

Case 3-D

Taking It for a Spin: Accepting Product Samples in the Newsroom

PHILIP PATTERSON

Oklahoma Christian University

To write an article on making the perfect “peartini” it helps to have the ingredients on hand. It’s even more helpful if those ingredients come free—courtesy of a liquor company (Grey Goose in this instance) seeking publicity. The free ingredients and the story mix nicely (shaken, not stirred, perhaps?) at the Weatherford, OK *Daily News*. That’s because of a policy that asks supplicants looking for a free mention in a press release to submit samples for the staff to make up their own minds about the quality of the product and the newsworthiness of the story.

It began when publisher Phillip Reid decided the logical response to the more than 300 daily press releases (for a newspaper in a town of 10,000) was to ask the companies to put up or quit clogging up the fax machine. About half did, despite the lack of any promise of returns or reviews.

A wide variety of items have come into the newsroom, including the ingredients for a “peartini,” which Reid told the Oklahoma Press Association (OPA) made a “lovely story.” Samples have included a scratch remover called “Applesauce,” a concoction designed to clean the screen of your iPhone (it didn’t), a robe and slippers, cell phones, candy, and coffee makers to presumably wake you after a night of drinking free bacon-flavored vodka. Dell sent a laptop computer.

Any reporter is free to pick up a product and try it out (though presumably some discretion was involved in the camouflage briefs with a built-in nightlight) with the clear understanding that no manufacturer is guaranteed a product review or favorable coverage. The decision, in effect, wrested control of the message away from the manufacturers with their carefully crafted press releases and back into the hands of journalists with their well-earned reputation for skepticism. When the product doesn’t work, the paper is not afraid to name names. In the “Applesauce” story, the reporters sampled the competition until one worked as advertised.

Reid says he is motivated by a desire to change the habits of marketers who have little regard for the daily barrage of requests for what is essentially a request for free advertising. “Public relations agencies need to understand that we are not the free medium,” Reid told the Associated Press. “We’ve had so much fun with this idea,” said Reid, “but we want to get the point across that we’re not free.”

The mechanics are simple: the authors of unsolicited press releases received a return message asking for a sample. Mark Thomas, the executive director of the Oklahoma Press Association, said he sees nothing unethical about it.

“Is it ethical to send people press releases and pretend it’s news when it’s advertising?” Thomas asks. “. . . If the person sending you a press release wants to convince you their product is really newsworthy, they ought to send you a sample and let you try it out.”

But the idea has critics. Rick Edmonds of the Poynter Institute called the practice “dubious” and “horrendous” in an interview with the Associated Press. He likened it to “rolling the ethical clock back 40 years” to a time when delivery-men would roll in cases of liquor into the newsroom,

particularly at the Christmas holidays.

On the other hand, Brenda Jones, the owner of an Oklahoma City–based PR firm (two hours from Weatherford), told the OPA that Reid has “every right” to ask for a sample to an unsolicited pitch. “If you’re promoting that product, then you better believe in it,” Jones said. “He’s holding the fire to their feet and there is nothing wrong with that.”

Some media organizations ban the practice of accepting samples or “gifts.” The Associated Press directs employees to return items of more than a nominal value. The Society of Professional Journalists’ Code of Ethics says reporters should “refuse gifts, favors, free travel and special treatment . . . if they compromise journalistic integrity,” something Reid argues doesn’t happen.

Of all the products sent to the *Daily News*, only “Applesauce” asked for the product back. Reid figured they wanted to test the sample to see if the consumer was getting what they paid for—something no press release can do.

Reid would like to see other papers try it, saying, “We’ve had so much fun with this idea. Now it’s time to share our secret.”

Micro Issues

1. Does this pass the “smell test?” If you are the competition to the *Daily News*, which are you more likely to do: try the practice or write an investigative article on it? Why?
2. Is the dollar value of the product a “morally relevant factor” (see Elliott essay after Chapter 1 for a discussion of this concept) in this practice? Could the paper accept a car, for instance? Defend your choice.
3. Does the company giving the product away have a reasonable expectation of coverage? Of favorable coverage? Does that expectation go up as the price of the free product goes up?
4. A few years ago, one athletic shoe company sent a single shoe to reporters at several media outlets. The second was promised—in the right size—if the reporter showed up at a press conference about the launch of the shoe. It was a record crowd. Would you accept the shoe if sports were your beat? If it were *not* your beat? Justify your decision.

Mid-range Issues

1. How does this practice differ, if at all, from the media “junket” sometimes given to travel writers or film reviewers? From a press pass to watch a professional football game? Or a free ride on the team plane to cover the game? Does a poor economy factor in here?
2. According to Reid, the *Daily News* only mentions products when it’s justified. Would it be more justifiable if the media outlet (newspaper, Web, television, etc.) had a regular consumer report with the story clearly identified as commentary?

3. Critique the statement of Edmonds when he accused the newspaper of “rolling back the ethical clock.”
4. Is it fair to say a product doesn’t work based on a one bottle sample? Justify your answer.

Macro Issues

1. Thomas implies that the reviewing of a donated item might be more ethical than running a press release without labeling it as such. Does he make a valid point? Justify your decision.
2. In the Applesauce case, journalists potentially saved consumers money by identifying a single product that didn’t work. Does that “redeem” the entire practice?
3. If the practice of expecting freebies becomes as widespread as Reid says it should, can it be argued that the covering the cost of the freebies will outpace any potential savings from being warned of bad products?