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RAGAN'S

Media Relations Report

Is your pitch landing in the junk drawer?

Here's how to keep your e-mails from languishing in spam purgatory

Even if you don't use the words "Viagra" and "SEXXXXYYY" in your e-mails, your well-crafted and personalized pitches may be getting caught in the same anti-spam nets that porn falls into. As most organizations—and that includes media outlets—install aggressive software solutions to filter out spam from their e-mail systems, PR people are finding that pitches aren't necessarily reaching their intended targets.

"I was e-mailing the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*, and my e-mail was blocked," says Kristin Heinmets, an account executive at Padilla Speer Beardsley in Minneapolis. Late last year, Heinmets was pitching free transportation to the city's annual "TCF Holidazzle" holiday parades (which the PR firm was representing); Metro Transit was offering free rides to local commuters.

"I had to remove the words 'offers' and 'free' from the pitch in order for the e-mail to go through," Heinmets says, noting that her e-mails bounced back until she deleted the offending words. The paper eventually covered the free rides.

"It's very frustrating to have to guess why the e-mail is being blocked, and to keep deleting words, when you know reporters will be interested in the news you're pitching," Heinmets says.

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At least if your pitch e-mails bounce back, you have the chance to rewrite them until they go through. Most of the time, you won't have any idea that your pitch is being diverted to someone's "junk" folder.

"My media contacts have repeatedly told me that my personal pitch e-mails had been filtered out, so when I call for follow-up, they never know what I'm talking about," says Wilson Cleveland, account supervisor at New York's Cubitt Jacobs & Prosek Communications. "When I was recently pitching a good media contact mine [personal pitch] with some exclusive news, she almost missed it—[until] she happened to notice it in the 'spam' folder in her e-mail."

Cleveland says that *USA Today* seems to have a particularly tough spam filter on its e-mail system. "In fact, when a reporter from *USA Today* replies to an original e-mail, added to the subject line is the 'spam rating' their filter has given your message," he explains. "For example, the subject will read '55% SPAM: Original Subject Line.'"

Even discussing the concept of spam within your pitch can land your e-mail in the virtual trash can (i.e., the "junk" folder). Steve Mickle, PR manager for Cloudmark, a San Francisco software company that makes anti-spam solutions, recalls recently pitching a *BusinessWeek* reporter about the merits of Cloudmark's products. In a follow-up e-mail, Mickle talked about the various tactics that spammers use to get around filtering software.

You guessed it: Mickle's seemingly innocent e-mail was blocked by *BusinessWeek*'s spam filter, as Mickle discovered when he called the reporter to follow up. "We had a laugh about it," Mickle says.

For PR people who work hard to create personalized and well-written pitches for specific media targets, the spam-filtering problem is discouraging. (Everyone probably agrees that PR people who blast look-alike pitches to every target on their media list probably deserve to get their pitches bounced into oblivion.) This problem will only get worse this year, as organizations work harder to block the mountains of spam slowing down their networks.

Back to the phones

What's the solution? For some PR people, the answer lies with the telephone.

“When I'm pitching media, particularly if I'm doing it in a part of the country where I don't know the reporters, it's all about building the relationship,” says Holly Swantek, a PR consultant in Jacksonville, Fla. “If a journalist I am pitching does not know me, I always follow an e-mail pitch with a voice-mail pitch, directing the journalist to my e-mail and asking them to give it a read. Many do, and then fire back a response.”

Swantek is sure this tactic helps the reporter track down not only the pitches that have inadvertently ended up in a “junk” folder, but also to pay closer attention to pitches they've received but might otherwise have overlooked.

Kirk Sullivan, PR director at IQAir North America in Santa Fe Springs, Calif., says he's had several personal e-mails blocked by reporters' spam-filtering software. His advice: Don't include words in the subject line of e-mail that might be blocked by a filter: for instance, “free” or a dollar sign. (For a useful list of words and phrases that can trigger spam-blocking software, go to www.wilsonweb.com/wmt8/spamfilter_phrases.htm.)

Sullivan also advises against copying a pitch to other recipients, even those in your own office. (If you're sending out a pitch using the “blind cc” feature to a big media list, not only are you committing a big PR gaffe, but your pitch will most definitely be tagged as spam.)

Heath Shackleford, director of client services at Seigenthaler PR in Nashville, agrees that sending pitches to more than one target is not wise. “It's never really an effective way to reach the media anyway, and nothing says spam quite like 100 recipients,” Shackleford says.

He adds that it may be time to throw wacky and funny subject lines out the window.

“Forget all the things people have told you about being

creative in the subject line,” says Shackelford. “I almost always include something specific about the reporter or a recent article, or even put ‘Article Idea:’ in the subject line so that if the e-mail makes it into the inbox, the reporter knows it’s not spam. This is especially challenging when you are pitching a new product. But think about how you avoid sounding like a telemarketer when you call about that product, and apply that same logic to your e-mail.”

Like Swantek, Shackelford also thinks it’s smart to follow up on a pitch. “If you have an important pitch, and you want to make sure it wasn’t blocked by a filter, send a short follow-up note, avoiding any and all words that could possibly be warning signs for spam, just to make sure the reporter received your message,” he suggests. “Or call. Journalists tell you they hate follow-up calls, but it’s becoming more likely that they really didn’t get the e-mail you are calling about.”

Cloudmark’s Mickle, who’s gained an insider’s perspective on fighting spam, suggests avoiding all graphic images in your pitch e-mails. Even a company logo, which might appear in your signature file, should be eliminated, since they can trigger spam blocking. Likewise, long URLs (common in real spam) for a Web page will cause many spam filters to block the message.

Another piece of advice: Don’t get too personal. Says Cleveland, “A contact of mine from *Optimize* magazine offered me this tip: When sending a personalized pitch e-mail, do not include the reporter’s first or last name in the subject line. The name is the first thing spam filters target.”

Christine Attala, president of the Downers Grove, Ill., firm PR Results, says she relies on software to fight software. She sends out pitches and press releases via online marketing company Publishing Dynamics (www.publishingdynamics.com). The company’s Web-based interface provides a spam analysis of each document, and searches for words that might trigger a rejection.

“For example, at the bottom of one of my releases, I used the phrase ‘free 30-day trial,’” Attala explains. The word free was flagged. I changed it to ‘no-cost’ and it went through.”



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