

# When people click away after the first few lines, how do you tell your story?

A major corporate press release takes lots of work, lots of people: PR people, IR people, inside counsel, outside counsel, executive management, maybe investment bankers, maybe the board of directors. Say 30 to 100 person-hours, spread over a week, costing between \$10,000 and \$40,000.

When issued the press release goes instantly to the three major electronic news services. A reporter at each one will have about three minutes to reduce ten pages of well-crafted corporate prose to one headline and two short paragraphs, perhaps 80 words (about what's on the screen below). Each of those reporters will be paid about \$3 for that effort.

What reaches the world at large? Not those ten well-crafted pages. It's those three minute, \$3 efforts. Instant headlines and 80-word snippets create the frame for the topic – what is said, what is thought, what is repeated, what is remembered. Look at the tiny summaries on the home page of your favorite news source's web edition (or

your favorite blog). Then check the data to see how many viewers click through (or don't) to the rest of the story. (Usual answer: Not many.)

It gets worse. As the day progresses, the snippets get updated. A little more information gets into circulation. But so do comments, reactions, rumors, me-too's, digressions and outright falsehoods. The web moves information very quickly, without much in the way of fact-checking. (A day later, see how that tiny summary has morphed through the digital media).

When the dust settles, how much of the initial press release has had an impact? Some people will actually have read it all. A few will call with a question or two. But for most, recall is even less than that 80-word snippet—maybe three facts or short ideas, maybe only one, and it may be one that wasn't even part of the press release.

How in the world did we get here? The easy answer is technology, effectively giving everyone access to every-

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## Got Something To Say? You've Got 80 Words - Or May be 140 Characters

NEW YORK (ABMAC) - Spurred by 24/7 news media, ubiquitous handheld devices and surging social media, audiences everywhere are demanding very short, simplified messaging for news and business communications. Both conventional and digital media are responding to the demand.

This trend poses several challenges to corporate communications, which increasingly must choose between oversimplifying very complex material - or having that material denied to, or ignored by, its target audience. There are, fortunately, some alternatives to that stark choice.

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one else with incredible speed and ease, little to no cost, and little to no quality control. Twitter's famous 140-character constraint is now a credible format for a serious message.

But technology is only half the explanation. Politicians and advertisers learned long ago the power of short, memorable (and endlessly repeated) messages. Research suggests that when exposed to more substantial content, our attentiveness falls off very rapidly. Even with compelling material, we're unlikely to remember more than three key thoughts.

All of this is hugely frustrating for the editors of the most important news media. They see their print publications evolving into web publications; they see digital audiences flitting from one item to the next every few seconds; and they wonder how to justify having terrific reporters using powerful technology to produce editorial content that, all too often, the audience scarcely samples. Waiting for the novelty of information profusion to wear off is probably futile. An advertising guru fifty years ago had a better solution: "Go where your audience is. They're not coming to you."

**What does that mean for those of us who are trying to convey news, information and ideas to audiences who aren't readily giving us their attention?** A first provisional answer from a reporter for one of the major digital news services: "If you put two paragraphs in our style on top of your press release, I'll use them." Does anyone do that? "A few."

Web research offers a second provisional answer: When reader/viewers take an interest in a digitally presented news item, they pursue their interest with a click, a link, a scrolling down. Maybe not to page ten of the press release, maybe instead to a blog, a search engine,

a video. If that's where they're going, take charge of their destinations.

We are heading toward a hub-and-spoke architecture for what we used to call a press release. At its point of entry, the already-mentioned 80-word, two-paragraph teaser and summary. As its headline, the catch phrase or phrases intended to stick in audience memories. Linking outward from the central item, the actual press release; video interviews; photographs; charts and graphs; bios and Q&As and backgrounders; and, most controversial but perhaps most useful, links to useful materials available from other sources.

Social media can be critically important here: Blogs sometimes have more readers, and more influence, than printed documents. Twitter is now an accepted early-warning system. YouTube makes video universally accessible (and disciplines people to stay under 10 minutes). Facebook gets around many people's resistance to e-mail clutter. None of these media is mandatory. All have genuine situational utility.

The hub-and-spoke architecture effectively mirrors what the web audience is already doing—it just points them toward paths that reinforce aspects of the story that the storyteller is trying to tell. We're seeing experiments here and there. We expect more.

Until then: Simple, Strong Statements Catch Eyes. When they do, you've got 80 words to persuade them to stay interested. Then give them enough paths to follow, and they'll likely take one.

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