

Whitepaper 4: Responding to email enquiries from journalists

By Jane Dudman

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Every journalist new to using the information request service ResponseSource has experienced that tingle of delight after their first enquiry when their inbox fills up with those subject lines: “RE: ResponseSource”.

How quickly that delight can turn sour if half the messages come with huge, unsolicited attachments that clog up their system and others start “I know you’re writing about MP3 players, so I wondered if you’d be interested in writing about...instead”.

ResponseSource is a useful tool for journalists and PRs, but like any other tool – including standard email – it needs to be handled skilfully.

Five Golden Rules

The Golden Rules may seem obvious, but most PRs would be amazed how many times they are broken:

1. Read the enquiry carefully
2. Follow the instructions about preferred contact and deadline
3. Keep it short and to the point
4. Provide full contact details
5. Don’t send attachments unless clearly requested to do so

All these are important, but the single point that causes more ill-feeling than anything else is the last: unless the journalist specifically asks you to do so, don’t send attachments. None. Not one. Not anything. No attachments.

Keeping to these simple rules will form the basis for an effective working relationship between PR and journalist both when using ResponseSource and when dealing with other enquiries sent direct by email.

1. Read the enquiry carefully

“It’s clear many PRs do not read the synopsis, deadline, publication or readership details properly, or take the time to brief their client to see if the request is relevant,” comments one freelance journalist, who uses the service regularly. “And they wonder why they get short shrift when they call for a ‘few more details’ or take 100 emails to set up a ten-minute phone interview that may, or may not, be useful.”

The best advice is to read the whole request through, then read it through again before replying or taking any other action. And if you are unfamiliar with a publication, look it up on a publications database like featuresexec.com which provides details on readership, content and contacts.

2. Follow the instructions

Don't phone if the journalist wants to be emailed. Don't email if the journalist wants to be phoned. On the whole, journalists tend to prefer email: it's easier to weed out unwanted replies, to pull out relevant details, and to store your replies for their contacts book. But this is by no means always the case, so it is important to check the instructions and stick to them. Stick to deadlines too. If you have missed a deadline then the chances really are very slim that the journalist is still open to a pitch.

If the journalist asks you to use a specific subject line for your reply, do so. If you don't, your email risks being caught by spam filters or simply missed by the journalist who needs to organise information for several features. It can still be helpful to the journalist if you do this anyway – for example, "ResponseSource request on (SUBJECT) for (PUBLICATION)".

However, it is fair to say that not all journalists, especially those relatively new to using the service, provide as much information as PRs would like. "I do feel that not all journalists are very clear at times on what it is they require," says one PR.

Some journalists are aware of their own shortcomings: "We love ResponseSource and always understand that if you ask a silly question you get a silly answer," says the editor of a monthly internet magazine.

Generally though, most enquiries are quite explicit and it will only be by following instructions carefully that you will have any chance of success. In any case journalists have good memories and a poor response will not engender a positive ear next time you pitch.

3. Keep it short and to the point

A ResponseSource is an initial enquiry on the part of the journalist, often to garner useful background and contacts. At this stage, any reply should be kept short. A couple of paragraphs will suffice, showing the PR has understood the brief and putting forward a spokesperson or perhaps suggesting additional material.

As well as the individual query, think about the reader of the publication the article is going to appear in – that is who your information should be relevant to. Look up the publication in a publications database such as featuresexec.com to get a better idea of its audience and direction before deciding if a company or product is applicable. Listing the main points in bullet point form can be useful. You should aim to relate your client or company to the specifics of the query – with two or three hooks about the query followed by a few points about why your specific company or product is relevant. Brief company details and bios may sometimes be useful, but again do NOT attach any form of document: provide the relevant web address so the journalist can look up any further information they need or mention the availability of documents or trial products so the journalist can ask for them if interested.

“Some PRs are brilliant,” says the telecoms journalist. “They brief their client, get back to me with relevant suggestions and consequently get brownie points from their client, who is a happy camper, having had a chance to air their views. It’s doing the simple stuff: reading the enquiry fully is a useful first step!”

Keep to the point and don’t tell the journalist their job. One freelance business journalist says she posted a ResponseSource asking for very specific information about corporate customers in a particular field and got back 150 replies, of which many provided irrelevant information.

“My personal favourite was the marketing director who wanted to tell me my basic premise was faulty and I should be writing about the good value and competitive pricing in this particular market!” she comments.

4. Provide full contact details

Most PRs would be staggered by the number of times journalists receive breezy emails from PR people without a single contact detail.

In addition to supplying their own office phone, mobile, email and fax details, PRs should also provide full contact details – and job titles – for all client spokespeople they are putting forward, particularly if they provide a brief quote from that person in the initial email.

On the subject of contact details, remember to make sure you or your colleagues are available to respond to any follow-ups from the journalist. And if you go away or are out of the office, you can also choose to have your ResponseSource emails suspended until your return and have your colleagues in your office signed up to receive them as well (see contact details at the end of this whitepaper).

5. Don’t send attachments

It seems extraordinarily difficult for PRs to resist the temptation to attach unrequested pictures, company backgrounders and case studies. This has become a sensitive issue, not just for ResponseSource, but as a general point whenever you deal with journalists by email.

This is more than just an issue of personal preference. Many journalists using ResponseSource are freelance. Although broadband internet connections are now very common, some can find themselves reduced to dial-up connections at times, and these can be slowed to a crawl when downloading attachments. Others might use a webmail address with limited storage space and will not appreciate it if attachments fill up their allocation and prevent their receiving emails from other contacts.

Journalists are also very wary of computer viruses – often carried by attachments – so this rule applies whether journalists have a fast connection or not, or are freelance or staff. Attachments should be sent only when requested by the journalist.

Common Misconceptions

Speed is of the essence

Sometimes this is true, but very often it is not. The key thing is to read the journalist's deadline: if it's four o'clock on the same day, obviously speed is important; if it's two weeks on Tuesday, then the article is still at an early stage and it would be better to take a little time and get good, concise information, rather than rush in.

One typical PR view is: "Be quick; the faster you respond, the more chance you have," which comes from a Leeds-based PR executive who used ResponseSource to get coverage for clients in The Guardian. Many PR people seem to hold this idea that to get their client quoted, they need to reply to a ResponseSource instantly, but it is not necessarily the case.

Company material must be well presented

Not if that means sending any form of attachment. Send brief, appropriate company material as text in the body of the email reply and provide appropriate web addresses for information on company websites. Ensure that all company material is dated, so the journalist can see how recent it is.

If you haven't heard from the journalist, follow up the initial response

This can be one of the most contentious areas. Journalists do not want to be pestered, particularly when they have set a reasonable deadline. They will have had many responses; it will be impossible to answer them all. Not having heard back from a journalist does not mean your response will be ignored: if it provided all the necessary information, there may be no need for the journalist to follow up.

Conversely, because this is journalism and PR, rather than rocket science, there will always be times when the journalist realises, usually within a few hours of their deadline, that they do need to talk to a PR's client, even if they haven't responded to the initial ResponseSource query. They will then want the PR to set up a call, or an email, as soon as possible. So be prepared for that sudden response – even when you thought there was going to be none.

Journalists are ungrateful boors

It can be easy, after a few bad encounters, to assume that all journalists are offhand, ungrateful boors. But many journalists do try and be polite.

"I find ResponseSource and the PR responses excellent," comments one well-established freelance IT journalist. "I always give as much info as possible on what I want and try to thank everyone for their response (often running to 40 or 50 companies), whether I pursue them or not. Many responses come in the same day and virtually all are within the deadline and in the form requested – PRs respect my request for emails, not phone calls."

Should PRs expect a reply? "It's hard to reply to everyone," points out one freelance consumer journalist, "especially when their responses weren't really all that relevant."

Seasoned ResponseSource users have generally found the knack: it's fairly easy to put together a standard reply message, along the lines of: "Thanks for the information, I'll get back to you if I need anything further". Then the PRs know their message has at least been received.

But not all journalists will have time to reply to every single response and PRs should not necessarily expect a reply.

One freelance business journalist and former editor points out that most of the time, if a journalist doesn't reply, it's probably because they've either been inundated with too much material or because the input was inappropriate in some way. "For me, it's often the type of spokesperson being put forward that's the problem," she comments. "At other times, the problem is that the client is repeating comments that 17 other spokespeople have put forward in the preceding days, so I am unable to use the comments as they offer nothing new."

The only true way to track how successful you have been is to use a press cuttings agency, although Google Alerts are also useful. Also, check each ResponseSource enquiry to see if the journalist has provided an issue date. This is naturally subject to change but will provide you with a guideline of when you should look out for the article's publication.

What is ResponseSource good for?

PRs need to bear in mind that journalists use ResponseSource in different ways. Some will quote directly from responses they are sent, pasting quotes directly into their articles; others would never work in that way and always want to talk to the company spokesperson themselves.

"While it would worry me if it did become a substitute for a contacts book, where ResponseSource works is that it frequently brings up new leads and angles," comments a features editor on a monthly magazine. "I always tell freelancers about it, especially if they are writing about an area relatively new to them and don't have the contacts already established, or, alternatively, if they are particularly short of time. I think ResponseSource is pretty bloody good."

Good PR, whether it's online or through any other medium, isn't just about putting journalists and clients together. Looking at the ResponseSource query and coming up with a fresh angle or quote could make the difference between getting quoted and getting left behind.

"You must put time and effort into writing a piece that fits the bill and is unique and interesting," agrees one PR at an agency with many IT clients. "If you simply send a press release where the journalist has to trawl through useless information to get at the detail, you might as well not bother. Keep what you write short and to the point to increase your chances of success."

Some PR companies sign up for ResponseSource and then delegate to relatively junior staff the task of monitoring and responding to enquiries. This can lead to the kind of errors and irritations that annoy journalists. PR firms and departments should also ensure that if the PR whose job it is to answer queries is away, a colleague is signed up to cover ResponseSource so that you don't miss any journalists' deadlines.

And finally: we don't live in a fair world and ResponseSource replies are just as prone to the vagaries of journalism as every other area. If a PR's company is one the journalist really wants to talk to, the journalist will track down that contact, even if the initial response broke every single one of the Golden Rules. And if the PR is going to mind about that, they're in the wrong business.

***About ResponseSource**

ResponseSource allows journalists to send requests for information to PR people. This is done using a simple form at [.com](#). The PR recipients get the enquiries by email. The requests are sent immediately and are structured carefully to allow PRs to decide rapidly whether a request is relevant and how they will respond.

ResponseSource is not new - a version has been working for technology journalists since early 1998 on the technology and business journalists' site [sourcewire.com](#). This highly successful service is now called Tech ResponseSource and complements the multi-subject ResponseSource launched in late 2001.

Go to [.com](#) to get enquiries.

About the author Jane Dudman

Jane Dudman, former news editor of Computing and editor of two specialist IT magazines, has been a freelance journalist for many years, writing for many different business magazines, and is now associate editor of the Guardian's Public magazine. In her freelance writing, Jane focuses on the real issues of the industry and the effect of technology on everyday business life. She has written extensively about IT developments in all areas, particularly the legal and financial markets, as well as the public sector.

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