

Some Thoughts on the Source-Review Process

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This was a note I posted to the CUE listserv in January 2007 in response to an editor who had asked: "How do you all handle approvals of profiles ... in particular, donor profiles? Do you let them make whatever changes they want? Do you hold firm? Do you hold firm even if they call the president and complain?"

I'm sure you'll get all kinds of answers on this. Some alumni magazine folks refuse to share copy with sources in advance of publication, while at the other end of the continuum there are those who not only share the copy but make every single change the source requests, even if it makes the story cumbersome and less readable.

At The Penn Stater, we're kind of in the middle. We share copy with our sources—the person being profiled, the people we quote, etc.—but we tell them that we're inviting "corrections and suggestions." What that means, although we don't say it explicitly, is that (1) we absolutely want to know about, and fix, anything that's factually incorrect, and (2) everything else is a suggestion and will be treated as such.

On the subject of factual corrections: Often we would never have known we had errors if we hadn't sent a draft to the sources. So I don't mind sending the story off for their input, for that reason. As for "suggestions": We look at each change the person wants to make that's not a factual correction, and we decide whether we want to incorporate that change, incorporate a modified version of that change, or just ignore the suggestion altogether. We decide based on what it would do to the length of the story, the readability, etc.

Sometimes we'll get a story back from someone with dozens and dozens of changes on it, and we have to remember to take a deep breath, remind ourselves that we're in the driver's seat (after all, the version that will eventually go to the printer will come from our hard drive, not theirs), and calmly assess each of the changes they want, one by one. Meanwhile we might write back to them to say something pleasant, like, "Thanks for the input. This is really helpful." In extreme cases we might wait until the story is safely at the printer and say something like, "Thanks for all your input. It was very helpful. In a few cases, the changes you

wanted would have conflicted with our style, but I think we ended up incorporating most of your suggestions.” Or, if they wanted to change a quote from what they had said in the interview, we might say, “We talked about it and decided that we liked the way you said it the first time.” :-) That’s one of my favorite lines!

Occasionally if we know we have a politically sensitive story, I’ll show it to my boss first, to sort of inoculate him. I’ll even tell him what I’m worried about—“I think VP so-and-so isn’t going to like the fact that we said X or Y, but we think it’s important because of blah blah blah.” Nine times out of 10 he agrees with me and says, “This is a great story. Let me know what you need me to do.” Then, if someone fusses, I already have the boss in my corner. He’s great that way.

But there still is the occasional instance where someone goes ballistic and goes over not only *my* head, but the boss’s head as well. That’s when things get nerve-racking. In such instances we would make our case to the higher-ups and hope that they back us. And usually they do. But if, after hearing our side of things, the president still ordered us to accommodate the person who’s unhappy, we would have a hard time holding firm—since, after all, I do like being employed.