

ALEX SINGLETON

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# THE PR MASTERCLASS

HOW TO DEVELOP A PUBLIC  
RELATIONS STRATEGY  
*THAT WORKS!*

**Foreword by  
Francis Ingham**

Director General of  
the Public Relations  
& Communications  
Association



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## **Sample material taken from Chapter 3**

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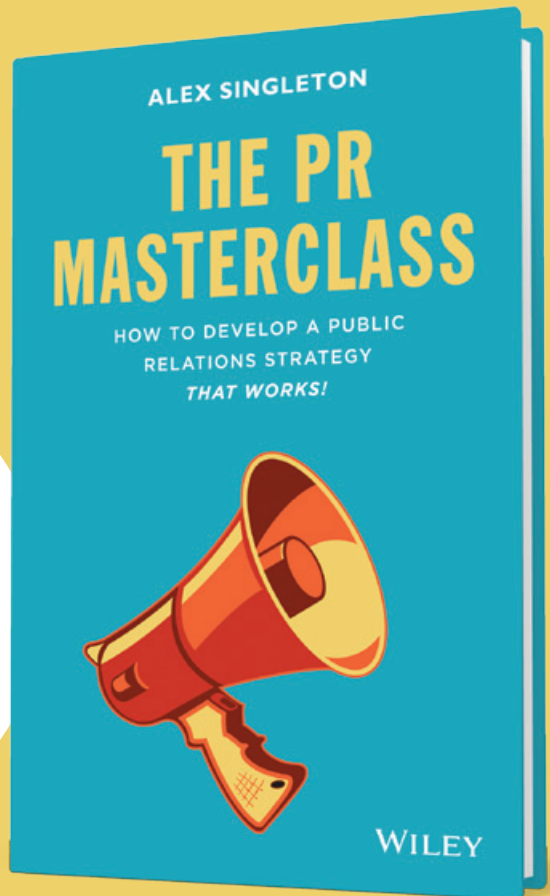
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# THE PR MASTERCLASS

is packed with practical advice and insights that will help you implement a PR strategy that delivers great results. Whether your PR budget is large or small, it will ensure you develop and pitch newsworthy material that outdoes most of what is put out by the PR industry. Written by Alex Singleton, an in-house Director of Comms & Marketing, the *PR Masterclass* will help you become a thought leader who magnetises the media with columns, letters and appearances on TV and radio. And it will show you how to react effectively if the media goes hostile.

The *PR Masterclass* is an utterly frank account of why some PR activities succeed and others fail. Hence, it is a must-read for anyone who deals with the media.

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# FOREWORD

*By Francis Ingham*

Director General of the Public Relations & Communications Association  
Visiting Professor in Public Relations at the University of Westminster

Crudely speaking, there are two types of books on PR, carrying with them two types of uses. The first type is the pseudo-academic book, probably written by somebody with little or no knowledge of PR. You've probably never heard of the author. That book's primary use is to light your fire, line your cat's litter tray or prop open a door. Good trees died in vain so that it might live.

The second book is by somebody who actually understands PR, because they work in it. That book has a completely different use – it's there to educate, guide and inform. It is a good thing. You should read it.

I'm delighted to say that Alex Singleton's book is most definitely in the latter category – which is why I'm delighted to be writing its foreword.

Ours is a vibrant, growing industry. It informs and inspires the majority of what you hear about from the media. And, in so doing, it moulds choices, opinions and visions. Because of that fact, it plays a fundamental role in shaping our world. Obviously, that role can be for good or for ill. But its power is undeniable.

Yet it is also an industry of contrasts. The majority of practitioners in our industry are not members of professional bodies, and probably aren't eligible to be so. The code of conduct that distinguishes PRCA members from the others, for example, is valuable not least because of the contrast it draws between those willing and able to subscribe to rules and sanctions – and those who are neither willing nor able.

Our industry prides itself on professional skills and relationship building, yet all too often fails to invest in either. For a trade of such power, we spend remarkably little time focused on honing the power we exercise. That needs to change.

Our industry all too often strives after the ephemeral and intangible at the expense of the important. Its biggest failure is a propensity to – how should I put it? – be rather up itself. That is, to fail to see the reality of our craft, rather than somebody's artificial representation of it.

This book falls into none of those traps. It is practical, direct, correct and insightful. It recognises, for example, that we should of course talk about how digital is changing our industry. And we absolutely must explain why PR should have a strategic as well as a tactical function. And, for that matter, why reputation management is vital.

But it recognises that the bread and butter of PR continues to be about relationships with journalists, colleagues and clients. Good writing skills; the ability to spell (all too often lacking in new recruits to our industry); a capacity not just to tolerate the company of clients and journalists, but actually to enjoy it; and the ability instinctively to see the angle and to know the nascent story – all of these remain vital to PR.

It's all too easy to lose sight of these basic facts. I have sat through dozens of talks about Grunig,<sup>1</sup> and new paradigms, and symbiotic relationships, and all of that stuff. It all has a place, and I do genuinely respect that place. But it is far from the being the entirety – or indeed the mainstay – of our industry. And sometimes when people seek so very, very hard to create an artificial intellectual construct with which they can frame our industry's work, they serve only to obscure what it does, and to confuse us all.

The glory of this book is that it doesn't make any of those mistakes. And there is an obvious reason why not. It is written by a poacher-turned-gamekeeper – by a former and respected journalist who moved to PR. Because of that background, he knows what journalists are looking for. He knows the things that annoy them – like calling on deadline “just to check you received our release”. Like poorly written copy. Like spamming journos. Like failing to realise that the journalists' role isn't to serve your clients' interests. All of that insight is of incredible value.

Over the past few years, our industry has grown considerably. It has done so despite the strongest economic headwinds in living memory. It is a career of choice, offering good pay, intelligent colleagues and excellent prospects. And if that is true of the UK, it is even more valid outside of it. A recent magazine front cover described how “spin doctors” were taking over the world. Its language was rather over the top, and its term of choice – spin doctor – was an unfortunate throwback to a time when our

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<sup>1</sup>“The Importance of the Four Models of Public Relations”, <http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/fall99/westbrook/models.htm> (accessed March 4, 2013)

industry foolishly embraced that sobriquet. But the message was clear and right – that ours in an industry of the future.

But every industry of the future needs a route map for its practitioners. Otherwise, they're likely to get lost. And that is why I welcome wholeheartedly this book – an accurate, accessible and powerful atlas for anyone seeking their way through the PR jungle.



# Chapter 3

How to Build and  
Maintain an Effective List  
of Journalists

**W**hat is the biggest mistake people make when pitching to the press? It is to think that having a rented database of journalists means that they do not need to personally concern themselves with learning about any individual writers. There are huge databases with 1.5 million media contacts worldwide, containing newspaper reporters, television and radio editors and even bloggers. They sound like a fantastic shortcut. Just like get-rich-quick schemes, which promise financial success without doing much work, these seem to tell you which journalists to contact without needing to read and research the publications.

But you might as well just send your press release to everyone in the phone book.

As a result of the lazy use of these databases by bad PR people, journalists are endlessly harassed by press releases that they have no interest in. A PR practitioner pays somewhere between £900 and £4,500 a year for one of these media databases. Because they have spent so much money on it, they feel that they need to get value for money out of it, so they export 500 journalists and send their press release to all of them.

It has been estimated that 1.7 billion irrelevant press release emails were sent in 2009 alone.<sup>38</sup>

This spamming has got so bad that British trade bodies and unions including the Public Relations Consultants Association, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and the National Union of Journalists introduced a “Media Spamming Charter”, in which they wrote: “Practitioners should invest time in researching the editorial scope and interests of a journalist/blogger before approaching them, to ensure their area of responsibility is relevant to the communications plan.”

It irritates journalists to receive mass-distributed press releases because it is obvious to them that they are being spammed: these press releases just aren’t relevant to most of their recipients.

Charles Arthur, the Technology Editor of *The Guardian* (i.e. a computing and consumer technology journalist), wrote on his blog about the irrelevant press releases he receives, including from people who spam him assuming that his job as a tech journalist makes him interested in heavy plant machinery.<sup>39</sup>

This is always done with no regard or interest or even checking as to whether the journalist is interested, or has ever written about this topic. That’s because . . . it costs the PR nothing to send the email; the annoyed journalists’ wasted time simply doesn’t show up on the balance sheet.

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<sup>38</sup> <http://inconvenientprtruth.com/research/> (accessed March 3, 2013).

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.charlesarthur.com/blog/index.php/2010/01/06/how-pr-fail-works-or-fails-to-work/>.

According to Stuart Bruce, a founder of the English PR agency Wolfstar:<sup>40</sup>

Every single media database I've tried . . . churns out lots of irrelevant targets and misses others no matter what you put in.

The databases give the illusion of research, but in reality are a lazy way out . . .

An effective press release is unlikely to go to many people – and sometimes the pitch will be entirely bespoke for each journalist. Moreover, my experience of using most of the databases is they are inevitably out of date, because journalists move around more quickly than they are updated.

However, there is – at the time of writing – one media database that is actually good. I promise I'm not being paid to say this, but Precise Connect is a dramatic improvement on what has existed previously. It works well because every day around a million articles are added to the system, which stores them for 18 months. You can then search for everyone who has written about a subject in the past 18 months, regardless of what their job title is (and Precise has a global database of contacts, comprehensively covering major countries). Then, you can look at the articles they've written and see if you think a journalist is favourable to your position. You get the choice of either clicking to search for the web version of the article (this is free) or paying to view a PDF of the article from the print edition.

It is not a replacement for putting time into learning about journalists, but as a tool, it is actually useful.

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<sup>40</sup><http://stuartbruce.biz/2010/02/an-inconvenient-pr-truth-experience-and-training-are-what-counts.html>.

## Pay-for press-release newswires

These services are mostly a waste of money, yet there is one advantage to them – which I’ll come to towards the end. These sites promise to mail your press release to thousands of opted-in journalists, bloggers and “influencers”, and promise to improve your company’s search engine optimisation by putting an online press release on their website.

It all sounds a bit hocus pocus to me, and using them in the wrong way can cause more damage than good. They are, in the words of Heather Baker, Managing Director of TopLine Communications: “expertly designed to part fools from their money”.<sup>41</sup>

Firstly, Google simply doesn’t give much credibility to these online press releases. If you check the so-called Google PageRank of a press release on these press release websites, you’ll see that they have a PageRank of zero. For search engine optimisation, you probably want sites with a PageRank of 5 or above linking to yours. But given that a release on a press release distribution site is likely to have no PageRank at all, any links to your site from those releases will fail to lend credibility to your site.

This is not just an opinion. The best-known authority in these matters is Matt Cutts, who is head of webspam at Google. He was asked about the strategy of using press releases to build links to a website. According to SearchEngineLand.com, he “clarified that the links in the press releases themselves don’t count for PageRank value, but if a journalist reads the release and then

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<sup>41</sup> <http://b2bprblog.com/blog/2012/10/newswires-parting-fools-from-their-money-since-the-advent-of-the-internet>.

writes about the site, any links in that news article will then count”.<sup>42</sup>

Separately, on his blog, Cutts wrote: “a legit press release can get you written up by reporters, or editors/sites may subsequently choose to link to your site. But the actual content of the press release itself doesn’t directly affect a site. For example, on [a press release about Avatar Financial on a distribution service’s website] those hyperlinks don’t help avatarfinancial.com.”<sup>43</sup>

The question, therefore, is: how often do journalists actually pick up on what appears on online press release sites? For most journalists, the answer is surely never.

Some of these press release services say that they will get your article to appear on lots of websites. But what sort of website is likely to want to publish any old press release? Are they sites that relevant journalists or your customers are going to read? In 2011, Google took action against so-called “article directories” that were full of PR material placed there for the purpose of search engine optimisation. Google hates duplicate content, just as it hates webspam. As such, it is better to place your press releases on your own website.

Secondly, while I’m sure that these services do email many people who call themselves journalists, the vendors are not at all transparent about *which* journalists receive them. I, for one, have never come across a salaried journalist who subscribes to such

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<sup>42</sup> <http://searchengineland.com/lessons-learned-at-smx-west-googles-farmerpanda-update-white-hat-cloaking-and-link-building-67838>.

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/seo-article-in-newsweek/#comment-5925>.

services. After all, why would they want their inbox bombarded with the stuff? It seems to be likely that the recipients are mostly freelance journalists – which these days typically means unemployed people. According to the New York news website Gawker.com: “A few writers (and many bloggers) ask for press pitches; readers can guess what that means about the quality of these outlets’ material.”<sup>44</sup>

What the pay-for newswires may achieve is one thing: they may get your story to appear on Google News. That might be worthwhile for you – and it has been for me. I put out a press release on one of those services. It was read by someone employed in a PR department in Paris and they paid for a first-class return Eurostar journey to attend an event. It did not, however, cause any journalists to get in touch.

In theory, using press release distribution services might be good if you are trying to piggy-back on a breaking news story and want to position yourself as a potential expert for television and radio stations. Journalists searching on Google News to find out what others are writing may see your press release. But this is only likely to work if producers are finding it very difficult to secure a guest.

There is another important consideration, which can make using these services backfire. If you’re embargoing a story for a particular date, and send it out on one of these newswires, the moment it appears on Google News, the embargo is dead. You

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<sup>44</sup>Nick Douglas, *Gawker*, <http://valleywag.com/200494/dont-be-a-flack-tips-for-pr-workers-from-the-journalists-who-hate-them> (accessed February 23, 2013).

won't be able to enforce it. (We will talk about the pros and cons of embargoing in Chapter 5.)

So, if pay-for newswires are of minimal use, why is it that films and dramas refer to “the wires”, as though they are important? Well, a number of them are. It's just that the ones the media use are paid for by the media, not the PR practitioners. They are hand-crafted by teams of journalists and filter out all the worthless press releases and report on the genuinely newsworthy.

If your story is picked up by one of these, such as the Press Association or the Associated Press newswires, you are likely to get a lot of coverage. I cover how to interact with these agencies in Chapter 4.

## How to build a list properly

The good news is that there are four cheaper and more effective ways of building a list of journalists.

The first – which I do religiously – is to add journalists I come across to a section of my Filofax. Every time I read a newspaper or magazine and come across a byline of someone I think I should contact in the future, I jot their name and publication down. This is a surprisingly effective technique, because actually reading a journalist's article(s) will do more to improve your pitches than anything else. Periodically, I sit with my Filofax and computer, research a journalist's back catalogue of articles and add her name to my computer. You can find out what software I currently prefer to use at [www.alexsingleton.com/software](http://www.alexsingleton.com/software).

The second, if the publication has a website, is to visit it online and use its search facility. If you represent a new brand of gin



and tonic, and you want to pitch a story related to the drink, you could go on to *The Guardian's* website and type in "gin and tonic". You can sort by date and find out who has written about the subject recently and decide which journalist or journalists at the paper would be most interested in your story.

If you don't recognise the journalist's name, the newspaper website might contain some biographical information, or a Google search might deliver this.

Using a news website's search facility will deliver much better results than most of the media databases, because it will be more comprehensive. If you are pitching a story about antiques, you are unlikely to find any journalist with the title "antiques correspondent" in a media database. But if you search for "antiques" on a newspaper website, you are likely to find more relevant general news reporters or features writers who have written about antiques previously. If you pitch to them directly, you might find that they are keen to write something.

The third way of building a list is to use an archive of publications, which are most notably provided by LexisNexis and Factiva. Their search facilities let you type in any subject and they will give you every article written about it in major publications. Importantly, they contain articles that have appeared in print publications but which never made it to the web.

The fourth way is to invite journalists who are visiting your website to join your press release distribution list. It is possible that there are journalists who are also your customers. They already love what you are doing, and would jump at the chance of writing about you. Therefore, you ought to have a "media

centre” on your website and encourage the press to sign up. There is more on how to organise an online media centre in the next chapter.

## How to build a relationship with the press

When I got my first column in 1994, in a newsstand computer magazine, I had no idea what I was doing. But it seemed like I needed to get some stories, so I wrote to all the relevant companies and invited them to send me information about what they were doing. Not all of them replied – those that failed to respond were PR idiots. Some of them wrote to me saying that they would add me to their press release distribution lists – they were amateurs.

Then some guy called Quentin got in touch. His company, Accountz, sold products by mail order and it was miniscule – just him and his wife. But he wrote me a personal two-page letter (this was before email was commonplace) explaining how he had a Big Idea to defeat the major players in his sector. Unlike some of the other companies, he had no PR agency – but he had a story. And during the 15 issues I wrote that column, I could always rely on him to take my calls and give me a good quote. When I upgraded to bigger-selling PC titles, including the market-leading *ComputerActive*, I kept on writing about his company. Today, his products are sold in PC World, Currys, AppleStores and Staples, and as I type this he has just made a successful exit from the company, passing it on to an investor.

What worked about that PR-journalist relationship is that Quentin – perhaps unwittingly – had good personal brand. He never tried to force a bad story on me and never wasted my time.

Marketing textbooks talk about the importance of a company brand, but anyone who's pitching to a journalist has a second brand to worry about: their personal brand. I get called by PR agencies and asked if I will help them pitch to the media a press release they've already written. I always refuse that sort of work, as I know they've rung me because the media isn't interested. It would be bad for my personal brand to ring journalists with bad stories, so I only pitch if I've been involved in the earlier creative process.

If you're dealing with the press regularly, they will get to recognise your name. Lots of PR people's emails never even make it to a journalist's inbox. That is either because they end up being spam filtered, or – as is increasingly common – because the journalist gets so fed up with the worthless material in them that he creates a filter to automatically divert a particular sender's messages to the bin.

Some clever journalists have discovered ways of automatically blocking all messages sent directly through media database services. Peter Kafka, Senior Editor at the Dow Jones-owned technology website AllThingsD.com, launched a Twitter attack on one of the most famous media databases, saying "Please stop using them. I'm setting up a filter to delete all their pitches."<sup>45</sup>

What you want is for the journalist to get a warm fuzzy feeling when you pop up in their inbox. How do you achieve that?

First, you need to be picky about what you send them. We will look at how to create a newsworthy story in the next chapter.

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<sup>45</sup>Jeremy Bencken, "PR Spam is a Tools Problem", <http://www.buzzstream.com/blog/vocus-pr-spam-kafka.html> (accessed February 27, 2013).

Second, don't make every contact a request for coverage. For example, you ought to be following your target journalists on social media. Sometimes they'll ask their friends or followers for help. If you can assist, especially if it's not related to what you are selling, jump in and offer your advice.

While there are some journalists who are showered with praise and correspondence and offers of undying admiration, most get little feedback from what they do. They notice – and like it – if you share their content on social media, or write a blog highlighting the significance of what they have written. A word of caution: you need to be authentic, but showing that you are genuinely interested in what they are writing will do you well.

Third, get to meet the journalist. That doesn't necessarily mean a boozy lunch, which is much less common among journalists than it used to be. Most reporters find themselves tied to their desks at lunchtime, and pop out for a quick sandwich. As Professors Morris and Goldsworthy put it: "Keeping journalists in the office, tied to their computers, makes it easier to assess their productivity."<sup>46</sup> They refer to a study which suggests that British journalists have to write three times as much as they did 20 years ago. That's hardly surprising when you consider the average number of editorial pages in a selection of major British national newspapers ballooned from 26.4 in 1995 to 41 in 2006.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, internet publishing has provided significant opportunities for publishing extra content.

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<sup>46</sup>Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy, *PR Today* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p. 32.

<sup>47</sup>"The Quality and Independence of British Journalism", <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/resources/QualityIndependenceofBritishJournalism.pdf> (accessed March 1, 2013).

So journalists simply have less time to meet people. As such, there are lots of meetings that go on over breakfast these days, especially with financial journalists. Many one-to-ones happen quickly over coffee at newspaper offices. But you may find that a beer after work or a “chance” meeting at a trade show will work better, especially as the journalist then is unlikely to be worrying about deadlines.

You will also find that the more colourful journalists do speaking engagements and a bit of research on Google may reveal opportunities to meet them. I routinely go to major exhibitions and conferences in London where relevant journalists are likely to be present – perhaps on their magazine’s stand – introduce myself and have a quick chat.

The purpose of meeting a journalist is not to harangue them into writing about you. It may be that you give them materials related to a future story. But it may be just to introduce yourself and let them know the sort of things you are working on and find out from them what they are really looking for.

Journalists, for the most part, don’t want to have meetings with press officers, unless they are seen as having clout in their own right. A political journalist would normally be delighted to have a meeting with the Director of Communications at Number 10, but less so with a Junior Account Manager at a small PR agency. Generally, journalists want to meet the person in charge – e.g. the entrepreneur, the chief executive or the head of research. The job of a PR executive is to set up that sort of meeting, and perhaps sit in on it.

In the BBC comedy series *Absolute Power* – a must-watch for PR practitioners – a pop singer goes for an interview with a music

journalist. He is with what he calls his “media mummy” – the PR consultant. The client doesn’t always say the right things – not least because he is a druggie – so the consultant periodically interjects to keep her client on track.

Fourth, invite a journalist to chair, speak at or attend a prestigious event which is not directly a pitch for your products. It could perhaps be something that you are sponsoring. Never offer them money for doing this, though you could offer to make a donation to a charity of their choice.

Fifth, interact with journalists on social media. I come across media relations managers with abandoned Twitter accounts, which they haven’t used for a year or two. This is a terrible sign. It implies two things to me: they aren’t consuming much media, because if they were, they would get excited by some of it and share a link on Twitter. Second, they are failing to interact online with any journalists or opinion formers in their sector. Now, it may be that they are old-school and lunching the press every day, but somehow I doubt it.

Social media is personal, and therefore it is better for PR practitioners to use their real names on Twitter than hide behind some anonymous department name.

## **How to get the best results when emailing the press**

Did you know that the time you send an email will affect the response? You would not believe how many emails get sent to journalists at 5:20pm on a Friday afternoon, when they are frantically trying to meet a deadline and thinking about the weekend.

The best time depends upon the publication. Let's say it's Tuesday and you are tapping out an email to the editor. You know that it goes to press on the same day. So today is really a bad day to be emailing the editor because it's his busiest. What should you do?

Well, there is a wonderful facility in Microsoft Outlook for Windows called "Delay Delivery". On any email you type, you can choose that option and set it to send after a certain time, say not before Thursday at 10am. The first time Outlook checks your email messages after that time, your email will be sent. In Google Mail, you can add an extension called Boomerang which similarly delays emails.

This feature is particularly useful for those who like to get some work done at the weekend. Emails received out of office hours don't tend to get much attention. I routinely type emails at the weekend and get them to send on the Tuesday.

Likewise, if you are sending press releases through an email list system such as GetResponse or Aweber, you can schedule the message to be sent at a time you think will be most effective.

Research by MailChimp found that Tuesday to Thursday are the best days of the week to email, because a higher percentage of emails are opened on those days.<sup>48</sup>

Every journalist is different – and every desk on a newspaper is different – but I have found that 10am until 11am is a golden hour for the national press. If a journalist arrives at the paper

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<sup>48</sup><http://kb.mailchimp.com/article/when-is-the-best-time-to-send-emails>.

somewhere between 9am and 10am, he will then spend some time prior to 11am reading all the stuff that has happened overnight. He starts making plans for the following day's paper. He, or his boss, might need to go into an editorial meeting at 11am or 11:30am, where decisions are taken.

The worst time to contact most newspaper journalists is late afternoon, when they are trying to write their articles for the following day's paper and are much less keen on taking phone calls or dealing with emails. By the way, I hate leaving telephone messages for journalists: not all bother to listen to them, but if they do and you call again, it looks like you are pestering. Journalists find listening to them time-consuming and therefore annoying. A.J. Jacobs, the Editor at Large of *Esquire*, says: "I'd rather get almost any other type of message than voicemail – email, text, telegram, telex, cuneiform tablet. At least you can skim those."<sup>49</sup> Or, as one newspaper journalist told me while listening to a barrage of mobile phone voicemails: "Why does everyone choose to talk to me on voicemail when they have an extremely detailed and lengthy message?"

It is worth asking journalists whenever you meet them what times of the day and week are busiest for them and when in the week they are keenest for stories. The information will be invaluable.

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<sup>49</sup> "Is it *Ever* OK to Leave Voicemail Anymore?", <http://gizmodo.com/5762401/when-is-it-ok-to-leave-voicemail> (accessed March 1, 2013).



“PR can do more for your money than any other marketing tool. But very few people understand how to use it. Alex does because he has been at the receiving end. So will you if you read this remarkably practical book.”

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“This is an important book about public relations and how the media is changing. Singleton is a straight-talking journalist-turned-practitioner who pulls no punches. He calls on the industry to grow up and adopt the rigour of a professional discipline. It's a call to action that I wholly heartedly support. You should read The PR Masterclass if you're new to public relations or work in the profession and want to continue doing so.”

– **Stephen Waddington,**  
European director, **Ketchum,** and 2014  
President of the **Chartered Institute**  
of **Public Relations (CIPR)**



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Editor, **Public Relations Review**



“Written in a no-nonsense style, every chapter contains a mine of information about the subject. What’s more, it’s clear that Alex knows the business inside out. This is the kind of book you need to have close at hand. Do what it says, and you’ll be miles ahead with your PR.”

– **James Hammond**,  
brand consultant

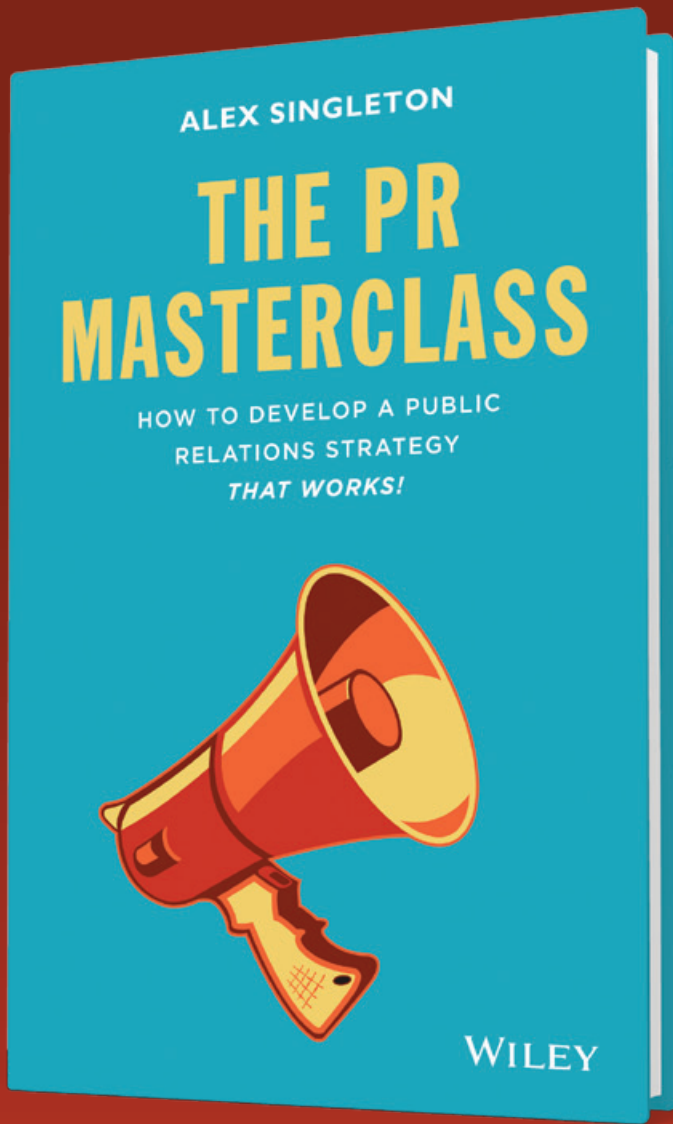
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Alex Singleton** is an in-house Director of Communications and Marketing.

Alex was previously a journalist at The Daily Telegraph in London and has also written for The Guardian, The Daily Express and Mail Online. He has been interviewed on countless news programmes on broadcasters such as the BBC, CNN, CNBC and Bloomberg, and successfully appeared on Channel Four’s comedy show Ten O’Clock Live.

He ran PR campaigns as Head of Media Relations at business group London First, Research & Communications Director of the Adam Smith Institute and Director of the Globalisation Institute, and has spoken on communications all over the world.



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