



PR POINTERS



## “Graying” of Communications Translates into PR Opportunity

[By Steve Caulk, President of ProConnect Public Relations]

The world of communications gets grayer and grayer, even as it becomes brighter and brighter.

Grayer in that the distinctions between various duties have tended to blur. Brighter in that never have we had so many opportunities for someone whose main mission is simply to convey a message to a certain audience.

That message-conveying group includes both reporters and public relations consultants. Reporters who can't get their messages past gate-keeping editors can often find traction via blogs. The blogs can be sponsored by the reporters' publications, or they can be independent. In any case, the messages are getting out, assuming the reporters are determined enough.

The same is true of the relationships between reporters and PR consultants. While reporters previously wore the gate-keeping mantle, their power has been eroded by technology. PR consultants still tend to look first to the traditional media (newspapers, radio, TV, and magazines) for exposure because those traditional media carry the greatest credibility.

But PR consultants no longer face do-or-die situations with reporters. When a reporter says “no” to a story, a PR consultant can still go to the Internet. If PR consultants believe strongly in their clients' stories, they will find ways to make them available to people.

In that respect, PR consultants are doing the work of reporters. To give their stories the greatest impact-to make them most readable and most memorable-PR consultants are researching topics, quoting customers, and giving their stories greater substance...and

even sometimes including information about the competition. This is what I mean when I refer to the “graying” of communications.

Do these PR consultants offer the same credibility as an objective, independent, highly trained reporter? No. But the best ones (and the most ethical ones) understand they can offer a service and provide information to people who otherwise would not receive it; and believe it or not, those PR consultants take great joy in that kind of opportunity.

One Denver-based client has created a software package designed to make the whole healthcare costing/billing system more effective. The software is complicated, so most reporters aren't willing to take the time to try to understand it; they would rather move on to the next iPhone-accessories story. To help spread the good word about a good company and a good product, I reported it myself on Wikipedia, mentioning the client by name as one of the first companies to make true “price transparency” available to patients who want to know ahead of time what their out-of-pocket costs will be for health procedures. Of course, I also acknowledged the other company trying to make the same service available, and I specified the differences.

By the same token, press releases are no longer written solely for publication in the *Rocky Mountain News* or *New York Times*. They are written instead for pick-up on RSS feeds, for direct distribution to customers, to build an image for the client, and, yes, even as window dressing for a client's website.

There's no reason a client needs to feel ashamed that his or her press release did not get pick-up in the *Wall Street Journal*. Press releases these days are generally offered on a take-it-for-what-it's-worth basis.

In the past, PR consultants would advise clients on whether to invest the time and resources in the creation and distribution of a press release. These days, the distribution is cheaper, and the outcome is less severe. Technology has eliminated the do-or-die element. So today PR consultants typically advise on what to expect from a press release rather than whether to create one at all.

Is this a good or bad thing? I suppose if you are a reporter who has to filter through so many more press releases, it's bad. But that's why they get paid huge salaries. And I don't see a downside for the general populace, which suddenly has such an expanded availability of information.

### About the Author

Steve Caulk provides his clients all the benefits of 30 years in the communications business, with access to the long list of journalists across the nation he has cultivated. He writes with a crisp simplicity that clarifies the most complex messages, focusing on the needs of the target audience.

In his 19 years as a reporter and editor at the *Rocky Mountain News*, Caulk covered topics such as high technology, telecommunications, tourism, international



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business, airlines, gaming, skiing, and sports. He spent seven years covering the Denver Broncos—an era of three Super Bowls, a union strike, and the onset of mega-million-dollar salaries. His journalism experience has sharpened his appreciation for precise communication and has given him a vast network of former colleagues eager to accept guidance on potential news and feature stories.

During his two years as director of media relations at EchoStar Communications Corp., Caulk communicated to journalists the details of financial reports, legal developments, regulatory issues, and product introductions. He collaborated with the organization's Washington office on a

highly successful campaign to prevent the adoption of satellite TV taxes and another campaign that shaped the industry-critical Satellite Home Viewer Extension and Reauthorization Act in the U.S. Congress. He is a certified Colorado lobbyist.

In 2004 he directed EchoStar's messaging to the public during the temporary removal of CBS and other channels, a company crisis that affected 10 million customers. Most recently, he co-created and executed the DISH City Makeover campaign, a Bronze Anvil Award-winning effort in which EchoStar's DISH Network offered free satellite TV service to any U.S. city willing to change its name to DISH. Spanning three months, the campaign generated more than

3,600 media mentions by prominent outlets such as CNN, Fox, *The Washington Post*, and even BBC Radio.

The University of Colorado Foundation relied upon Caulk to help overcome public misconceptions of the school's fundraising arm following a report by the Colorado State Auditor's Office. That campaign won a Silver Pick Award from the Colorado Public Relations Society of America.

Caulk received his journalism degree from Northwestern University and his MBA degree from the University of Colorado-Denver. He is married and has five children.

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