

# MEDIA RELATIONS INSIDER

WHAT'S NEW AND WHAT'S WORKING TO INCREASE YOUR MEDIA COVERAGE

SUPPLEMENT TO BULLDOG REPORTER'S BUSINESS AND LIFESTYLE EDITIONS

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## PITCHING TACTICS

### How to Employ Humor in Your Pitches—and Increase Hits—Without Crossing the Line

Not getting the hoped-for response rate to your email pitches? Try injecting a humorous angle. "We use humor all the time in our pitches. Our rule of thumb is that as long as it's not crossing a line of decency, then it is more than appropriate—and often necessary," says **Michelle Metzger**, director of public relations for M/C/C.

Think about it: "Reporters get 300 emails a day. How do you expect to break through all of that noise with a pitch about 'The New and Improved Box X' or 'XYZ Company Partners with 123 Company'—you know, the kind of stories that really make your head spin and increase your daily intake of Pepto Bismol," she offers. "We've had great success incorporating humor into our pitches and subject lines. Reporters see them as a refreshing change to the usual boring stuff they get from nearly everyone else."

But before you start tapping into your inner Richard Pryor, there is a cautionary side to consider. "A sense of humor is a terrible thing to waste and a dangerous thing to use," believes **Heath Shackelford**, manager of public relations at **American Healthways**. "When applying humor to media pitches, you have to consider the nature of the content you're pitching, the personality of the journalist in question (if known) and the greater news environment that exists."

To that end, here's a list of dos and don'ts to help you achieve maximum impact—and minimal backlash—by adding humor to your pitches.

**1. Don't be too clever—or irrelevant.** It's important to remember that it will never be enough to simply "be funny." You have to make the pitch relevant to each person you're targeting. Ask yourself, "Why would this reporter care? How does the humorous angle relate to what they cover?"

For example: "That's the trick with subject lines," Metzger says. "You can't just be clever or funny, because if you don't show relevancy, your pitch can get deleted even faster than [if it wasn't funny]. Be clever, but also be relevant to the topic you're pitching. That way reporters know it is something they'll want to open."

**2. Do get creative.** "Some PR pros are so afraid of offending a reporter or crossing a line that they don't know how to have fun," Metzger says. "But most of our clients are either brand new companies or in a category that is still emerging—which means we have to be more ingenious about how we pitch. Rather than saying, 'Cover us because we're so great,'—a common mistake among PR pros—most reporters thank us for being so refreshing."

Her advice: "Don't be afraid to have fun. We've been able to have fun with our clients and the process, and we've been able to give reporters some fun too. And they appreciate us not treating them like faceless, nameless people who don't enjoy being tickled as much as the next person. Contrary to popular belief, reporters are people too."

**3. Don't be insensitive.** "You don't have to be reverent, but being sensitive is important," says Metzger. "Don't make fun of people who are physically challenged. You want to be seen as a credible source, and coming across like a prejudiced person does not help your case."

For similar reasons, executive coach **Leslie Ungar** thinks it's best to avoid making jokes in your pitch altogether. "Humor yes, jokes no," she clarifies. "Think about it. There is a butt to every joke. When you make a joke in the workplace, you don't know who you'll be offending. You can't know what nationality someone's spouse is nor from what country they adopted children."

**4. Do balance risque with relevance.** On the other hand, "Humor is a terrific approach to soften a quirky product or [dubious] subject matter," says **Adrienne Arieff**, of **Arieff Communications**. "For example, I work with high-end sex toys sold at Fred Seagul, Maxfields and other upscale retailers. We always use humor in our pitches so editors don't feel uncomfortable. And since we are trying to turn these products into a lifestyle brand, it is imperative for us to be funny-yet-sensitive to an editor's comfort level."

**5. Don't kid about safety or tragedy.** "The only time you want to avoid humor like the plague is when it comes to topics that deal with life or death situations," Metzger notes. "For example, we have a client that produces thermal imaging cameras that are used by law enforcement officials and firefighters. While most of the time we can get away with humorous pitches, we have to forego humor when the topic involves officer safety or reducing the number of fire victims. It's just not appropriate. And the truth is in those cases, humor is not necessary, since the hard facts stand on their own."

## SAMPLE PITCH LETTER

### Being Humorous and Relevant—Here's How It's Done

The following is a pitch from Metzger's own portfolio that is clever-yet-relevant from the subject line to the closing paragraph. **Mark Marselli**, editor-in-chief of **Wire Journal International**, later told Metzger, "Just for the record, I like your style (most notably, the subject lines). You get me to open up your press releases, and believe me, I get a goodly number that do not pass that test!" She secured a bylined placement on the follow-up.

**Subject Line:** What do bees, cobras and cabling have in common?

**Copy:** The space between your wall is dark, narrow, cold and often lonely. Many secrets lie inside a building's walls. Sometimes, they are hidden dangers like the recent 500-pound honeycomb in Los Angeles that housed more than 100,000 angry bees or the king cobra loose in a Dallas townhouse community a few weeks ago. But sometimes, the stuff inside the walls isn't dangerous at all. Sometimes it's wonderful—like the cabling that supports the traffic of the enterprise network.

So, what's snaking around inside the walls of most enterprises? Is it cabling that will still handle growing bandwidth needs for the next five to 10 years? Or are business going to have to gut the place and put new cabling in to support the higher bandwidth traffic the management team demands?

Here's a tip: Do it right the first time. Enterprises can use SYSTIMAX Solutions and know their cabling is ready for the future. They can also rest assured they won't have to see the insides of their walls for at least another fifteen years. Now that's reassuring.

Please let me know if you would like to visit with an executive at SYSTIMAX Solutions about their cabling solutions. Alternatively, we could contribute an article on the subject for your readers. Just let me know how we can help you.

**6. Do reference pop culture.** “On the flipside of that, we did develop a pitch for our thermal imaging client around Spring Break that was irreverent,” Metzger relates. “It played on Mastercard’s “priceless” ad campaign and read, ‘Being rescued from the snow before having to eat your friends: priceless.’ I also signed the pitch ‘Michelle “Snow Bunny” Metzger.’ Shortly after, I got a response from a **Better Homes and Gardens** editor saying, ‘Hello, Snow Bunny. I guess you can tell I read your whole pitch.’”

Why was it OK to joke about life and death in that case? “It was irreverent, but it wasn’t based in recent events,” Metzger explains. “It was more of a pop culture reference. Whereas, if we’d said something like, ‘Keeping officers from being killed in the line of duty: priceless,’ that’s not funny.”

**7. Don’t carry on.** You don’t want to get so into your ‘standup routine’ that you wind up losing your audience. “You have to be cautious using humor in your pitches—especially by email—because many reporters want you to get to the point,” Shackleford notes. “It’s an easy way to ensure you miss the mark with your intended message.”

Metzger agrees: “Don’t belabor the humorous aspect,” she says. “Your first paragraph can be about the anecdote [or other variety of funny business], but by the second paragraph you should draw it down to what your client does. If you spend more space [than one paragraph] on the anecdote, then it will come across as rambling and lose its relevancy. You always have to draw the pitch back to why the reporter should care.” ★