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Writing And Editing For The Travel Industry

By

Mike Sullivan
Dear Mr. de Alwis,

Please find enclosed 9 pages of speech from Mike Sullivan for your information.

Thanks & Regards.

Mary Lo
Renton de Alwis  
Director of Member Services,  
PATA Asia Division  

Fax: 65 225 6842  

Sorry for the delay in getting this to you. I have been madly doing daily newspapers for InterTour. Regarding the support equipment, I believe all I will need is a white board and a flip chart. I may bring a slide or two just to liven up the scenery, so if you can have it there I’d appreciate it. I unfortunately do not arrive until about 7.30pm — couldn’t get an earlier flight. However, I will join you as soon as I get to the hotel.

What follows is a brief outline of the presentation, which I have deleted certain areas of explanation, which I hope to do better with interaction of the participants. I will bring the full text with me, formalised a bit, so you can offer it around.

I hope this is okay. Please fax or phone me if there are other areas that need to be touched upon. Also, I hope to call someone out of the audience to be ‘interviewed’ as a test story.

The other cases I’d suggest would be an airline launching new services to an unusual destination; a crisis in a hotel, perhaps an earthquake; and a new theme park being launched somewhere in ASEAN. If you need to contact me tomorrow, I am at home on 987 3144.

Regards,

Mike Sullivan.

WRITING AND EDITING for the TRAVEL INDUSTRY

A presentation on behalf of the Pacific Asia Travel Association, Singapore, June 8 & 9, 1992.

ENVIRONMENT  
These days, all writers have to consider the environment. I don’t mean The Environment, capital E, although that is certainly a
strong source of stories -- I mean the environment of the publication you are writing for. Specifically, that means the environment of the reader and the environment of the editor or editors working on the publication.

Why?

Let me make a calculation for you. Your average travel trade publication in Asia, for instance has an average advertising charge of about US$5,000 per page -- S$10,000. Think what you could do, right now, if you had that kind of money. I'd pay off my highly inflammable credit card, for one thing.

Think as a publisher does for a moment. When you submit a story for a publication, you are asking them to give that space to you, so you'd better have something worthwhile to put in there. Not only that, but if you are a freelance writer, you're asking for that space AND asking them to pay you a few hundred dollars US on top of it so you don’t starve to death for your art.

When you submit a press release, you are asking the editor to give that space to you, often when then information you provide is just the same as all his competitors has anyway. Let's face it, some company managers still believe that PR and press releases are there so you don't have to pay for advertising. I think everyone acknowledges that a good slice of editorial in a publication is worth its weight and more in the cost of buying that space. But by nature, editorial is a vastly different breed of space from advertising.

In these days of advertorials and editorial favours for ad campaigns -- and it goes on in the travel industry, unfortunately, as much if not more so than any other industry -- the division of church and state is under attack. Very often the same publishers who sprout about editorial integrity in their media kits are those who, when pressed by a major client about lack of coverage, "why their press releases are not getting a run" will take that complaint to the editor asking questions like: "If it's newsworthy, why aren't we running them?"

If the editor says as far as he can recollect they were not as newsworthy as the other material which was used, the publisher is unlikely to take that back to the client. Instead he is likely to suggest the editor re-evaluate the system. Publishers will wince at this but of the half-dozen I've worked for it's all been the same story. Today, the bottom line is king.

Of course the smart editor will ignore such advances, using press releases as an adjunct to a story, or as a starting point to a better story. Some affronted editors will go quite the opposite way and never use a press release from that company in living memory just to prove independence and for the joy of watching the publisher writhe and squirm.

I'd suggest that's not the best approach either, not just because exploding publishers are messy, but because you may also be missing information that is of use to the reader.

My only advice to anyone in such a position is to judge the information on its merits -- that is, it usefulness to the reader. Then treat it on its merits which, in the case of most releases, requires follow-up from a reporter and customising the story for your own publication.
TIME TO READ ALL ABOUT IT
Let me just make a statement that affects a lot of what we do as journalists, because it’s something we rarely consider.
When we produce a publication for people to read, what we are actually asking them for is their TIME.
As you know, that is about the hardest thing in the world to ask people for. You are asking them to read you instead of Make that Cup of Tea; Watch that TV programme; Change that Nappy; Look at the View; or even Chat with their Wife or Husband.
I used to think that was the blessed thing about trade publications: People would read them at work. It would make sense that people would have a set amount of time put aside in every publishing cycle to read their travel trade publications.
It’s bunkum, of course.
People in the travel trade, particularly travel agency people, are as busy as hell. And if they’re not as busy as hell they’re probably worrying so much about not being busy that reading a trade publication is the last thing on their mind.
A travel trade publication has to compete with the Phone; the Staff; the Boss; the pile of travel brochures that should be scanned; the daily newspaper; the product videos; the company’s marketing materials that need to be updated; the intineraries for clients . . . you name it.
Added to that, you have to consider that travel trade publications also have to battle the pass-on cycle. In an agency of about 20 people, probably only two or three would get the publication. They would mostly read it, copy what was necessary for them, then pass it on. At any stage the magazine may not make it off someone’s desk to the next person and someone is out of the loop.
You’ll mostly find that it is the managers who have a set time put aside for reading the publications they believe are necessary. The good ones - and thankfully there are a lot of good one - will clip items of interest and circulate them to staff.
EDITOR AT WORK
Let’s talk for a moment about THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE EDITOR
All the while that the Editor - and you can read that as Editor, Deputy, or Sub-Editor -- is trying to figure how his magazine can beat the reader’s environment for his attention, he’s in a situation that’s as bad if not worse.
While all those phones are going and the pile of mail on the desk needs attention and the reporters and sub-editors are asking for assignments or advice, he’s also probably trying to finish that story he should have written days ago, that Leader article that is urgent, that report for management on his editorial budgets, or that next production schedule to his production manager. And everyone want to know why the next lot of planning has yet to be done.
The point of telling you this is not to ask for sympathy -- although that would be most welcome -- but to point out that if you are submitting material to a magazine, and this is the guy you want to impress, you’d better:
A. Write it well, and
B. Write it appropriately for the magazine -- and that means in the style of the publication and with the information in it that the publication wants.

To complicate matters further, The Environment of the Editor, is where the Editor is doing what he is supposed to do best -- and that's all about interpreting the environment of his or her reader.

I got a letter recently from a regional hotel PR who lamented the fact that he 'didn't seem to be able to get anything published even though he'd sent reams of stuff to me. I haven't had time to answer it yet, and that's probably for the better. Instead of calling up or sending a short note asking what I might want, he proceeded to say that he'd send reams more stuff until I did find something to publish. Well, I'm still looking and he's still in PR avalanche mode.

Apart from the cost of all this, and it's expensive glossy stuff -- because that's what ad agencies and printers make their money out of -- it's not working because all the guy has to do is look at the magazine and see what we publish, what length and then do it. I've never had a story less than about 300 words from the guy, and I've never published a 300 word press release yet.

He's not thinking about the environment of the Editor or, more importantly, the reader. Can you imagine a travel trade magazine reader, who might be reading it on the Star Ferry in the middle of a rain squall, or in between clients at the travel agency counter, taking the time to read dilligently about the maple wall panelling or the IDD phone or the six different restaurants and what they serve. Tell him in a few short sentence that you've cut room rates or upped commissions or are paying commission faster and those readers will find the time -- and even better tell their colleagues about it. All that other stuff is in the brochure. The day the travel trade magazine replaces the brochure is the day that travel industry news ceases to exist.

And why do newspapers and newssheets exist anyway?

So we have a job, I guess . . .

What do you think?

The general answer is that there is a need for them. If you speak of newspapers in general, their purpose is:

TO INFORM
TO EDUCATE
AND, TO ENTERTAIN

There is a need for honest, stand alone news about the travel industry. There is a need for decent information and informed analysis of trends in the travel industry.
With all its elements considered, the travel industry is the world’s biggest industry. It’s a complex industry that is impacted by political decisions, economic considerations, social and demographic change, marketing approaches, geography, natural disasters, conflict, exchange rates, interest rates, fuel prices... you can just about name it and it affects the travel industry in some way or another.

It’s difficult industry to report well. But I would suggest that reporting travel news is the best journalism job in the world. What else is there that combines all that?

And no matter how indepth and serious it all is -- and after all that’s what we want as a news writer anyway -- no matter how indepth it is, you often get to travel to do it. Hard to believe, really.

But it’s an industry that makes special demands of a writer. It is an industry that is all too easy to treat in a simplistic fashion, to feel that as long as you have talked average room rates and load factors and hotel occupancy, you have reported the story. I’d suggest that scanty treatment of a story, to such a well-informed and inherently interested audience as a travel industry audience is, would receive scant reading as well.

Today’s travel news writer has to look at the reasons why those numbers are in the story. Compare the numbers to competitors. Have informed people comment on the market situation. What is it that makes those numbers significant? Have some acknowledged bright sparks in the industry make their comments. A good writer would organise them in a fashion that makes it easier for the reader to see different sides of an argument. Then we are all getting somewhere.

So, let’s get down to preparing a news story for the travel industry reader.

Even before you go out to do the story, PICTURE THE READER

If you know what publication it’s going into, that actually makes your job a lot easier, because hopefully the editors would have done that already and you just have to work to the style. If the readership is predominantly travel agents, which most travel trade publications are, then find out what they want before you even shape the questions for your interviews. Interview a few of them -- that’s the best way. They often make the best comments anyway.

SORT THE INFORMATION

Get a logical flow going to your story. Do it right, and you can get rid of words like these: Moreover Heretofore
Meanwhile (back at the ranch ...)

Henceforth

Thus

There are a whole range of supposed linking words that still seem to find their way into copy. They are unnecessary in a good news story. They are cumbersome, they stop the reader in his tracks and they waste space. You don’t use them in normal speech. Remember, you’re telling a story to a friend here — so why introduce them to the precious space of your newspaper.

Think of this: If you were to cut out words like these, and other flotsam such as the word "that" you’d probably be able to find room for another story or two in your newspaper. More about using the language to make best use of space later.

And now comes the fun part. Living proof that good journalism is all due to pyramid power: (FLIP CHART graphic, o draw on white board)

THE INVERTED PYRAMID

What you have to do as a newswriter is catch the reader’s attention with the concise presentation of facts — lots of facts — and not writing technique and powers of description.

In fact, with good newswriting, the style really should be silent. Understood, but silent. The style should not intrude. And if it does, you really should have a mighty good reason.

The model that describes the newswriting technique is called inverted pyramid because it actually does turn feature writing on its head. In feature writing you make a statement and expand upon it until the reader sees the length and breadth of it.

In news writing, when you are competing for the reader’s time and attention, and often in a difficult environment, you have few other choices than to do it by giving the facts up front. Nothing holds attention like pertinent facts.

The pertinent facts are the good old fashioned five Ws and an H. You tell them Who, What, When, Where, Why and How.


Get all or most of it into the first sentence if you can. Certainly get it into the first few, without overloading the sentence.

There is a standard in journalism that the lead sentence of an article should be not more than 24 words long. Why? Well, I used that standard for years without actually finding out why, and the answer came from a design journalism lecturer.

(Explanation of 6 words per line and use of white space, which the eye is drawn towards).

All that aside, if in doubt, go for shorter sentences. Nobody is going to say this guy can’t write because he only uses short sentences. Instead, you’ll be more likely to get the ultimate
compliment for a writer -- someone will read on, read further into your story.

Readers don’t say: "I’m confused. What does this mean?"
"This sentence is too long"
"What does that punctuation mean?"
"What does that word mean?"

They just stop reading. They go on to something else.

If the reader moves on because he’s not interested, that’s his or her prerogative. If he moves on because he can’t figure out what’s meant, then that’s a writer and editor doing a bad job. Just because a journalist is bored by simple language doesn’t mean the reader is. It’s a trap we all fall into as writers. And it’s one of the worst.

WRITING STYLE

Headlines are active. They thrive on good verbs. They are immediate in their treatment.
"Govt tax irks hoteliers"
"SIA fires general sales agent"
"BA sparks fares war"

The job of a headline is to entice the reader to read the story. The immediacy of it helps. The drama of it helps -- and above all, information of what is in the story helps.

Once the headline has introduced threader to the first paragraph, you had better do your best to hold that attention -- and that means providing information fast.

News is past tense, but the construction of the sentences makes it an active presentation.

Instead of "An air fares war that was launched by BA last week has increased ticket sales for Singapore travel agents by 10 percent."
Try: "BA launched an air fares war last week which boosted Singapore travel agent ticket sales by 10 percent.

Then why: "We felt the route was too expensive and it’s already seen our load factors increase by 15 percent," BA Singapore manager Benny Hill said.

Then get into reactions and other ramifications: Other airlines reactions; other ticketing agents reactions; STPB’s reactions to see if it’s helping the other way.

Don’t editorialise:
example ...... Seatrade press release treatment (I’ll bring it with me, Renton).
Don’t mimick people’s titles
example ...... ,” reaffirmed Alexander J.P. Jones III, Holiday Inns Worldwide Asia/Pacific vice president, operations-commercial

Instead, it is the popular name and easier title that works:
...... Holiday Inns Asia/Pacific vice president for commercial operations, Alex Jones said.

If you don’t simplify it, everyone gets lost, you waste space and the title has to be described, but it’s not the most important thing in the story.
Get rid of 'that'

Decide on American or British spelling

Explain the acronyms. Use them only if it’s common for your readers to use them

News language is common language. It’s an organised version of how people speak.

Newswriting is like sitting down with a friend and telling him some news.

"The Seatrade Convention in Singapore is gunna have sessions to help travel agents set up their own cruise departments. They’re also having some thing for port and destination guys along the same lines, to help the ports and that set up cruise facilities. It’s on in November, I think.’

(Compare with news story).

Don’t editorialise, because you won’t get away with it. There’s only one place for that. Let the subject try to sell the story in direct quotes.

Direct quotes are the life blood of a news story. They are what makes it real. They are what bring real people into the newspaper -- so much the better if you are quoting people your readers know and admire.

A good travel news writer doesn’t really hold any pre-conceived ideas on travel subjects. Instead, the skills to be developed are those of sorting information -- assembling what the subjects say into rational argument.

USING THE NEW ELECTRONICS

One of the great things about the electronic age of journalism is that it opens up a whole range of opportunities to sort stories better, call in quotes and information you have amassed, and generally should allow more time for ‘working’ your stories. One of my editors says his favourite keys -- we use the Xywrite programme -- is F6-F6-F8. That stands for define and end block -- and delete.

It’s easier than ever to delete material for sub-editors, so you’d better have what they want in there in the first place.

A good reporter has his files and directories organised so that he can introduce relevant elements easily. Get your system right and new aspects of stories will readily present themselves. A comment by someone last month may be just the thing to add to that story this month. Some people are extremely well organised in this regard, so I’d count Imtiaz Muqbil as one of them.

THINK VISUALLY
(to be expanded using examples, which I’ll bring)

THINK SECTIONS
(again, to be expanded using examples, which I’ll bring)

THINK SERIES
(expansion on the art of following a story or an issue).

THINK EDUCATIONAL
(teaching the reader through news coverage, to be expanded on)

THINK DATA
(figures mean a lot in the travel business, to be expanded on with class interaction)

ENCOURAGEMENT:
Being analytical in your news stories, which travel writers are increasingly having to be, does not mean the writer has to suddenly know more than everyone else about the travel industry and be able to develop theorems in every story. I'd encourage this not to happen, in fact.
I'd suggest the travel news writer of the future is the person who knows what questions to ask -- and if he or she is not sure, then asks a lot more questions. The writer needs to be inquisitive and well-informed, but not opinionated, at least in presenting news stories.
Otherwise it's more a story than news.

Brief wrap-up to conclude. Then open to the floor.
To: Renton de Alwis  
From: Tom Chapman

Here is the first draft of the opening remarks. It is longer than I want, so it will be cut about a page or two, but you have here the nucleus of my remarks. I hope it does the job for you. The case history will be dispatched DHL and I hope you have this Wednesday. I am arriving now in Singapore in mid-afternoon, June 5, having discovered Friday is a holiday in Hong Kong and I don't have to work. All best regards.