

# Bloggers & Journalists redux: Separate, but equal?



Lori MacVittie, 2008-02-06

Martin McKeay had a [very interesting post on Friday regarding NDAs and bloggers](#). I responded with a comment, but later got thinking about the subject and thought it deserved even further discussion.

Martin says

If I didn't sign any paperwork, the only thing obligating me to that Non-Disclosure Agreement is common courtesy, something PR people need to be very careful of expecting as they dip their toes in the blogosphere.

Martin's right, of course. PR folks must be careful because the rules of engagement with bloggers is being written as we speak (type). The traditional expectations made of the press can't necessarily be made of those in the blogosphere, and it's this fact that needs to be addressed - but not necessarily by PR folks as Martin suggests a bit later.

The crux of Martin's irritation appears to be with "slipping in" an NDA statement in the middle of a presentation or e-mail. He'd prefer that NDA disclosure be made up front, ahead of time, before any information is exchanged, and reminds PR folks that bloggers are not reporters.

Bloggers are not reporters

PR professionals need to realize that bloggers are not reporters, we don't have the background a reporter does and in many cases a quick flash of popularity and traffic is more important to us than a 'relationship' with a PR firm. If you want something to be under Non-Disclosure Agreement, ask up front if a blogger is willing to respect a verbal NDA. But don't slip it into a slide in your presentation and expect it to be honored.

In general I agree with Martin's assessment. Bloggers are not reporters, they don't have the same background and their 15 minutes may be more important to them than their reputation. But at the same time, having been in the press, I recognize that PR folks don't necessarily have the time to manage and nurture every blogger - or even every journalist - out there. They're concerned with "getting coverage". In order to do that, they have to entice the person at the other end of the e-mail with *something* that's going to peak interest, because when someone sees 50 releases a day only the ones that stand out are going to get noticed. An e-mail offering a preview of "Product X under NDA" tells you that "Product X" is coming out. The e-mail will also likely contain some nugget of information designed to wet your appetite and get you to take the bait. The verbal NDA comes *after* you've indicated you want to hear more about Product X.

I mean, c'mon, give the PR folks a break, here. They have to give you *some* information so you know whether or not it's worth your time to talk to them, they have to make the pitch - it's their job! And that pitch necessarily includes some information that might be considered somewhat confidential, or at least *should* be considered such by those receiving the pitch.

It's bloggers who began demanding that they be given equal status in the Fourth Estate, so it isn't PR folks who should be changing their ways, but bloggers. We tell our children as they grow older that if they want to be treated like an adult they should act like one. Well, the same goes for bloggers who want to be treated like journalists. Then act like one. Bloggers need to step up and recognize that with the ability to have an impact and be treated like a journalist comes great responsibility and obligation, and you can't have one without the other. Media outlets have publicly accessible guidelines for PR folks when submitting story pitches and suggestions, but I've never seen a blogger provide this kind of information publicly.

If you want the respect as a blogger, you *have to earn it*. And that starts by honoring implied confidentiality. Maybe I'm too old fashioned, too mid-western, too "boy scout", but the trust proffered by others in you should be validated by your actions regardless of the industry in which you work. That's one of the reasons I fit with F5 so well - we both have the [same view on honesty and integrity](#) no matter whether you're a blogger, in sales, in product management, or an executive. As Jeff says, "We're about being honest, up front, direct, confident, yet humble."

Martin gives PR folks some advice

If you want something to be under Non-Disclosure Agreement, ask up front if a blogger is willing to respect a verbal NDA. But don't slip it into a slide in your presentation and expect it to be honored.

I think what bothers me most about this advice is that it's likely necessary in the first place. Martin is probably right, but what he's really saying to PR folks with this entire post is: **DON'T TRUST BLOGGERS**. And that's just a very sad state of affairs, both for PR folks dealing with bloggers and for those bloggers who are ready to step up to the plate and be treated as a trusted outlet for industry information.

If Martin's right and you can't trust bloggers, or "expect" them to honor NDAs that aren't explicitly spelled out before information is exchanged, then we're no closer to "citizen journalism" begin a reality then we were in the beginning of this explosion. If bloggers want to have the same "rights and protections" as journalists, then they need to recognize that must shoulder the same responsibilities as journalists.

Otherwise, bloggers and journalists will stay segregated - separate, but (mostly) equal.

*Imbibing: Coffee*

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