

Making the call

When I was a journalist, the inundation of information was mind-boggling. There was a constant incoming mountain of information. News releases arriving by fax, media kits arriving by courier, news wire stories provided by Broadcast News and their commercial counterparts, all followed by hundreds of phone calls made by well intentioned people wanting to know if I had received their information and was interested in their story. Sometimes these calls worked when their news was put into a tight sound bite. Sometimes I would scramble and dig into the blue box looking for a kit that seemed interesting after the “verbal sell.” But not usually.

And now that e-mail has significantly increased the flow of information into newsrooms and freelancers’ home offices, how can one follow-up telephone call cut through all the “noise”? What follows are some suggestions from two journalists in the field.

Marc Saltzman, who is one of North America’s most successful freelance technology journalists in both print and broadcast, receives between 150 and 200 e-mails per day, plus about 10 telephone calls per day. He hates the phone. “The phone ruins my writing flow, e-mail is much more conducive,” he says.

Which leads to follow-up call tip #1. Find out the journalist’s preference in communication. Is it e-mail, telephone or fax.

Saltzman also stresses that practitioners should “choose their battles” for follow-up calls. “Isolate the important stories.” He also notes that PR should do their homework. Don’t follow-up on an inapplicable lifestyle story to a tech product journalist for example.

John Valorzi is the Business Editor at The Canadian Press, which is the nerve system for the Canadian news business and one of a handful of newsgathering co-operative organizations that feed the world’s news outlets. He receives about 200 e-mails a day and gets between 75 and 100 telephone calls per day. He likes phone calls by the way, as long as they are worthwhile and provide context. “I don’t mind receiving (follow-up) calls, but more than half are from juniors who simply ask if I got the release, not from seniors who can debate things or tell me the context.”

Valorzi points out that two or three times a week he gets follow-up calls from practitioners wondering if a release is of interest when it’s actually been on The Canadian Press wire for three or four hours. He begs that we media monitor before we call.

He also begs for data that makes a story newsworthy. For example, if a product is being launched, how many jobs will it create, how much money will be spent on building the new plant. He notes that is worthwhile follow-up contact information that will interest him.

And he reminds us to do post-mortems on stories that bomb out. “Did it have hard edge, quantifiable information that lifted the release beyond just a product release? Before being called 100 times, the PR person has to understand that content is king,”