

PCNY Luncheon
Planes, Trains and Automobiles:
Working with the Travel Media in Challenging Times

Ray Cormier, Travel Staff Editor *New York Times*: I did not make Danielle that promise. Unlike Val, as you can see from my brief bio, I'm not a travel expert. I'm a newspaper editor. I sometimes wonder how I got to the Travel section myself. But it's been a really interesting and fun and eye-opening six years there. I spoke to Nancy Newhouse, my boss, about coming here last week and she thought it was a great idea. Her immediate comment, though, was, "The problem with these kinds of events is that we always sound so negative!" And so I want to apologize in advance for all the negativity.

For those of you who don't know, the New York Times is a little local paper, situated on Times Square. It's been there a little while, and we think the Travel section is pretty well read. And in a way we try to be all things to all travelers, which is part of our problem because all travelers and all travel writers and their publicity agents want to be in it. As an example, and the first thing Nancy said to me was, "Tell them that I just got back from vacation and I had 350 emails to look at, being away two weeks," and that was just her personal secret email address. All of us, and it is not a large staff, perhaps surprisingly to you, perhaps about a dozen people, all editors or editorial assistants, and I'm sure all of us get dozens and dozens every day. I know I do. I can't answer Nancy's questions about how many press releases I get because unfortunately in this day and age, in the last year, the problem with spam has gotten so horrible that I can't possibly keep track. And the best way to reach us nowadays is indeed by email. So have your pens and pencils and papers ready and I'll give you the best address in a moment, but let me say one thing: because of this problem with spam, there are so many emails now that I look at the subject matter, I look at the name of the sender and the subject matter, and if it doesn't mean anything to me I don't even open it. I'm sorry, but I just can't do that. Certainly, the most common subject I get these days is something about penile enlargement. Sad, but true. And I've been hearing this so long that I don't need to hear it over and over and over again. So please, a simple, basic, fundamental thing: make that subject line specific, clear and concise, just as much as we expect your actual message to be. Because if it says something really witty but in a silly way, it may not even be opened. So tell us what you want to talk to us about. It sounds basic, but a lot of people don't do that. And it's necessary.

The other thing that has changed a lot in recent months is the amount of space we have in our section. I asked another person who keeps track of these things yesterday. We went over the figures for this first half of the year, our 25th issue is this Sunday, and compared it to last year, which obviously was a bad year, we were off quite a bit from previous years. Last year, in 2002, we averaged 22.8 pages per section. This year so far we're down to 19.4. It almost doesn't matter what the reason is, but obviously advertising is the main one, whether it's the economy or people are... What the bottom line is that we just have to be tighter and we have less room to put in the World. So your information has to be really, sell us right away, it has to be clear, it can't take up too much of our time to make a decision, it's got to be well written and targeted correctly.

One of my pet peeves is getting emails from public relations practitioners for areas that we would have never in a million years write about. Know what we do. I can't believe that anybody in this room has not read the Travel section more than once, and I suspect all of you read it very regularly, and yet it's amazing how I will get PR releases telling me that the new CEO of XYZ hotels has just given birth to her third daughter or something. Or that, this is a true story, an airline in China, I get a PR release almost every week and it's often about well, they've opened a new gate in some terminal in the middle of China or they've just ordered another Boeing 707. We are not the business pages, I will tell you where to send travel business news stories to in a moment. We don't do that. So you're not going to make us too happy if you keep sending us business news stories when you know that we're not going to run that in the Travel section.

We are not, also, Escapes, that is a totally different operation, it's not in the Travel Department. We've had in-house discussions about whether it's been a positive addition to the New York Times, you can tell me, but it creates more redundancy at the New York Times, a place not unfamiliar with that notion. But it's a big place, just as if when you're flying a 747 you probably want a lot of redundancy, it's not so bad at the New York Times, either. The difference with Escapes is, if you haven't looked at it closely, is that it's not just travel and what they do about travel is simply in the United States and it's mostly weekend trip oriented.

We, on the other hand, cover the whole world and the whole gamut of the travel business from a destination-oriented point of view. What do I mean by that? If you look at our last few weeks, we go to places, we feature places: New England, Denmark... we try to build packages around someplace in the world, for the most part. And occasionally a trend, for example, this year everyone tells us they're going to travel by car or RV, so we did an issue on that. But it's still about places more so than the development of hotels and things of that nature.

So, know what we do and pitch us stuff accordingly. That's my basic message to you. We want to be informed by you mostly by email or fax. Phone calls are not that much appreciated in the course of a busy day. I hate to say it, but it's sort of the old, "We'll call you." I don't mean to sound rude, but in a small department, very busy, where people wear different hats, that unfortunately is the best way to go about things. So if you want to send us stuff by email, the best way is to send it to travelmail@nytimes.com, or fax us at 212-556-1604. And again, as I said before, please address it to the part of the paper, the part of the section you think it should go.

As you know, Page Three is our newsy page called the Travel Advisory page that is overseen by an editor, Suzanne MacNeille. It will have a correspondent's report, one of our staff people from somewhere around the world talking about some place, some issue, some debate somewhere involving travel. It will have a featured short item with some art and with some other short items mostly about attractions - a new hotel of some note opening or reopening, such as the Gran LaFlorida Hotel in Barcelona after 40 years of being something other than a hotel, coming back to life, things like that. There's also a

deals and discounts column written by Joe Siano. But if you were to send anything to travelmail and mark it for those people or for that little department, that column, it'll get to those people. Because that email address is monitored by a couple of the editors and they will then divvy it out. It really is the best, the most efficient way to reach us. But if you want to fax, do the same thing, address it to the proper area. I also mention Escapes, if you have something you think is proper for Escapes Stuart Emmrich tells me to send it to escapes@nytimes.com. And if you have something of a real business nature, an editor named Brent Bowers oversees that, and you can reach him at bowers@nytimes.com.

Finally, I'll wait for some questions except for one thing. I don't know if there are any writers in this room but what I'm usually asked is, "How do I get a story in the New York Times?" And this is pertinent to you, too. I tell them, "I really can't tell you. There's no formula. It's really a very amorphous and even serendipitous process. For example, we might get a nice story on Denmark and Nancy decided with her deputy --by the way, we have a new deputy next week, Jan Benzel, who is returning for her second stint, -- wonderful editor and wonderful lady -- and they decided, "Let's get another story at least about Denmark, we'll make a package about it." And sometimes that's how it's done. Sometimes we just say, "Well there's certain places we have to go to every year, sometimes more than once -- New York, L.A., Paris, Rome." And so they get their heads together, they try to figure out with correspondents or with some of their writers they've talked to who have been to those places recently, how to go about putting together a package. So I'm sorry to say there's no set way, it really is a sort of washing ashore of ideas, trends and good stories that sometimes just come over unsolicited. And it's fun to put it together that way, and it may be a little bit frustrating for folks like you, though, because I just can't say, "Write this, write that. Cover this, cover that. Tell us about this and tell us about that." But do tell us, we do want to hear from you, and just try to make it a little easier on us by those little tips I gave you and get it to us in a timely and concise fashion and we'll take it from there.

Thank you.