

# Five Seconds. One Percent.

By James MacGregor

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Those who want a reporter's attention often don't realize how hard it is these days to get it. Reporters are drowning in press releases and other technology-enabled messages. The only way through the clutter is the old, familiar one—established relationships.

**W**e recently hosted a workshop that included fifteen non-business journalists. They were asked, "How many press releases do you receive each day?" Low: "At least a hundred," high: "Three to four hundred." "How much time do you devote to each one?" Everyone: "Five seconds or less." In that brief period, releases were sorted into three piles. The largest pile went straight into the wastebasket. A smaller pile contained "must cover" news. The smallest pile contained non-mandatory items interesting enough to return to if time permitted. How many made it into this pile? "One percent—or less."

**Five seconds:** enough time to read a headline and a first sentence, but no more.

**One percent:** daunting odds for those of us who make our living using press releases.

Concerned and curious, we expanded our inquiry to business reporters from newspapers, magazines, and wire services. We got the same answers. Five seconds to sort releases into three groups, and a one percent yield on stories interesting enough to pursue if not required to do so. One wire service reporter said the odds were actually worse than that—someone else had already screened the releases before they reached his desk.

What about e-mail? The picture gets even worse. Many reporters won't open e-mails from people whose names they don't recognize. Reporters who are nicer, or less pressured, give their e-mail the same five second treatment they give releases printed on paper. Voice mail? Same deal. If the name isn't recognized, chances are the message will be erased, often unheard.

**It's not that reporters are bad people.** They're just drowning in pleas for their attention. If they are to have any time for actual reporting and writing, they have to triage, quickly and ruthlessly, through the cries for attention.

Given that this is the way reporters work, one way to succeed is to do something so vivid and persuasive with your five-second window that the reporter will put your release into the "looks-interesting" pile. There are some arrestingly unconventional press communications out there these days, and some of them really do grab a reporter's attention. But most business-related topics, sad to say, do not lend themselves to arrestingly unconventional treatment.

**Fortunately, there is a better way to get more than five seconds. And more than one percent.**

As they sort through all the messages clamoring for their attention, reporters are looking for any hint, clue, or indication that a message is worth a little more of their time. The most pertinent guide is, "Where did the message come from?" Or, more precisely, "Did the message come from someone I know, trust, or have a reason to pay attention to?"

There are actually three different levels of such guidance. "Comes from someone I know" ensures more than passing attention, but not necessarily a response, unless the message does pique reportorial interest. Call it a twenty- to thirty-second commitment. "Comes from someone I work with and trust" ensures a serious hearing or reading, and a response, even if there's no interest. Call this a two-minute commitment. And "Comes recommended by a fellow reporter who works with/trusts the source" comes pretty close to a first-hand relationship. Call this a one-minute commitment.

**Relationships matter. That's what this is about.** The basic message is at least fifty years old. Reporters are most comfortable working with, and most likely to pay attention to, sources with whom they already have constructive and mutually trusting relationships. And there's a flip side: News sources are most comfortable with, and most likely to believe they'll get a fair shake

from, reporters with whom they already have constructive and mutually trusting relationships. All of this applies with at least as much urgency when a reporter is writing a story that's not particularly favorable to the subject.

The new technologies of communication were especially seductive to newcomers and outsiders because they promised instant and universal access, for everyone, to everyone, and thereby an end to relationship-dominated media. But the law of unintended consequences prevailed: As everyone used this instant and universal access, recipients were swamped with messages. And they in turn became even more reliant on the personal relationships that had served them well in the past.

There's an old story about a tourist asking a gardener how to achieve the perfect lawns that surrounded a royal British castle, and being told, "Well, you'll need to start about three hundred years ago." Same deal in media relations: The reportorial relationship you need today is the one you began to fertilize years ago.

But it's never too late to begin. Relationships are there to be made. The alternative is clear. Five seconds. One percent.

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*If you would like to discuss other aspects of getting reporters' attention, please call Jim MacGregor at 212-371-5999 in New York, or Ian Campbell at 213-630-6550 in Los Angeles.*