

TV AND NEWSPAPER EDITORS EXPRESS CONCERN OVER INFORMATION DISSEMINATION PRACTICES OF MARKETERS AND PR PRACTITIONERS

Lowell Frazier, University of Hawaii, 2550 Campus Road, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822, Phone (808) 956-8881

ABSTRACT

In recent years marketing and public relations practitioners have touted the advent of facsimile machines and broadcast faxing as a Godsend for quickly disseminating information to a large number of media outlets and getting the attention of the gatekeepers. U.S. and Canadian editors, drowning under a deluge of unsolicited faxed press releases, have said this is wishful thinking. TV assignment editors express their concerns in this national study. Marketing educators would do well to alert their students about the building media resentment toward unsolicited faxing.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most widely used enhanced facsimile services is broadcast faxing to the news media [Coleman 1991]. A growing number of bulk faxing companies are marketing their services as a cost-effective means of distributing information to the news media outlets and getting the attention of the gatekeepers.

Some direct marketers contend that faxed information has more impact than communications sent through more traditional channels. It is seen as having a sense of urgency. One marketer figures that faxed advertisements, for example, are 6.75 times more effective than those sent by mail [Gelfond 1988].

Some public relations professionals raised the flag of skepticism as early as 1990, warning that deluging the media with faxes could alienate and incur the ire of editors [PR Journal, April, 1990]. In 1989, experienced communicators who work frequently with the news media questioned the practice of sending unsolicited faxes to the media [Eisman 1989].

A 1992 study documents that these concerns are not unfounded. Eighty percent of the newspaper editors responding to a survey of all metropolitan newspapers with circulations of 100,000 or more in the United States and Canada agreed that the faxing of unsolicited information is already or is becoming a problem for the news media. Abuses of protocol and non-judicious use of faxing are antagonizing the news media. The growing flood of unrequested faxes is creating an irate backlash [Frazier 1992].

The Frazier study documents that unsolicited faxing has become a serious problem for news gathering organizations, especially among the larger ones. The practice is seen as a problem by journalists for several reasons [Adair 1989].

First, unsolicited faxing ties up fax machines, making it difficult to receive information reporters have requested. News organizations purchase facsimile machines to speed up communications, but this flood of unsolicited material is having the opposite effect [Tulisano 1989].

Second, unsolicited faxing imposes a calculable burden on the receiver. Unlike junk mail with no direct cost for the recipients, fax transmissions create a very real expense in the form of electricity, fax paper and downtime [Tulisano 1989].

Third, the faxing of unsolicited news releases tends to frustrate the editorial process, according to John Paluszek, former president of the Public Relations Society of America. The society has not taken an official position on the issue, but anything that demeans the integrity of the editorial process is discouraged [Eisman 1989].

Finally, the faxing of unsolicited news releases has intensified the age-old problem of duplicate copies of the same release being sent to the same news organization by different means [Brislin 1989].

Several approaches to coping with the problem of unsolicited faxing are mentioned in the literature. They include withholding fax numbers unless the receiver requests information, organizations of public relations professionals to discourage the practice, requiring prior approval, banning them outright, and passing legislation. The New York Times' financial section, for example, in 1989 imposed a ban on unsolicited news releases sent by fax. The paper also changed its fax numbers and now gives them only to those from whom the staff want material. The Wall Street Journal's Washington bureau has adopted the same procedure [Adair 1989].

President Bush signed legislation in January 1992 designed to limit unwanted telephone solicitations and junk fax. The bill gives the Federal Communications

Commission authority to preserve legitimate business practices, and so far it does not appear that unsolicited faxing to news organizations will be affected. The bill outlaws sending unsolicited fax messages into consumers' homes. Additional regulations are being considered. Some of the proposed bills include the need for prior relationship before a call can be made. At least one bill would require prior consent from recipients [Scala 1992].

Regulators worry that, as the number of fax machines grows, the amount of junk fax mail will only get worse. Not everyone agrees that faxing should be regulated by the government. Representatives of the National Fax Users Committee contend there is no way to write a law that prohibits only junk [Ridinger 1989].

PROBLEM

As the news hole shrinks in the mass media and competition for that limited time and space increases, the necessity for good media relations increases. Unlike past years when most of those entering the field came from the news media, young professionals today have to learn about the media second hand. It is especially important for those educating future practitioners to make them aware of media procedural expectations. The Frazier newspaper study recommends a similar survey of large television stations to see if faxing is perceived any differently by broadcasters.

The purpose of this study was to replicate the newspaper survey to determine these perceptions. The study sought to ascertain the opinions of television assignment editors about the extent of the problem, the problems they see in the practice, what should be done about the situation, and the proper procedures for faxing from the media's point of view. This prompts the following research questions:

- (1) To what degree is the unsolicited faxing perceived to be a problem by assignment editors of large commercial television stations?
- (2) What problems do these editors have with unsolicited faxing?
- (3) What are these editors' opinions about some of the approaches being taken to combat unsolicited faxing?

METHOD

A questionnaire was designed for television stations, replicating many of the same statements about faxing

that newspaper editors were given. The questions in both studies grew out of the literary review. They were informally tested using Honolulu editors. Assignment editors were asked to respond to the statements as to whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, agreed or strongly agreed. Assignment editors were chosen because their day-to-day responsibilities make them the managers most knowledgeable about incoming information at a TV station, especially via the fax machine. Also, their position is a counter part to the city editors surveyed in the Frazier study. The questionnaires were mailed to all 112 VHF commercial television stations in the top 30 markets. These were chosen because they are approximately comparable in size, location, and number of the newspapers in the Frazier Study.

Results

Forty-seven percent, or 53 of the 112 assignment editors survey, responded after three mailings. Compared with the 60 percent response rate of newspaper editors after two mailings in Frazier's survey, the response of TV stations was not as high. This could be an indication that the problem is not as serious at TV stations as with newspapers. The resulting data reflect this observation.

Since this survey was not based on a random sample, caution should be used in generalizing the results beyond the respondents. Of the respondents, 2 percent were from the Northeast, 9 percent from Mid-Atlantic states, 17 percent from the Southeast, 30 percent from the Mid-West, 15 percent from the West, and 26 percent from the West Coast.

The characteristics of the non-residents should be taken into consideration. The geographic distribution of the 59 non-responding assignment editors with a few exceptions is similar to those who responded. The distribution is Northeast, 12 percent; Mid-Atlantic, 15 percent; Southeast, 14 percent; Mid-West, 31 percent; West, 8 percent, and West Coast, 20 percent.

One indication of how non-respondents might have responded was that the percentage of assignment editors agreeing that unsolicited faxing was a problem was approximately the same for all three mailings.

FINDINGS

Fifty-five percent of the responding assignment editors agreed with the statement that faxing of unsolicited news releases and related materials is or is becoming a problem for television news departments. The seriousness of the problem was viewed differently in various

regions of the country. Sixty-seven percent of West Coast respondents, for example, reported unsolicited faxing was a problem. On the other hand, 80 percent of the editors from the Mid-Atlantic region and 50 percent of those from the Southeast and West disagreed with the statement that faxing was a problem. Ironically, one Mid-Atlantic station reported receiving more than 50 unsolicited faxes per day.

The 55 percent agreement response indicates that unsolicited faxing is not considered as big a problem at television stations as at newspapers. Eighty percent of the responding newspaper editors in the Frazier study considered unsolicited faxing a problem.

Given a choice of corporations, public relations agencies, nonprofit organizations or government, 71 percent of the responding assignment editors indicated they received most unsolicited news releases from public relations agencies. Seventy-four percent of the newspaper editors also named agencies.

How do television assignment editors prefer to receive routine information? Given the choices of mail, fax, hand delivery or wire service, 70 percent chose mail. Only 13 percent prefer fax. Newspaper editors in the Frazier study preferred mail by 36 percent, PR wire service by 32 percent and fax by 10 percent. One explanation for this difference is that the Frazier study included Canadian newspapers which rely more heavily on PR wire services than U.S. newspapers.

TV and Newspapers Agree on Faxing Problems

Table 1 shows assignment editors' opinions about the problems unsolicited faxing pose. The editors surveyed were presented with five statements containing concerns expressed in the literature. While the responses by the two groups of respondents differed in magnitude, the differences were not statistically significant. Both were in agreement on the first three problems and disagreed on the last two.

Most respondents, 88 percent, reported their biggest problem with unsolicited faxing was that it has resulted in an increase in the sending of duplicate copies of news releases to their stations through different channels. An even higher number of newspaper editors, 92 percent, in the Frazier study identified the same problem as the biggest. This is probably because newspapers receive a much larger number of press releases via more channels than do TV stations.

The second most agreed-upon problem was poor judgment

as to when to send something by fax. Seventy-one percent said most information faxed to them in the past could just as well have been delivered by a less timely means. Seventy-seven percent of the newspaper editors in the Frazier study agreed.

The third most agreed-upon problem by 71 percent of respondents was that unsolicited faxing ties up telephone lines and fax machines, sometimes delaying news gathering. Eighty percent of the responding newspaper editors in the Frazier study indicated this was their second biggest problem.

TABLE 1
Problems with Unsolicited Faxing

Problem	TV	Newspapers
	Agree N/%	Agree N/%
Encourages duplication	46/88	68/91
Shows poor sense of urgency	37/71	60/80
Delays newsgathering	35/66	7/77
Jeopardizes use of information	14/27	24/33
Demeans editorial integrity	11/21	14/19

Almost three out of four responding assignment editors said unsolicited faxing does not jeopardize subsequent use of information. Two-thirds of the newspaper editors felt the same. A majority of both groups also indicated they did not agree that unsolicited faxing demeans the integrity of the editorial process.

TV and Newspapers Disagree on Solutions

Table 2 shows the responses to statements suggested in the literature concerning approaches to coping with the problem of unsolicited faxing. Assignment editors were presented with the same five statements as presented to newspaper editors in the Frazier study. The difference in responses was statistically significant at the .05 level or better.

By the slimmest of margins, the TV station editors favored only one of the five reactions as an acceptable response to unsolicited faxing. Fifty-one percent agreed that the news media should release fax numbers only to those from whom they request information. This was also the preferred solution chosen by 67 percent of the newspaper editors, who also favored two other reactions to faxing.

Fifty-three percent of the TV assignment editors disagreed that the public relations profession should discourage the practice. Some expressed the concern that

they don't want to risk missing a good story at the expense of not receiving unsolicited faxes.

Fifty-five percent disagreed that information should be faxed only after the receiver approves the transmission. Fifty-seven percent of the newspaper editors favored this procedure.

TABLE 2
Preferred Reaction to Unsolicited Faxing

Reaction	TV Newspapers	
	Agree N/%	Agree N/%
Withhold fax numbers	26/51	44/67
PR profession should oppose	24/47	46/62
Require prior approval	24/45	42/57
Ban unsolicited faxing	14/27	27/37
Government regulation	10/20	6/9

Perhaps because of this concern about missing some valuable information, 73 percent of the responding assignment editors disagreed with the idea of banning unsolicited faxing. Newspaper editors were not as strongly against banning. However, 63 percent disagreed. This could be because newspapers have traditionally tended to rely more on press releases than have TV stations. The printed word is obviously more useful to a print medium.

The response to counter unsolicited faxing that generated the strongest opinions was government regulation; only 10 out of the 53 responding assignment editors agreed. Newspaper editors in Frazier's study were much more opposed to legislation. The reason could be that TV managers are more accustomed to regulations than newspaper editors who defend freedom of the press and freedom of access to the press.

CONCLUSIONS

Fifty-five percent of television assignment editors responding to the survey agreed that unsolicited faxing is a growing problem. They identified the most significant problem with faxing as an increase in duplication of distribution of news releases. Only 8 out of 53 responding editors indicated they preferred to receive information by fax. The majority preferred mail instead.

Eighty percent of the newspaper editors responding to Frazier's survey indicated that unsolicited faxing was a problem. This is a significant difference by any standard. One could also conclude that this is because the printed word is more associated with newspapers; therefore, they get more faxed information.

While no TV station reported having a formal written policy concerning unsolicited faxing, respondents favored the withholding of fax telephone numbers except for when requesting information. Most editors disagreed that the news media should ban the faxing of unsolicited information, and they strongly disagreed that unsolicited faxing should be regulated by law.

One of the purposes of this study was to determine if the opinions of television editors about unsolicited faxing were any different from newspaper editors who responded to a survey conducted for the Frazier study. One conclusion is that while TV editors agree that unsolicited faxes are a problem, their opinions are not nearly as strong as those of the newspaper editors.

Based on these two studies, public relations and marketing professionals should think twice about faxing information to the news media without first getting the transmission approved. The significance of these findings is that it shows that professional courtesy and protocol in dealing with the mass media have not kept up with technology. Marketers and public relations practitioners working in media relations are obviously not being properly prepared for the job.

REFERENCES

- Adair, Bill 1989. Damming the Fax Flood. Washington Journalism Review, 11, 8.
- Brislin, Tom 1989. Interview with a city editor. The Honolulu Advertiser, Sept. 14.
- Broadcast Faxing Gaining Popularity 1990. Public Relations Journal, April, 10-12.
- Coleman, Lynn G. 1991. It's a 'Wild' Fax Future for Marketers. Marketing News, 25, 5-11.
- Eisman, Regina 1989. Industry Weighs Impact of Unsolicited Faxes. Public Relations Journals, 45, 7.
- Frazier, Lowell D. 1992. The Fax News Flood: Editors Grapple with Technology's Benefits, Burdens. Newspaper Research Journal, 13, 100-111.
- Gelfond, Susan 1989. How to Get on the Fax Track. Working Woman, 14, 27.
- Ridinger, Steve 1989. There's No Way to Write a Law that Prohibits 'Junk'. The Office, 110, 95.
- Scala, Richard P. 1992. FCC Hangs Up on Auto-dialers and Faxes. Direct Marketing, 54, 7.
- Tulisano, Richard D. 1989. Why 'Junk' Fax Should Be Controlled by Law. The Office, 110, 94.