

The Redundant Journalist Guide to PR

Things to be considered before jumping careers

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The Redundant Journalist's Guide to PR

So, by choice or design, you find yourself a redundant journalist in an era where few are hiring journalists but there seems to be more opportunities for PR (or 'the Dark Arts'; the Dark Side'; 'those bastards' or any one of a million other nicknames you have for people in PR/Corporate Communications/Media Relations) and as you have bills to pay you have to consider it.

You may be telling yourself that "it's just for a while" or "until things pick up" or it may be you've been looking at the so-called other side of the fence for a while and fancied jumping over.

Any and either way, the fact is this: **you're considering a PR job**. Now you no doubt think that there's nothing you need to know about PR - in fact by the sheer force of your presence and skills, you are going to be the best PR operator ever because unlike the other hacks who came over you are going to keep your journalism skills and set everyone/everything straight.

Oh boy.

What this document aims to do is show you the similarities between journalism and PR and give you an idea of the differences as well, so that you are heading in with a bit more of an idea of seeing if you might manage a career in PR – though I wouldn't go as far as to suggest that you might actually come out of this with any more respect or admiration for PR operators because while reading this you're reading it as a journalist and not as one of **them**.

Who the hell are you to tell me about journalism and PR?

I spent more than 15 years in journalism, spent three years studying it before working at the following titles: The Daily Express, The Press and Journal, The Guardian, The Scotsman, The Herald, The Daily Record, The Sunday Mail, The

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Evening Times, The Sunday Mirror, The Daily Mirror and The Sunday Times as well as having copy picked up and syndicated across the globe.

I broke news scoops (including revealing a gangster's international hitlist), entertainment stories (including David Tennant being the new Doctor Who), sport scoops and wrote columns, subbed pages and manned the news desks on a regular basis. I did death knocks, overnights, walked away from family parties and Christmas dinners to chase stories. (There's more at www.craig-mcgill.com)

The point is this: I grafted in journalism. I wasn't Woodward or Bernstein, but I could find a story and write it up. I held my own in the UK, the world's most competitive newspaper market in a time when budgets and staffing levels were being massacred and regulations tightened around the industry.

So when you read this, bear in mind it's being someone who's been through what you are going through. This is meant to be advice for you to see if – despite your thoughts that there's nothing to it – you might actually want or be able to do a career in PR. Because ultimately, if it's not for you, all you'll end up doing is trashing your reputation.

I don't intend this to be a long booklet – it's the five most common points a journalist should know about PR – but it is all words and no pictures. Sorry about that, some habits never change.

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1 – THE TRUTH ABOUT THOSE AWFUL PRESS RELEASES YOU USED TO GET – AND IT’S YOUR TURN TO DO THEM

Yes, many a time you’ve received a release and thought ‘this is horrific, did this person ever learn to write?’ And the odds are that they probably did – and the press release may have looked a lot different before something happened to it – and that something was the client.

(NOTE: during this document I’ll talk about clients – regardless of you working in an agency or in-house – because ultimately they all are.)

Unlike journalism where you write the copy and off it goes (apart from subs and desk rewriters), a press release can have numerous approvals. You write it, a colleague in-house may have a look at it, the people all quoted in the release and others up their chain of command – and they may all have contradictory requirements – look at it.

Yes, what you may end up with may look awful – that’s where you can point this out (in a polite way) that ‘in this style it may not get published’ in which case will be back to square one with another rewrite. You also risk offending the client by pointing out that their suggestions are bad.

One thing to accept – and accept early because it bothers a lot of people who are very good at writing stories – is that quite often you will take something well written and make it worse because a client wanted changes. Stand your ground by all means and defend that ampersand if it means so much to you, but remember this: they pay you, so consider it like a sub’s rewrite – it was better before they got it. The difference being, this press release will go to all your ex-peers with your name on it.

Ultimately you have to suck it up, because, short of physical violence, telling your paymasters that their suggestions are crap will cost you your job and lead to a hell of a lot of rewrites – and your time is going to be precious to start with.

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It's a tricky area, but one thing you should never do is send out the approved release and in the main body of your email, add in a more newsy version – because if the client catches you sending out unapproved items, you could be in bother.

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2- YOU WRITE PRESS RELEASES, NOT THE STORY

You might hear something from a client that you think is a great tale and will get great coverage – if you can stoke a row from it (‘after all, don’t all great tales involve a row?’ is what you’ll be thinking from journalist days).

Tip: don’t create the row. At most levels of PR you aren’t dropping the story into the world like a tale from the West Wing. If you have some old contacts, feel free to give them a call – not an email – and tell them how you think the tale could develop.

And then don’t be surprised if they don’t touch it. Why? Did you ever like it when a PR called you and tried to tell you how to do your job? Noooo, you didn’t.

“But I’m trying to give them a good tale, a row that can run and make my client look good too...” And so was that last person who called you when you were a hack. Welcome to PR.

Similarly, if you do get a topic or issue that you can get your teeth into, remember you aren’t looking to give all sides. You aren’t writing the row, just your client’s side of it.

On the one hand, this means you can turf objectivity out the window with glee. The downside is that if the reporter reading your release doesn’t have the savvy to grasp there’s a potential row here – or who they should call for the other side of it – then your stories dies a death – unless you place a few nudges here and there.

“But wait – you just said don’t create the row.” That’s right, but there’s nothing wrong with trying to let people know about how potentially big this story you have is. How you do that – and who, if anyone, you contact is up to you. Remember, you may be in PR but you still have your guile.

Also, while you can’t add in the row, you can add in comments from third-parties that back your client’s point of view. Just remember to let them approve the comments first.

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3 - BEING IN PR ISN'T ABOUT WRITING PRESS RELEASES – OR EVEN RELATING TO THE PUBLIC

Nine times out of ten your job will be client and media relations with nothing to do with the public – unless you are getting into social media like Twitter – and in fact PR is nothing like what you expect.

In journalism you spent most of your time doing one of a few things:

- Chasing contacts, finding stories, writing stories, rewriting other people's copy
- Even as you went up the chain you were still making contacts and finding stories but you may have handled some budget and staffing situations

In PR, you can be doing the following – even at fairly senior levels:

Generating stories, selling in stories to multiple media, chasing new business, presenting and pitching to new business, making contacts, following up enquiries, tons of paperwork, media monitoring, meetings – clients, staff and journalists, getting story/release approval, costings, budget monitoring, tons of paperwork, dealing with cuts (and boy is that last one a laugh when you don't have access to a library system any more).

And you'll be doing that for every client/department you work for.

Oh and don't expect to get by just knowing how to open a new document in Word. You're going to need to learn how to use Excel, Powerpoint and Photoshop (at least) – because you're going to have to do PR plans on spreadsheets, presentations on Powerpoint and cut out and resize pictures for picture desks (they no longer have the staff to do it).

Meetings will particularly kill you. They'll take hours and seem to be of little relevance at times, but you have to do them.

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4 – YOU AREN'T A JOURNALIST ANY MORE

Suck this one up, 'cos it will kill you. You'll be on the phone chatting away to an ex-colleague and you'll be giving them bits of gossip and chat from your new job and before you know it, it's in the paper. Now it might be a good story, it might be a funny story, but the client's furious. Why? **Because they never approved the release of information.**

Clients like to be in control of the information that goes out there – and remember what may seem funny to you, could offend others and knock a share price or cause a prospective employee to think 'I don't want to work there' – and that's doubly true in an internet age when your stories can live forever thanks to Google.

Other things you can't get away with any more:

- Slagging off a journalist in front of other journalists – you only get away with that when you are in very powerful positions or a journalist. It makes you look bitter and snide if doing it as an average PR – and if they hear about it, they'll never touch your releases and you've just lost an avenue of exposure.
- Lunchtime drinking – actually this one depends on where you work, but the odd four-hour lunch with 'contacts' won't be happening.
- Swearing like a crude marine – newspapers are rough and tumble with strong language, most modern office places, including PR, are not.
- Throwing about strong insults – media offices are full of banter and insults that would cut most to the core. And most are funny, but only in context. In most modern, ultra-PC offices, what you may consider banter, could for others be deeply insulting – and that can lead to poor morale, HR issues and lawsuits. None of which are good.

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- Shouting – again the macho culture is a no-go.

5 – WHAT’S THE PRO’S AND CONS TO PR FOR ME?

By now you may have realised that contrary to what you believed, PR isn’t all about long lunches, mingling with celebs and working 10am-4pm four days a week while checking a Blackberry or iPhone now and then.

It’s still long hours, sometimes dealing with people you’d rather not, late nights, early mornings, moments of frustrations as you wait for others – or people don’t see that you are giving them a fantastic pointer for a story. You’ll butt heads with people you consider friends, you’ll have people accuse you of still thinking like a journalist and you’ll discover that some people hate PRs more than journalists.

Having said that, what does it have? You get even closer to the actual stories, find out the truth behind the scenes (you just can’t tell anyone), it’s a growth industry (especially with social media and online) compared to where newsgathering operations are just now, the money can be similar and more often than not you won’t have to throw in the hours that you did as a journalist – which may change your life more than you think if you have a long-term partner and/or children.

You’re still getting to stay in the industry that you love (it’s still the communications industry, just the other side of it), you may even get paid for training, people will treat you with respect, from time to time you get to treat friends to a meal or a drink. And, when you get tip-offs on stories, you can pass them on to your friends to show them that you’re ‘still in the game.’

Is it for everyone? No. Some people who were great journalists will be great PRs, but some will be terrible, some who were terrible reporters will be great PRs.

And you have a lot to offer: you’re skilled at finding a story, you know the right times to file a story (you’d be surprised at how many think 6pm is a fine time to send a release out), you can think on your feet, you can probably react quickly to

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crises and you can probably mingle with many walks of life. You just can't swear, reveal secrets or get drunk at lunchtime.

And PR, just like journalism, sure beats working for a living...

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CLOSING THOUGHTS

Even after this, you'll probably be thinking 'the sellout knows nothing' which is fine. Most journalists can't help it. Just as many marketing types can't stand PRs (and vice-versa), it's an almost instinctive thing. All I've tried to do is help show you what lies ahead if you are either forced out of journalism or are considering PR.

None of this is to say that PR should be filled with journalists bitter at having been kicked out of reporting and are only doing it to wait a chance to get back in – that's not the right attitude, but everyone will have their own thoughts and reasons for why they get into PR.

But if you don't go into PR what can you do? In many ways there's never been a better time to be redundant. Learn how to use the web, video and audio with web2.0, keep finding the stories, publish them and have the web be your way of making money. Work on selling yourself and your stories.

And if you do that, you've still ended up in PR – but for the most important client of all: yourself.

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About the Author:

Craig McGill – www.craig-mcgill.com - has worked in the media for more than 20 years. As well as having been a senior journalist, he has worked at senior levels of PR. Amongst his achievements have been:

- Being head of PR for the first Retrofest music festival, bring in a ROI of 20:1
- Head of PR for the Tesco Enjoy The Taste of Scotland Food Festival, generating more than £230,000 in positive coverage
- Carried out the UK's first **Twitter** charity fundraiser for the National Trust for Scotland
- Developed numerous online plans using blogs, forums, Twitter and other social media aspects for global brands
- Revealing the existence of terrorist hitlists
- Revealing David Tennant and Matt Smith to being the new Doctor Who's

He has also written four books:

- Football Inc: How Soccer Fans are Losing the Game
- Do No Harm: Munchausen Syndrome By Proxy
- Human Traffic: Sex, Slaves and Immigration
- The Lion Roars

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