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RED SKY THINKING

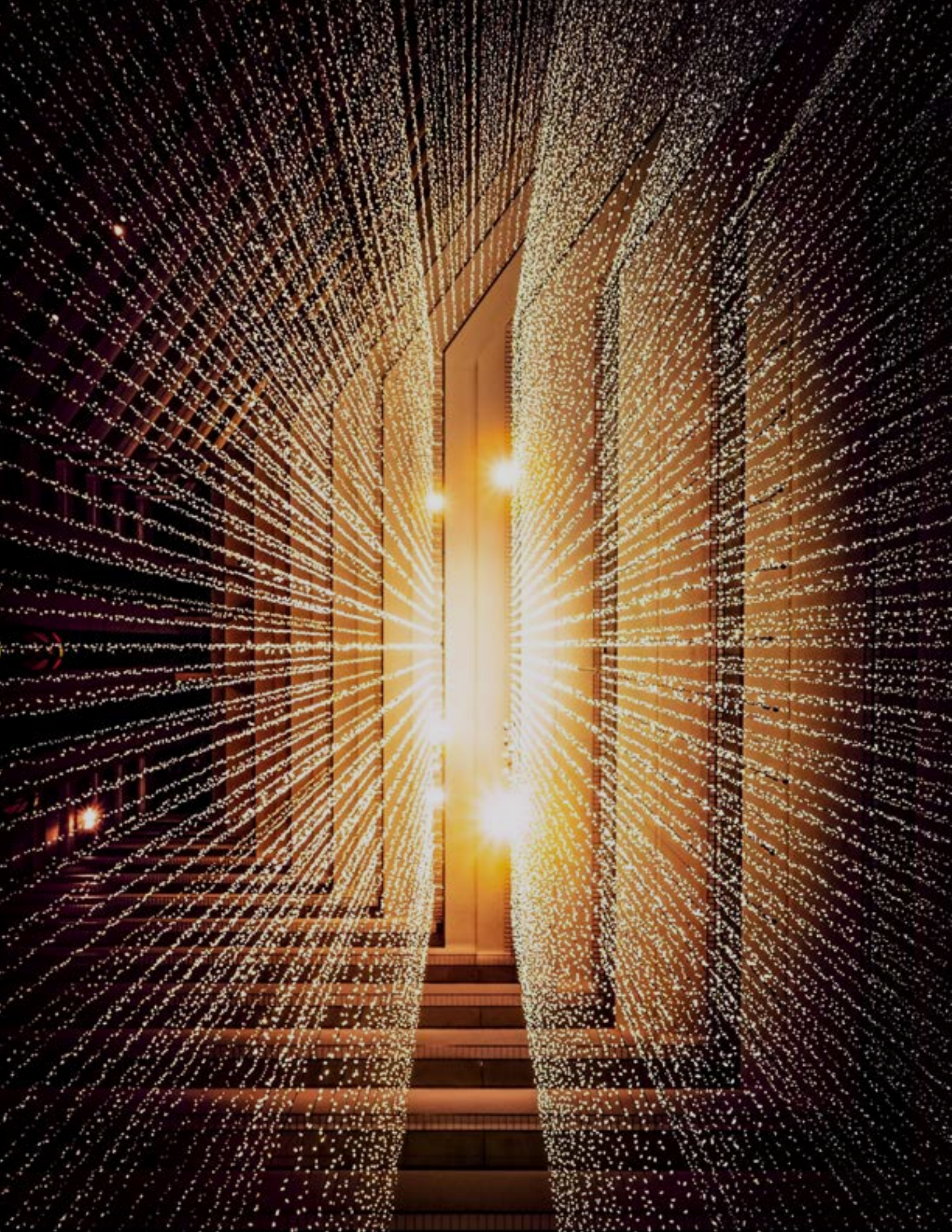
THE ART OF  
PLACING A STORY IN THE  
NEWS-YOU-CAN-CHOOSE  
MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

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## A CRUSH OF CONTENT

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### Appetites and aversions to news change from decade to decade, sometimes minute to minute.

Consider that we once received our daily dose of news by turning into the same television news program each evening or fetching it from our doorstep every morning. In many countries, there are no longer “universal” trusted sources of news like these. We’re now far **more likely** to get our news from digital devices than from television, radio or print publications.

*Three major trends are shaping the news environment today:*

- The avalanche of content that people must filter through
- Consumers’ deepening distrust and apathy toward the news media
- The changing business of news

Each new day brings us **7.5 million** additional blogs and articles and **500 million** tweets. Over on Instagram, **500 million** accounts use Stories daily. The sheer volume of content means we have to make choices about what to view, read, listen to or click on — or else we’ll get buried.

**This is now a news-you-can-choose environment. We don’t have, nor do we want, a one-size-fits-all news source anymore. Instead, the mix of news people choose to consume is as unique as they are.**



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**Brands that want their stories to break through to media must consider that brand trust is at an all-time low in many parts of the world.**

Havas Group's proprietary **Meaningful Brands®** study from 2021 finds that less than half (47%) of brands are seen as trustworthy.

At the same time, news consumers are also **more distrustful** and apathetic toward the media. Some are opting out of news altogether. Thomson Reuters' **"Digital News Report"** shows interest in news has fallen sharply across countries, from 63% in 2017 to 51% in 2022.

The U.S. has the largest group of disconnected news users, with over 40% saying they "often or sometimes" actively avoid the news. This type of selective avoidance has doubled in both Brazil (54%) and the U.K. (46%), with many respondents saying news has a negative effect on their mood. There are also high figures of completely disconnected news consumers in Japan (15%), the U.K. (9%), France (8%) and Australia (8%).

It's a circle of distrust, where consumers trust neither brands nor media. Instead, with news audiences polarized and the media scrutinized constantly for bias, people have come to define quality news based on their individual lens.



**People have lots of news sources they trust, but they don't think that the institution of the news media and the industry of news organizations as a whole is trustworthy. So people tend to go to sources of information that map with their point of view. The charge to people who are in the thick of this new environment is to figure out how to help people find their way to the truth and not make it a hard job."**

– Lee Rainie, Pew Research Center's director of internet and technology research, as said in **an episode** of its **"Trust in America"** video series

A photograph showing the back and shoulder of a person with dark hair, wearing a grey and white striped sweater. They are standing in front of a whiteboard covered in various papers, diagrams, and photos. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an office or workshop environment.

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## THE CIRCLE OF DISTRUST



# THE CHANGING BUSINESS OF NEWS AND THE ADVENT OF JOURNALISM-LIKE CONTENT

## Since 2008, newsroom employment in the U.S. has dropped by 26%.

Having had to become generalists to cover multiple beats in their shrinking or nonexistent newsrooms, today's remaining journalists are stretched thin, **burned out from covering COVID-19** and under extreme time constraints. Per **Pew**, 72% of journalists in 2022 use a negative word — like “struggling” or “chaos” to describe the news industry, even though most of them describe still being passionate about their work.

This doesn't mean journalism is dying. Instead, it's going new places. Digital-native news organizations have seen considerable gains, according to **Pew Research Center analysis** of data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

**Christopher Wink**, cofounder and CEO of the news organization **Technical.ly**, is finding journalism-inspired storytelling — he calls it “journalism thinking” — being used in new and different contexts to build trust with audiences.

“I'm finding three big buckets of people using journalism-like skills outside of news organizations without ever calling what they're doing journalism,” says Wink, who's writing a book on the topic. “There are creators who are increasingly adding more depth to their work with storytelling, content marketers who are increasingly doing fact checking and source interviews and elevating what content marketing can look like, and then a whole class of advocacy and nonprofit groups that are adding either data intelligence or people's stories to deepen their work. They may even be doing their own surveying and research work.”

Back to the matter of traditional journalism — “It doesn't really exist now,” says **Beth Willers**, principal at **WMC** in Santa Clara, California. “Journalists are

supposed to be able to record videos and do interviews and maybe speak on panels and have the social media following. They're expected to come with this whole package, yet they're not paying editors well in a lot of cases. So, you're getting people who are doing really difficult work for not that great of money and then you're giving them an attitude on top of it or making it difficult to work with you.”

**Dominik Lemanski** is a London-based freelance writer who's been at it for 20 years and regularly writes for The Times, The Sun, The Mirror and Daily Express. As he tells it, “Every week I have a mad rush to come up with ideas I can sell to newspapers. It feels like a bun fight. I have to be quite cutthroat. I can't write about what I might enjoy necessarily or what I might be interested in. I have to think, ‘What is going to pay the bills this week?’ I have to work harder to get more stories in because the rates have gone down. I'm constantly trying to weigh whether or not it's worth me putting in the work for the space and the fee that that story will give me. Is it worth the reward?”

When it comes to placing meaningful news stories in this post-pandemic media landscape, brands face sizeable but not insurmountable obstacles. Some editors and journalists receive thousands of emails a day. Under tremendous deadline pressure in this 24/7/365 news cycle, they're short on time and prefer to digest information in a specific way. To earn a reply from an editor or reporter working within this paradigm, a brand's story needs to be deftly told, personally and culturally relevant, and deliver a value add to readers.

**The three tactics that follow have helped us be successful in getting our clients' stories to break through.**



# 1

## LEAD WITH YOUR BRAND'S IMPACT NOT YOUR MARKETING INFORMATION



### Your brand's impact on people should be at the heart of every story you tell.

Not the product you're trying to sell, company you want to raise awareness of, or message you want to land. It's about the human beings your company has impacted. Who are they, and what's been the benefit to them?

Red Havas has made a case for **person-to-person (P2P) communications**, as opposed to the more traditional stay-in-your-lane practices of business-to-business (B2B) or business-to-consumer (B2C) communications. That's because to us, the lines of contemporary communication haven't just blurred; they've merged. To customers and consumers, it's all one experience. With this approach, the company is the sidekick not the hero. It ensures every story starts with the consumer/audience in mind versus the company. When you make your reader your main character, you make it clear you have your priorities straight.

Certain story formats, such as case studies, can be especially impactful, says **Cynthia Challener**, a technical writing consultant who specializes in pharma. "Most of the good trade publications aren't going to take any stories that are advertorial, unless you paid for it. They want stories that are about solving a problem. People should do more case studies, where you outline the problem and exactly what you did. You can push your product or strategy that way, but you're presenting it as a problem that was solved. People really appreciate examples of what's been done so they can benchmark and get ideas."

**Bottom line:** Shift your mindset from thinking of your brand's content as transactional to thinking of it as transformational.

### What Makes Brands Meaningful

We know from Havas Group's proprietary **Meaningful Brands® survey** from 2021 finds that people want to hear about benefits. And there are three categories of benefits that brands can speak to — functional, collective and personal.

- ✓ **Functional:** What rational benefits does your brand provide? Focus on product functionality, customer service, interactivity and technology.
- ✓ **Collective:** What company initiatives, behaviors and actions can you highlight that respond to and connect at a social and cultural level?
- ✓ **Personal:** What messaging and behavior does your brand exhibit that connects on an individual basis and serves a specific personal need or want?

Going a step further, to get a journalist to believe the benefits your brand touts, you need facts. One way to get these is to conduct a survey of your key audiences — perhaps broken down by location, age, gender and ethnicity. In this way, you'll gain critical insights that inform key messages and can be used as third-party, statistically significant data when pitching to media.

# 2

## PERSONALIZE AND CONTEXTUALIZE EVERY PITCH AND INTERACTION WITH THE MEDIA

### There has to be a good reason why a journalist would talk to your company spokesperson over any others.

Can you supply facts that show that you're the best, first, latest or most unique? Are you finding out something that counters a common trend? Even better. To succeed, your brand needs to showcase it has real credentials. Working with a PR firm that knows how to spark a connection with the right journalist and what they're pitching on your behalf — ensuring it is both personally relevant to that media contact and culturally relevant to what's going on in the news cycle — can put your brand in position to stand out.

When we pitch stories to the media, we consider how what we're offering meets the journalist's needs and how we can ensure they have all the critical information they need to create a credible, quality story. As much as possible, we try to connect the dots for them to make their job easier.

As Willers advises, "Understand what the journalist does, what journalistic integrity means and what your part is in that. Make it easy to work with you. Your attitude should show that you understand it's not your schedule; it's their schedule. If you can't meet the schedule, let them know in advance and offer them something else. You can't leave editors with gaps. You can't leave editors hanging."

In a media landscape where newsrooms are changing as quickly as the news cycle, building authentic new relationships with journalists must be an everyday pursuit, along with maintaining existing relationships. Of the editors Willers works with most often, she says, "I actually like these people and know these people. I know their kids' names. These are long-term relationships that are only going to last if you're genuine and you follow through."

We also can't overstate the importance of staying dialed into the day's news. By knowing what's trending on a higher level and what's driving the news of the day, you'll be far better equipped to plug your brand into the news cycle. Relevance is key — look for ways to connect your brand's little story to the bigger news stories that journalists are already covering.

When it comes to personalization and contextualization, also remember there's no such thing as a global story. Some companies believe it suffices to translate global pitches into the local language, but regionalizing global stories is about much more than language. Pitches need to be adapted — or completely revisited — alongside the nuances of each region to ensure they're relevant in markets across the world.

## What's Newsworthy?

### Timing: News Is 'News'

**First, it is truly new?** There's a reason why the first segment on the evening news is breaking news.

### Significance: Makes an Impact

**Next, it is significant?** Think of the coronavirus. While it's no longer new, it continues to make a big impact on our personal and professional lives.

### Surprising: Unknown Insights

**Is it surprising?** Jolt journalists out of the hum-drum by offering them a strange or unique angle they couldn't get from anyone else.

### Novelty: New Way to Think About Things

**Is it novel?** The media is always looking for a new angle on topics that may have already been well-covered.

### Human Interest: Relatable

**Is there a human-interest component?** Story-telling that emphasizes the human element brings context and meaning to broader information.



# 3

## GET TO THE POINT WITH PITHY PITCHES AND PRESS RELEASES



### We must contend with shorter attention spans.

This shows up both in how consumers take in content and how the media interacts with our pitches. Successful pitches consider what each journalist likes to cover, how they like to receive information and how they like to be spoken to.

#### Brevity Over Bravado

At Red Havas, we've come to understand that media will simply delete any email that doesn't get the point across in the subject line. Most want no more than a few lines of information. We recommend keeping pitches to one paragraph, two max, if possible.

And curate those lists. If your PR agency is haphazardly sending your press releases to everyone in a media database, they'll end up sending an editor who covers green tech a press release about a new software package and risk losing them forever through the dreaded "block" option.

The days of the two- or three-page press release are also gone. Instead, we're giving editors two or three paragraphs and all the images or assets they may need in one place. While many companies still follow the standard press-release format of "We did X thing; it's so exciting," what journalists need to know is why it's exciting and how it's impactful. Why is it relevant? That's all they need to know and nothing more.

It's also important that pitches sent to journalists on your brand's behalf are in plain English. As we explored in our **"Content That Cuts Through" white paper**, stories are only as good as a reader's ability to understand and relate to them or to take inspiration from them.

Our jobs as communicators is to make sense of the world, create clarity, help the writer and help the reader. **Thomson Reuters** found that a significant proportion of younger and less educated people say they avoid news because it can be hard to follow or understand. This suggests we could do much more to simplify language and better explain or contextualize complex stories.

### Final Thoughts:

There's no going back to the way things used to be. New channels, choices and definitions of journalism all characterize the "new normal" for brands and media. To keep up with changing news consumption habits and the challenges facing today's newsrooms, brand communicators and marketers need to consider how to optimize your impact. Your best bet is to look for ways to be meaningful, relevant, transparent and human with news media.





# UNBLINKERED THINKING UNEXPECTED IDEAS

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Red Havas is part of the Havas PR Global Collective, the PR and communications arm of the Havas Group that comprises approximately 40 agencies around the world and more than 1,300 employees. The Red Havas strategic “Merged Media” model brings together traditional and digital publishing, content, social media and data within a single infrastructure.

For further information, please visit [www.redhavasgroup.com](http://www.redhavasgroup.com).