors will take a very dim view if I claim I missed the story because I didn’t understand the press release.

What else? I sense many press releases are written to please the client and are not written with the idea of winning some news coverage. Do some work with your client. Do they want to be the stars of a press release or do they wish to get some coverage of their new event?