

# Plugs are putting readers off

By [John Bradfield](#)

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As the lines blur between editorial and advertising, public relations people need to make smarter contributions towards writing that readers will enjoy.

The quickest way to make readers yawn is to serve them articles laced with product plugs. Even worse, try to attract readers to prose labeled "advertorial". Some entice readers to swallow the ultimate sleeping pill - an article that looks like editorial but is full of praise for a company or a product and devoid of critical perspective.

Many magazines have cut back on in-depth features and are flirting with lifestyle pieces spiked with publicity pitches. Such frothiness as "Discover what brings out the best in you" is being recycled so often that reader's brain cells (and most other cells) are unmoved.

It's hard to pick up a newspaper or magazine and find an article unmarred by promotion or advertising messages, insidious in the form of product placement. Favourable mentions for clients are a subtle type of product placement in editorial content and are found in many articles from those about investments and luxury cars to exotic game lodges.

Product placement in media is growing strongest in the United States where it has wormed its way into movies and TV programmes, reaching more than \$1 billion in revenue. An example of such placements is when Burger King products appeared in "The Apprentice".

Now magazine editors in the United States, anticipating similar product placement pressures on articles, have begun to draw up guidelines to separate advertising and editorial. They are concerned that commercializing editorial will lose readers.

PR people need not blush as public relations has since its inception pushed product, company names, business leaders, politicians and celebrities into editorial. Gaining favourable mentions is part of "bread and butter" work. PR practitioners broker between client and journalist, trading information for exposure. Although no money is involved in this information transaction there has to be a value proposition - the information must be interesting or useful to the publication's readers.

While public relations people may want to change perceptions and engineer images, professional journalists are trained to be skeptical to any forms of manipulation. However, company names and products are part and parcel of reporting. Business journalists can hardly write stories without using the names of companies and their products. Service columns, serious judgments on restaurants, hotels and tours, and advice about health products are probably justified too. Many trade publications write about products such as forklifts, air conditioners and personal computers because these products are

important to their readers' businesses.

But there is a limit on how far newspapers and magazines can go in writing about products and companies before an article becomes commercialized. The more serious publications tend to deal with issues rather than make one company or product the topic of their article.

What can the professional public relations person do to assist journalists in their quest to inform and entertain their readers? They cannot hide their commercial interests as need to promote their companies and their products or switch off their laptops.

To provide information that is more than a mere produce plug, PR people can dig deeper for real stories in their companies. They can send journalists press releases that are well researched and written. Press releases with long quotes made up of brazen commercial or self-serving messages from CEOs and marketing people don't make the cut. Real people don't talk in adspeak - PR writers should ensure that quotes are short and in the natural voice of the person being quoted. They must double check that their facts are accurate.

PR practitioners should increase their understanding of news values such as impact, relevance, proximity, prominence, timeliness, and conflict (human drama). News requires something new, different or unusual. Press releases exist to inform newspapers and magazines about new developments, milestones, achievements and, sometimes, even breakthroughs.

PR people can help journalists with information for their stories. Their research can benefit articles when they provide perspective, information that offers explanation of a complex subject whether it is in finance, petrochemical refining or pharmaceutical distribution. Consumers also want to know about products and services and how they can help their lives. Many products and services today are so complex such as home technology (computers, DVDs and even washing machines), health care, and overseas travel that they need much explanation.

They can also assist journalists with background information and become a trusted source in more complex industries.

When journalists write about products and services such as airlines, restaurants or travel trips to exotic locations readers should be made aware that the company concerned paid for the product or service reviewed. This is already practiced by more credible publications.

It's not easy for PR people to tread the fine line of promoting their client's company or product and at the same time giving journalists information that adds interest, perspective or explanation to their articles. But ultimately it is possible to sort the bad from the good. The best PR people present the facts journalists want for their readers, and sometimes even when the information can be controversial.

Interesting facts and anecdotes provided by PR people for an article can make a positive contribution: they prove the PR person's worth to their client, help keep in good favour with the journalist and may even add to the article so that it's riveting enough for the reader.

## ABOUT JOHN BRADFIELD

John Bradfield has worked in communications and journalism. He is a communications practitioner and freelance writer. For further information, e-mail: [john.bradfield@tiscali.co.za](mailto:john.bradfield@tiscali.co.za).

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