

Brevity is the soul of wit

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Especially in e-mail subject lines. Here are some good ones that produced results

Thanks to ubiquitous spam filters, it's getting tougher to create witty and creative subject lines that actually make it through to their intended media contacts. While some people like to play it straight and put the phrase "PRESS RELEASE:" in an e-mail subject line, others prefer to push the envelope, even at the risk of having their pitches tagged as spam.

Here are some successful subject lines that media relations professionals have sent out into the ether—and sailed through spam filters.

Not-so-hot story idea: There's nothing like playing into the media's preconceived notions and PR people (and their pitches) to grab attention. Andrew Lavin, president of A. Lavin Communications in New York, wrote this pitch for Saunex, a client that creates an infrared sauna that was cooler than particular saunas. "It worked wonders," Lavin says. He won placements in the New York Post and on the WB11 television show Popular Science.

A lazy, cavalier and foolish guy almost died and then decided to try to make mansgland funny: "I'm not a spam expert, but I believe that leaving out any hint of a pitch in the line, plus its length, plus the use of a made-up word, mansgland, helped me," says Kim Garretson, who works in marketing for retailer Best Buy. However, he wasn't pitching Best Buy; he was pitching The MansGland Campaign, a nonprofit group that uses humor to educate men about the need to get checked for cancer of the prostate (the "man gland").

In this case, Garretson offered himself as the "cavalier and foolish guy" who almost died from prostate cancer (and is now fully recovered). The out-there subject line got the attention of a reporter for HealthScout Network, a syndicator of health news, and has run in about 150 U.S. newspapers, including the Chicago Tribune.

Influenza: The nighttime, sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching, hurting my bottom-line business issue: This was a funny subject line for a serious subject, explains Wilson Camelo, account supervisor at Mason & Madison PR in New Haven, Conn. "I used this for Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Connecticut to pitch the importance of the flu vaccine," Camelo says.

"The aim was to educate consumers on the health aspects of the flu, and businesses on the costs associated with the flu, due to lost productivity and sick time." The sneezy subject line won healthy placements for the story in the Hartford Courant, the Hartford Business Journal, and a local TV affiliate.

This Month's Pin-Ups: Throwing in a little spice into a subject line is another good attention-grabber. In this case, Zipporah Dvash, director of public affairs at Long Island College Hospital/Continuum Health Partners in Brooklyn, N.Y., was pitching a “pinning” ceremony for nursing students. The ceremony marked their transition from the first year into the second year of their R.N. studies. The cute subject line helped Dvash get coverage in local Brooklyn media.

Small Stone Projects for Winter: If you can be succinct and to the point in five or six words, a straight-up subject line can make more sense than a wacky one. Sarah Thurston, a senior publicist at Storey Publishing in North Adams, Mass., used this subject line in December for a pitch about a free feature article from one of the company's gardening authors. She sent the e-mail out to about 180 gardening editors at newspapers around the country. “Within an hour of the e-mail going out, I had five responses,” Thurston says, with more rolling in just hours later.”

“I think the key is to be timely with your subject matter. In this case, gardeners are dying to know what to do in the garden when the weather isn't conducive to plant growth. [It's important to] target e-mails to the audience's interest, even if you have to spin a topic five or 10 different ways and create five or 10 slightly different e-mails, all with different subject lines,” Thurston says. “The subject lines should then reflect the timely, targeted content of the e-mail so the editor can determine whether or not to bother opening it.”

Swimming Pools, Barbecues and Death: Another great tactic is to string together totally disconnected items in the hopes that your media contact's curiosity will get the better of him or her. Michelle Owens, a PR coordinator at M/C/C in Dallas, says the staff there prides itself on coming up with subject lines—often several for the same pitch—that are not only clever, but net great coverage.

The above scratch-your-head subject line was created for a pitch about a GPS technology that tracks tractor trailers, which are often stolen in the summer months down south and used to ferry illegal immigrants across the border. Many of these would-be immigrants die in the overheated confines of a tractor trailer. This particular pitch, Owens explains, went on to note that while summer is known for fun pursuits like swimming and barbecuing, it also signifies an increase in the illegal transport of human cargo. The pitch helped land a story in a major transportation trade publication.