

A Note: Gradgrind PR

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Thomas Gradgrind was the merchant-pedagogue in Charles Dickens's novel *Hard Times* who believed all knowledge is "Facts! Facts! Facts!" Much of PR is presented in that light – releases in which the facts of a story, product or event are laid out for the media and others. The understanding is that credibility increases with the more independently verifiable facts provided. What a fact-based approach can miss, however, is the romance of a Sissy Jupe, the young daughter of a circus entertainer whom Gradgrind dismisses. There is a place for Jupe in PR writing, but too often it comes off as puffery.

The challenge for PR writing is balancing facts with vivification without exaggeration – to make dry facts come alive and to tell a larger story without lapsing into excessive salesmanship, to make a persuasive case that is readable and not hyped.

The practitioner's writing challenge often comes from marketers who want to inject adverbial and adjectival "sell" into PR copy when it isn't warranted. The nouns and verbs of a story should be good enough for the sale to be made without modifiers. There are few excuses for news release leads like this (made anonymous to protect the guilty.)

High-tech, "high-touch" and with high marks for innovation, XX - an emerging name in smartly designed, inventive computer accessories with distinctive design aesthetics - today announced the launch of its revolutionary computer mouse. The cleverly designed, ball-shaped mouse is ensconced in a soft, luxe gel covering that hugs the entire surface area and sets a new standard for comfort.

One is tempted to shout, "It's just a mouse!" There is little in the lead of the release that would make a reporter do anything except flick it into a waste can or a pile for new product squibs. One can hardly expect a story because there isn't much to say about the mouse, or what could have been said was buried. PR practitioners should use the lens of skeptical readers who discount "hard sell" and look for plausible facts beneath inflated verbiage.

Much PR writing has tended toward Gradgrind because a reporter is the intended reader – a cynical individual who has seen it all and who doesn't believe hype. While there are journalists in fashion, lifestyle and "soft" areas for whom a sales-oriented press release is acceptable, for the most part, reporters have learned to parse puffery. An inflated Jupe-style of writing doesn't work for them. They want facts and they want them quickly, so they can write.

However, facts might not be enough to make a point or to prevent reporters from misinterpreting them. One might also need an independent verifier and explainer of facts – say, a customer or official or someone else not related to the company and its work. One might also need an illustration that puts facts together into a comprehensible whole. (The National Aeronautics and Space Administration mastered this craft early in the space age. The agency takes the most complicated issues and turns them into charts, videos and animations that any layperson can understand.)

Corporate PR uses testimonials but often fails to use illustration. Part of the problem comes from PR training, which tends to be word-oriented. Part is a lack of skill among PR practitioners to think visually. Especially with the web, this is a failing that needs addressing sooner rather than later. Web-users expect visuals to explain stories and are not ready to wade through columns of text.

Ideally, all press releases would combine visuals and words because they would be designed for online first. There is no reason not to proceed this way. There are no restrictions in newswires about putting video, photos and text on the same page. That it isn't done routinely says more about the PR practitioner than it does a newswire.

Twenty years ago, I ventured an opinion at a round table of PR heavyweights that it was time for practitioners to get visual training along with writing skills. I was shot down by a retired executive from AT&T who would not hear of it. But, Gradgrind would not have protested pictures that explained facts. An illustration of a horse with arrows drawn to its muscle groups would have gladdened the heart of even the most fact-oriented 19th Century pedagogue. Why is it then that many practitioners continue to be Gradgrinds in word and ignore visual explanation?

One argument is that it is difficult to visualize some press releases – for example, company earnings. Further, there is little need for visualizing them because no one wants anything other than words. That is why most earnings releases epitomize dry-as-dust writing. But even here, there is room for a chart or graph to show visually what the facts are about. Certainly, in analyst conferences after earnings are reported, most companies use charts to explain the prior quarter and year.

A second argument is that journalists don't want picturesque writing or illustrations. However, a standard in business writing has been to create word-pictures of what the story is about. One begins with a focus on one person or event that illustrates the topic or presages a larger trend. Examples humanize what is to come and increase reader interest. So, why can't PR practitioners use the same approach with soft leads and human interest writing? They can, but often journalists want to create the approach themselves and not have it foisted

onto them. They want PR practitioners to provide ingredients but not the story itself.

There is no reason it should be this way, if practitioners stick with facts, write carefully and avoid hype. Practitioners must be aware of the limitations of PR writing, but that doesn't mean they have to be colorless. While we are Gradgrinds, we don't have to give up enlivening facts. We can still write within the boundaries of fact and make releases more appealing and persuasive.

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