

I feel it's time to answer some questions and respond to some criticism. And I'm having a serious case of writer's block (too many days without thinking).



QUESTION: How do you measure web hits? I don't consider myself a PR rookie, but the last time I worked in PR we were still receiving newspaper clippings and hoping for print stories, not web. Since I'm pitching mostly to trade pubs (healthcare, medical and IT), I'm aiming for online visitors and not holding my breath for print. How can I measure this traffic if the sites can't provide me a circulation or ad rate?

ANSWER: Ah, the Internet age old question. A few years ago, everyone lied about their website traffic.

The best way to get accurate website statistics is also the most costly. Firms like comScore (<http://www.comscore.com>) can provide you with web traffic numbers for thousands of online properties. But their products are expensive and not worth the money unless you're going to use them extensively. Alexa (<http://www.alexa.com>), which is owned by Amazon.com, provides some free information related to web traffic. Alexa

can give you a general idea of how much traffic a website receives, but nothing very specific, as can Quantcast (<https://www.quantcast.com>) and Compete (<https://www.compete.com>), though the latter two sites rely on a freemium model.

I guess the old adage “Any press is good press” works here. Trade publications are generally not among the most popular websites out there to begin with, but with trades, it’s all about the target audience anyway. Look for websites that are professionally designed and updated frequently – those are more likely to yield traffic than out of date, poorly designed websites.

More importantly, once you get the online press, what will you do with it. Take that article you worked so hard to get written and get it accepted as guest post on a blog. Once an article is online, it’s like everlasting press for your company. It will come up in web searches for eons thanks to Google and it basically becomes a floating press clip that you can use at your disposal.

QUESTION: I am working with an online music company and we are disagreeing on pitches – whether to target technology reporters, music reporters or media reporters. Can you help me with pitches?

ANSWER: Do your own pitches! But I do have an idea – pitch financial reporters. Online music is a hot-button issue and has been for a few years. The tech press has been all over it and can’t seem to find a new angle on it. The financial press has ignored the issue – concentrating mostly on lawsuits, but not the bottom line. And the bottom line is what matters here. I actually wrote a column for The New York Post mentioning this last week.

I have a lot of friends who work on both sides of the digital music divide and I’ve been pushing them to find new angles on the story. I think this applies to a lot of subjects. Having a focus is good, but once you’ve run through that focus group, why keep pitching them the same stuff? Find a new angle and pitch a new set of reporters who may cover your pitch to fit their subject

area needs.

LETTER: As a card-carrying PR practitioner myself, I got a kick out of “A Week on the Other Side of PR.” Believe me – I appreciate your sense of humor, and I sympathize for what you go through at the hands of some people who style themselves as public relations professionals. But, I don’t claim those people as true colleagues – and I respectfully ask that you not use the word “flack” to describe PR people, even those who seem to deserve it.

I’m not going to try to go into a long justification of how there are many educated, professional, and talented PR practitioners “out there” who don’t deserve to be belittled with an ugly word. I just don’t think it’s right for you, or anyone else, to lump all PR people together under a single label, any more than consumers should lump all journalists together. I’ll make you a deal, shall I? Let’s all of us true professionals on both “sides” of the PR fence agree to work together to elevate the profession. We can start by showing mutual respect.

RESPONSE: I respectfully reserve the right to call PR people “flacks.” And you may use the term “hacks” when talking about journalists.

In all seriousness, I never thought the term “flack” was viewed as derogatory by PR people and it’s not my intention to disrespect anyone. I have many friends in the PR business and I have as much respect for them as anyone in the business world. I feel that the role of PR is vital in business, government and society.

I understand the letter writer’s concern. I feel the same way when I get lumped in with journalists who, in my opinion, do nothing by regurgitate – get this – press releases. Is that journalism? At the same time, is someone who just sends out a press release and follows-up with a call a PR person? Unfortunately, the first person is considered a journalist and the second person is considered a PR person.

Is there another term, instead of flack, that we can use to describe PR people?

QUESTION: What do I look for in a good PR person/firm? Is there some key criteria I should use? Is there any way to avoid doing research into the PR company myself?

ANSWER: Oooh, good questions. As I've mentioned before, I've had good experiences and bad experiences when it comes to hiring PR firms for my own endeavors. This is a difficult question for me to answer because I know, based on my experience as a journalist, who I would hire to do my PR work.

The best advice I can give is to do some actual research. Sorry, but if I'm going to be spending money on a service, I need to do my own research. I would begin my research by talking to friends in the business (whatever business I'm involved in) to see who they use or have used in the past. I would be hard pressed to hire a firm that didn't come recommended by someone I know personally (just like I would be hard pressed to buy a car I didn't test drive).

It's difficult to come up with actual criteria for making a PR pick. Every company has a different PR need and every PR firm has a different track record. I'm going to essentially punk out on this question because I simply feel that the best way to find a PR firm is by doing your own research and contacting PR firms, meeting with them and then making a decision based on all of the available information.

QUESTION: I'm at a large agency, and everyone is on notice to bring in new business. I hate doing new business, and have no idea how to go about it. Any suggestions?

ANSWER: Yikes, they've turned you into a salesman! Sometimes you have to bite the bullet and just do it.

Consider this: Isn't PR, in one sense, a sales job? You're selling ideas and instead of getting money in return, you're getting press. Use those same skills to get new clients.

There are some easy ways to go about finding clients. First, think of companies whose products or services you enjoy and see what their PR situation is. You would be surprised. A PR friend of mine scored a new client for her firm by chatting up an executive of a clothing maker at a party. "I love your stuff and think it would be so much fun to work with you guys." A meeting or two later and she scored a new client.

Look for people that are trying to hire in-house PR people. Scour employment message boards and job listing websites. There's value to having an outside firm, especially with small and medium size companies. Pitch the value of not having to take on a salaried employee with benefits and see if they'll halt the job search and give your firm a three or six month tryout. Also, look at the press release wire and see what companies are bombing with their press releases and need some PR help.

You should check out websites that track venture funding. Private money is beginning to pour back into companies and those companies, rich with new cash, will need some ink. I've noticed a lot of companies in the WiFi arena are getting funding and that's a hot topic in the media right now. Companies that aren't getting ink, but are getting money, are missing the boat.

I realize that going out and finding clients is not what some of you signed up for, but it can be a good experience, especially if it saves your job. Consider it yet another challenge in an already challenging job. The skills that have made you a successful PR person can easily be translated into making you a successful salesperson.

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PR Fuel Mailbag

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