

## SPOOKY, SCARY

October is Halloween month, a time for all grown-ups to smile contentedly because we know that ghosts and witches aren't real. Unfortunately, a lot of other, real-life scary things can make a communicator's life miserable. In this issue we take a look at a few of them, and offer some ways to cope.

- [1] OpEds: When an editor catches the ghost
- [2] Press Releases: One mistake and you're out
- [3] Speeches: Staying out of the Dead Zone

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### 1. OpEds: When an editor catches the ghost

Almost exactly a year ago, the editor of Ohio's COLUMBUS DISPATCH published an "Inside Story" column that was every OpEd writer's nightmare. Here's how it started, "For the second time in a month, we have discovered that a guest writer plagiarized part of an opinion piece published in The Dispatch." The editor learned that two commentaries supposedly written by academics had, in fact, been written by PR firms. The editor went on to denounce everyone involved, and banish the "authors" from his editorial page.

The most obvious way to prevent this from happening is to stay away from "canned" OpEds, and write a custom one for each paper. If that's impossible, give your author a template and have him or her customize it as much as possible. When the author submits the OpEd, offer some suggestions on how to respond to a question from a skeptical editor. "I had some editorial help...I had some help getting it into an OpEd format."

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### 2. Press Releases: One mistake and you're out

The horror! The horror! You've spent hours crafting a press release to impress reporters with your client's skills, expertise, and -yes- gravitas. You send the release out, only to later discover a mistake (a typo, factual error, wrong name, etc) in the first or second paragraph. Credibility gone. Client fuming.

Since we're all human there is no iron-clad guarantee against mistakes. But there are approaches that can help. Start by hiring a good copyeditor, of course. Try out several to find out each one's strengths and weaknesses.

Then, work with the copyeditor to do several rounds of copyediting, each one focused on a different facet of the piece. Round one might be spelling and grammar (got to have those right.) Round two is checking that all the proper

names and titles are right. Round three is searching for words that are spelled "right" but don't belong ("care" instead of "scare," "far" instead of "for," etc.)

Offbeat tip: read the release backwards. You'll be surprised how well you pick out the typos when you read the words out of order.

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### 3. Speeches: Staying out of the Dead Zone

Speaking of nightmares. Your client starts to deliver the speech you've written, but within the first two minutes has lost the audience. Since it is so hard to recover from a bad beginning, how do you avoid a poor start? Andrew Gilman, president of CommCore Consulting Group ([www.commcoreconsulting.com](http://www.commcoreconsulting.com)), who has spent years coaching corporate CEOs, says "Stay away from jokes."

"Telling a joke can be like throwing a football pass," Gilman says. "Three things can happen and two aren't good. You can complete it, they laugh. It can be incomplete, they don't laugh and it throws you off your game. Or, it's intercepted. It offends someone, and you've lost the ball or connection to that member of the audience." Even jokes that seem harmless to your ear, may strike some bad chord with listeners, especially in an audience that doesn't know the speaker well.

Look for a safer way to engage the audience, Gilman advises - a personal anecdote, a reference to that day's headlines, or a surprising quote. (You can reach Andy at [agilman@commcoreconsulting.com](mailto:agilman@commcoreconsulting.com))