



## CHAPTER 1



# The Nature of the Beast

So here he is—napkin on the lap, a fresh glass of water, clean silverware, and a menu of absolutely delectable publicity items. The TV-Bone Steak sounds too juicy to pass up, but the Baby-back of the front-page ribs are pretty tempting as well. What kind of salad should he get—an Internet Caesar or a tossed magazine? And look at those deserts!—rhubarb radio pie, newsprint pudding, and feature story cheesecake. Who could possibly have just one? Better order all three and have a sound-bite of each. Boy, this guy looks pretty hungry. Where is that waiter anyway?

I've got news for our publicity-starved diner. The waiter isn't coming. In fact, the News Café doesn't employ any waiters, nor does it serve any food. In this odd media restaurant, the proprietors are the ones who devour the grub while the *customers* toil in the kitchen and scurry among the tables.

There is a fundamental problem in the way many people perceive the publicity game. As they ponder what sort of news

coverage they want, their attention is focused in the wrong direction—on themselves. They’re thinking, “What kind of tasty cuisine can the news media serve me?” That’s the wrong question. What any publicity seeker should understand is that you must give in order to receive. The Media Beast is eager to grant you the most powerful form of marketing known to man. However, in order to receive this gift, you must serve up a storyline that the Beast cannot resist.

Of course, there is a problem that must be addressed. Feeding the Beast isn’t as straightforward as it might sound. You need to know how to handle this customer because he’s a little quirky. (Get used to it—*he’s* the customer, not you.) There are times when he can’t be bothered, and other times when he is starved for attention. The Beast hates mayonnaise and cooked spinach, but he will eat tuna fish sandwiches and spinach salad. He gorges on meat and potatoes and desserts but wouldn’t touch a beet for all the Angus in Texas. And, never, ever attempt to hold onto any food that he has demanded. The Beast will not hesitate to bite your hand off—or worse.

In order to get the quantity and quality publicity you want, you need two things. First, you must know your customer better than he knows himself. That’s the material we will cover in this chapter. As you will soon see, the news media are not nearly so mysterious as they seem. Once you understand the handicaps and motivations of the Beast, you will then need to play by the Media Rules—12 requirements that are consistent among all media. The Rules are amazingly simple. You already know most of them; you just don’t know that you know them.

Are you ready to put on an apron, grill some steak, toss some salad, and be really nice to a highly irritable glutton? It may sound like hard duty, and sometimes it can be, but wonderful rewards await those who learn that before you get your publicity pie, you must first serve the Beast.

## The “Corporatization” of the Media

Journalists are not the enemy. In spite of what you have been led to believe, news people are not dangerous vipers. To the contrary, the vast majority of folks who work in the business are passionate professionals who want to make the world a better place. They tend to be idealists, but that’s a good thing. Our democracy would not work without them. Journalists are not the enemy, but the corporations they work for, well . . . let’s just say that many of them could use a good flogging.

In this book I will repeatedly refer to the “Beast,” which is an all-encompassing term for the system that pushes the news gathering process. Therefore, the Beast is the newsroom—not the editor, the corporate ownership—not the news director, the medium—not the reporter. It’s an important distinction to make, because those who form successful partnerships with the Media Beast are accepting of how offensively blunt the *system* can often be. While you may disdain the weaknesses of the institution, you should have great empathy for those who toil within. These people are your ticket to winning great publicity.

Journalism has never been an easy business. It has always demanded its people labor long hours for minimal pay. The work environment is messy, loud, and contentious. Reporters must ask nice people hard questions. They must reduce complex issues to a manageable form—which tends to upset those closest to the story. It’s difficult (albeit highly rewarding) work. Only the hardy need apply. I remember when I was still relatively new to the business I was given a plaque from the California Conservation Corps that contained the CCC’s motto: Hard work, low pay, miserable conditions, and much, much more. I set it on my desk, where it stayed for a few hours, until my boss noticed it. He told me to make the sign disappear. Guess the message hit a little too close to home.

As hard as it was to be a reporter then (1986), it's a lot harder now. In the past decade, the media landscape has undergone sweeping changes that have all but eviscerated the profession. In a word, the news business has become "corporatized." Journalists Robert Kunkel and Gene Roberts thoroughly document the problem in their book *Leaving Readers Behind: The Age of Corporate Journalism* (2001, University of Arkansas Press). As Kunkel and Roberts demonstrate, "Relentless corporatization is now culminating in a furious, unprecedented blitz of buying, selling, and consolidating of newspapers, from the mightiest dailies to the humblest weeklies." As of this writing, three massive conglomerates (Gannett, Knight-Ridder, Chicago Tribune Co.) own a quarter of all daily newspaper circulation. And it's not just newspapers. These mega-media corporations and others are buying up TV affiliates, radio stations, and magazines at an alarming rate. Fewer and fewer companies are controlling more and more print space and broadcast time.

Why should you care about these changes? Because the corporate bean counters have a strategy—consolidate, streamline, do more with less, and above all else, make lots of money, which they do. Most media outlets are enormously lucrative ventures, where profit margins of 20 to 30 percent are quite common. The price to be paid for this corporatization (aside from greatly degrading the profession—not the subject of this book) is that the stresses of the business have been amplified. The people whose job it is to actually produce the news are being squeezed in a most unhealthy way.

For you, the publicity seeker, this is a bad news/good news situation. The bad news is that the Beast has become far more dangerous. The extreme conditions in most newsrooms—leaner staffs, fewer experienced journalists, more work with less time to do it—mean the chances of getting unfairly burned in the press are greater than ever. But the good news is that there are incredible opportunities for people who know how to use this pressure to their advan-

tage. In order to accomplish this task, we will reduce the Beast's problems to a simple, manageable form.

In the following pages, I will make generalizations for which there will be exceptions. Our goal is to seize upon a small number of consistencies that are true for the vast majority of news providers. I will make a few distinctions where needed, but very few. This simplification makes the task of understanding the Beast easier and more efficient. Now, let's take a closer look at the Beast's four primary weaknesses—limitations that the Media Rules exploit. The Beast is Handicapped, Hungry, Harried, and Human.

## The Beast Is Handicapped

Today's news people are ill suited for the job of journalist. Basically, they are *under*: *under*-educated, *under*-paid, and *under*-appreciated, not to mention *under*-age. (I warned you of the generalizations.) Because of the squeeze being applied by corporate bosses, the job requires more from them than they are capable of delivering. The demands of the news environment have, for the most part, exceeded the capabilities of those who work within it.

Reporting is for the young. Few people in their mid-30s and up are willing to endure the pain, stress, and health-depleting lifestyle of a frontline news gatherer. Therefore, the majority of local reporters, and many on the national level, fall within the age range of 22 to 40, and that category is skewing younger all the time. While reporters have always been the youngest members of the newsgathering profession, the corporatization of the business has made it even less mature. The reason is that reporters with pimples don't cost as much as those with a few gray hairs—not that seasoned journalists have ever been paid much more than blue-collar wages.

When I became a reporter in the mid-80s, journalism school graduates typically started their careers at small town newspapers

and small market radio and television stations. They would put in a couple of years and then jump to a bigger city, spend some time there, and then jump again. While this progression of media-hopping is still the norm, the pace has been greatly accelerated. In fact, the most promising journalism students are able to skip the small cities altogether. It used to take ten years to get to places like Los Angeles, New York, Denver, Dallas, Miami, and Washington—and that was if you were good. Now, a journalist can find herself in the big city within a year or two out of college.

The youth movement in American journalism may be good for the scalpel-wielding corporate bosses, but those who had hoped to make news their lifetime profession are not happy. To get an ear full of their discontent just log on to any one of the websites dedicated to airing the businesses' dirty laundry—<TVSpy.com>, <NewsBlues.com>, and the vulgarly named <f...edTelevision.com>. One NewsBlues poster suggested that the call letters of WNGX in Atlanta be changed to WGNX because they now stand for “We’ve Got No eXperience in this market.” An employee at KRON in San Francisco publicly wondered if the station’s parent company would “Hire enough staff to cover the additional newscasts? And will that staff possess college diplomas with dry ink?” It’s the same story at newspapers, magazines, and radio. People with little newsgathering experience (let alone life experience) are in charge of giving us the news of the day.

Unfortunately, the youth movement in the media only begins at the reporter position. It extends deep into the newsroom as well. You can’t cut resources, freeze pay, increase the workload, hire less-experienced staff and expect to keep your best people. More and more seasoned journalists have discovered that they can reduce their stress, increase their salary, and generally improve their lives by simply getting out (yours truly is one case in point). The median age and experience level of editors, producers, news directors, and

photographers have dropped precipitously. At one station where I worked in the early 1990s, my life was controlled by three producers in their mid-20s. None of them had ever interviewed anyone, had ever reported on a single story in the field, or had ever stood in front of a live camera. Their lack of understanding of what it took to get the job done made my days extremely difficult. This kind of frustration is the rule rather than the exception.

Andrew Cohen, editor of *Athletic Business*, gives basic tests to people who apply for editorial positions at his publication. Most applicants fail—miserably. This self-described curmudgeon (at the ripe, old age of 39) says you would be astonished at how many would-be editors fail his test in the first sentence of their applications. “One guy, the news editor and chief copy editor of his college paper, misspelled the name of the local newspaper in which we ran the ad,” said the frustrated editor. In the end, Cohen and others like him must hire the grammatically challenged and hope to educate them properly (like the applicant who promised “superb grammar, spelling, and *punctuation* skills”). Mind you, we aren’t talking about the craft of telling a balanced story, but the simple mechanics of correctly putting words on paper.

The movement toward an even younger journalism workforce presents an interesting and difficult problem for the news industry—and for those of us who wish to seize publicity. The historic mission of the news business has been to gather information relevant to the community, reduce it, refine it, double-check it, and then release a well-processed product. However, intense corporate pressure to produce more news faster has made this goal largely unattainable. The mission has changed. In the 21st century, the Beast is bulimic. The new objective is to absorb as much information as possible and then regurgitate it at lightning speed. Along the way there’s little time to actually learn about the topics that are being reported on.

Journalists typically know little about the stories they are covering. In fact, even before the recent trend toward youth, the news business was described as “the craft of explaining to others that which journalists know nothing about.” News people don’t learn much about business, government, politics, the law, or any other subject in college. What they study is the craft of gathering information and the presentation of that information in a print or broadcast format. After J-school, when graduates *become* journalists, they still acquire little or no real-world experience outside the news envelope. Even those who spend time reporting on a specific “beat” (crime, health, education, etc.) do so from a distant outsider position. As we will soon see, the people who work for the Beast experience the world from a completely different viewpoint from yours. Therefore, their worldview is also different. But first, let’s take a closer look at the Beast’s voracious appetite.