Fact or Fiction?



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Science by Press Release

Some of the country's best journalism schools send more than half their graduates into public relations (PR) report John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton. They add: "Also disconcerting is the fact that the 150,000 PR practitioners in the U.S. outnumber the country's 130,000 reporters (and with the media downsizing its newsrooms, the gap is widening)." They estimate that about 40 percent of all "news" flows virtually unedited from public relations offices.¹

Who is the largest single employer of public information officers? Answer—the U.S. federal government, which in 1961 had 1,164 people working as writers/ editors and public affairs specialists. By 1990, the number in public information jobs was nearly five thousand.² I don't know what these numbers are today, but I'm willing to wager they are even higher.

In another book, Rampton and Stauber add the following: "A comparison of PR newswire releases to actual newspaper stories shows they are frequently repeated, verbatim or nearly verbatim, usually with no disclosure to tell readers that what appears on the page as a journalist's independent report is actually a PR news release. A study by Scott Cutlip found that 40 percent of the news content in a typical U.S. newspaper originated with public relations press releases, story memos, or suggestions. In 1980, the Columbia Journalism Review scrutinized a typical issue of the Wall Street Journal and found that more than half of its news stories 'were based on press releases.' Often the releases were reprinted 'almost verbatim or in paraphrase,' with little additional reporting."3

Medical News is Almost All PR

Medical news is often spoon fed from wire services. Dean Edell reports: "A Gallup poll in 1990 found that 'the most prevalent sources of medical news on television are the wire services and network feeds used by 98 percent of all TV news directors surveyed.' What you most often hear on the air are wire stories read straight to the camera with only a word or two cut or changed. The power of a wire service health writer is astounding. I have never in my twenty-year career seen a reporter first look for and then read the original medical journal report or research project on which a health story is based."⁴

Look at the Alar Case

An example of how clever PR can bring an industry to its knees is the issue involving use of Alar on apples. Alar was a chemical used to synchronize the ripening of apples. The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), an organization that wants food without pesticides went after Alar. Their ammunition was "a single study of mice fed enormous doses of Alar relative to their weight. In this study, one mouse developed one tumor. This study was not repeated with other species. Nor was it peer-reviewed or published in a reputable scientific journal."⁵

This didn't hinder NRDC. They hired media consultant David Fenton to help their cause. Here's how Fenton summed up his efforts in a Wall Street Journal article, "Our goal was to create so many repetitions of NRDC's message that the average American consumers (not just the policy elite in Washington) could not avoid hearing it—from many different media outlets within a short period of time. The idea was for the 'story' to achieve a life of its own and continue for weeks and months to affect policy and consumer habits."⁶

Fenton worked a deal giving CBS exclusive access to the results and a '60 minutes' exposure followed by a news conference the next day, then numerous talk shows and magazine cover stories meant that it was virtually impossible to miss the scary news. Their campaign was quite successful. Here's what James Collman reported: "Immediately alarmed parents dumped huge quantities of apples and apple juice and cost the apple industry about \$375 million in lost purchases. As a result of this panic, Alar was removed from the market by its manufacturer. Subsequent tests by the National Cancer Institute and the EPA failed to show Alar caused cancer except in doses between 100,000 and 200,000 times the normal amount a child might consume in a day's ration of apple products."⁷

Another Example

Another topic that gets a lot of PR is breast cancer. Although more than 95 percent of all women die of causes other than breast cancer and a woman is nine times more likely to die of a heart attack than breast cancer, we hear far less about the heart attack threat.8 David Murray and his coauthors note: "The popular perception that breast cancer poses an enormous risk to women is a sign of the remarkable success of activist groups that have moved the fight against it to the top of the national health agenda. Activists work tirelessly to publicize claims (derived from authoritative bodies like the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute) that American women face a one-in-nine (or one-in-eight) chance of falling ill with the dreaded disease."9

There are two important caveats regarding these numbers: (1) they only speak to INCIDENCE of breast cancer, not death from the disease and (2) the 1 in 8 figure is for a woman who lives to age 95; 1 in 9 is for a woman who lives to 85. Most people take these numbers as the risk right now, regardless of age. Looking at death instead of incidence, a woman's lifetime risk of dying from breast cancer is 3.29 percent or 1 in 30. If you look at the risk right now, it depends greatly on age: the risk of a woman developing breast cancer before the age of 50 is less than 2 percent (1 in 50), before the age of 60 the risk is 4.24 percent. Her total risk of death before 65 in 1.5 percent (1 in 65).¹⁰

Murray et al add the following: "Los Angeles Times media critic David Shaw has observed that in 1993 about 46,000 American women died of breast cancer, and about 38,000 American men died of prostate cancer. Yet breast cancer was mentioned almost 5,800 times in major magazine and newspaper stories in 1993, compared with fewer than 1,800 mentions for prostate cancer. In other words, breast cancer received 233 percent more attention from the media. Significantly, the greater media attention given to breast cancer correlated with far more government funding for breast cancer research. In 1993, the National Cancer Institute earmarked \$213 million for breast cancer research, compared with only \$51 million for prostate cancer research. As Shaw pointed out, this 418 percent difference is much closer to the relative media coverage of the diseases than to the relative number of deaths.9

Even EPA folks can get carried away by the numbers game. John Brignell observes: "During a speech at a conference sponsored by the State and Territorial Air Pollution Program Administrators and the Association of Local Air Pollution Control Officials, Mary Nichols, EPA's assistant administrator for air and radiation, claimed that the EPA's proposed air pollution standards for ozone and particulate matter would save (hang on to your hat) 58 million lives. You may wish to be reminded that 2 million Americans die every year from all causes. I stand to be corrected but I think that this qualifies for the Guinness Book of Records."11

Summary

Tammy Bruce describes in detail her efforts as a publicist in helping a firm who was having a "product brand anniversary coming up and wanted the news media to cover it not as a corporate event but as news".¹² Every television news station in the country was sent a fax that made a pitch about the event along with information for downlinking video footage. This was followed by a personal call to the assignment editor at each network station in the top 50 television markets. The project was a success. The video aired in almost every one of the top 50 markets in the nation. Here's the important point that Bruce drives home. "This may seem to you especially blatant—pitching a product as news. But consider the way protests and demonstrations by special-interest groups are arranged exclusively to receive media coverage. What is pitched is different—a product versus an issue—but the method is the same. In each case, the critical thing is not to let the public know how it is done."¹³

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- John Brignell, Sorry Wrong Number! (Great Britain, Brignell Associates, 2000), 217.
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Advice & Counsel

(Continued from page 28)

mist or splashes from the cleaner collect on the portion of the parts that reside out of the cleaner (parts are only partially submersed). During subsequent plating processes, the cleaner runs down the part and causes a streak in the plated deposit.

Plating/Anodizing Processes

Hard chromium platers that have switched from air agitation to eductors to maintain tank temperature have provided me with favorable comments on the effect. A nickel plater that replaced air agitation with an eductor system reported a dramatic reduction in air emissions and an improvement in plating speed and distribution.

Eductors may improve most any plating process that requires vigorous agitation. An exception may be processes such as acid zinc plating, where air agitation is required to control the iron content.

Eductors may also improve anodizing quality and speed by providing a higher level of mechanical force.

Acid Pickling

The efficacy of an acid can be improved by adding agitation. If the eductor is used to replace air agitation, less fumes and mist will be produced.

Rinsing

I have always had a poor opinion of air agitated rinses, because too often the air comes up in one corner of the tank and the rest of the tank is "dead". Eductors provide a much more effective level of agitation and are not subject to the clogged sparger syndrome.

A word of caution: Always discuss a change in the method of agitation of any plating or anodizing process with your supplier or consultant, before investing in such a change. At times, an eductor system may require a change in additive package (especially wetter) to avoid an undesirable change in appearance. *P&SF*