

Asking To See An Article Draft Is Asking For Trouble

Written by Business News

Next time you're surfing for an interesting movie, consider checking out "The Insider." The 1999 movie – starring Al Pacino, Russell Crowe and Christopher Plummer – tells the true story of Dr. Jeffrey Wigand (Crowe), a tobacco industry whistleblower, and Lowell Bergman (Pacino), a producer for the television news magazine "60 Minutes." The film follows Wigand and Bergman's attempt to get Wigand's story about tobacco companies manipulating nicotine levels and lying to Congress about it out to the public. The movie shows the pair had to learn to trust each other as corporate lawyers, news producers and the media tried to derail the truth.



"The Insider" is the story of two different men who want to tell the same story, but with different motives attached. It's also a tale of how people will attempt to compromise the integrity of journalism. To lay the groundwork for the bigger story, the film starts with Bergman in the Middle East, attempting to secure an interview for legendary newsman Mike Wallace (Plummer) with the leader of a "terrorist" organization. When told that he would have to provide the subject with Wallace's questions before the interview, Bergman says that's now how journalism works. Thank goodness that's the case.

I'm in no way implying that what I dealt with recently is akin to the story behind "The Insider," but it did serve to remind me of one of the main themes of the movie – people's attempts to manipulate the journalistic process.

My story starts with a casual business contact, someone I've known for a few years and someone whom I trust. He came to me with a story pitch for my newspaper column sometime

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ago and I expressed interest. Recently, he told me he was ready to get the news out and asked if I was still interested. I was still interested I told him. He said he would get me all the information I needed and set-up the interviews. While this person isn't a PR professional, he was certainly acting like one. That is, until a conversation we had online last week. (For the sake of protecting his identity, I'm calling this person "Mike" – not his real name).

Our story begins with "Mike" answering my question about whether or not one of the subjects of the story would talk to me for the article.

Mike: Basically, he said that if he can see a rough draft, it'll be a lot easier for him to participate/get approval [from his company].

Ben: Can't do that.

M: Didn't think so. Is that for editorial reasons or time reasons?

B: Editorial. I don't show anyone drafts of stories, no one does.

M: So it's just blind? That's cool if it is.

B: It's the news. For future reference, if you asked another journalist to see a draft – someone you didn't know – they'd tell you to [BLEEP] off and wouldn't write the story.

M: Didn't mean to insult your integrity. Just knew you wanted a quote.

B: It wasn't an awful question, it was just inappropriate.

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M: Lesson learned.

B: Makes a good topic for my PR newsletter.

M: Great, leave my name out of it.

B: I never name names.

M: I don't want to be the screw-up that asked to see a rough draft.

B: Believe me, it happens all the time. You asking is not a big deal because you're not a PR person, it's an honest mistake.

M: That's good.

B: I learned this lesson the hard way. When I first started writing, I let someone see a draft of a story about an hour before it was due to my editors. [The story subject] sent me back all these notes and corrections – totally changed the story and I'm thinking, "I just showed them my story and now they're trying to change it to suit their needs." It went from being a piece of journalism to being an advertisement for someone. I didn't run the story and I've never shown anyone a draft of another story since.

M: There should be a middle-ground, no?

B: Well, from the PR perspective, a middle-ground would be nice. From the journalism perspective, it doesn't serve the reader well. We're trusted with reporting the news fairly, not reporting the news how the people making the news want us to report it.

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M: But if there's not [a middle-ground], don't you get stuck with people being too tight-lipped when a journalist could possibly be writing a good story?

B: Sure, it happens all the time. But the subjects of stories don't control the editorial process, the journalists do. If it was the other way around, would you believe anything you read?

M: Good point.

Our conversation shifted to another topic from that point out, but as you can see, "Mike" raised an interesting issue.

I do get a lot of requests from sources and PR people to see my columns before they run in the paper. As I mentioned to "Mike," I did this once and never again. It's journalistic suicide to show someone a draft.

As a PR person, there's no quicker way to land on a journalist's blacklist than making this request. It's beyond unprofessional to ask this question and any journalist who says yes certainly isn't credible in my mind.

Don't make the mistake my friend made. While I eventually wrote the story, it was only because my friend didn't know any better when he asked the question. It was an innocent mistake by someone who is not a PR professional. But if a PR professional had asked the same question, you can bet they would have been told to [BLEEP] off and their clients would be forever banned from my columns.

Ben Silverman was previously a business news columnist for The New York Post and the founder/publisher of DotcomScoop.com.

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