



Focus on Boughton's Coffee House with editor Ian Boughton

* **Date:** 24/07/2007

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This weeks Focus looks at Boughton's Coffee House with editor Ian Boughton.

About the publication:

Who reads it and how many of them are there?

People who run independent coffee houses, tea-rooms, and cafes. Generally, these people who are realising their dream - they are heroes, and they deserve a lot of respect, because it isn't as easy a job as it seems. There's a vast number of cafes in the country, but we go to 3,000. This is what the trade thinks of as a realistic number of 'serious' independent operators, with decision-making and purchasing power. It would be easy to bolster up a circulation figure with a thousand branches of Starbucks, Caffe Nero, Costa Coffee and the rest, but that would be no use to the advertisers and to trade suppliers.

What subjects do you cover?

It is generally accepted that a 'coffee house' means the owner and staff are 'baristas', which means they are trained in the skill of making espresso-based drinks. This is a serious thing - there's actually a World Championship for espresso-making. So we have to satisfy these experts by writing about coffee at their level, and yet we also have to cover all aspects of keeping a commercial café going, from the choices and presentation of tea and coffee drinks to the marketing of ancillary stock (from snacks to domestic espresso machines) and the various considerations of store design, marketing, and so on. We'll cover anything which will make a café owner think - 'hey, that's a good idea, that'll help my business'.

What makes you different from the other publications in your sector?

Speed, understanding and enthusiasm.

- We are almost certainly the fastest information source in the café sector. Our email news alerts are constantly remarked upon by the trade, and rather delightfully, a couple of companies have chosen to launch news through these alerts.
- We have a certain understanding of what we're talking about. We can actually use an espresso machine and make a cappuccino, and we have actually been behind a counter and we know what it's like. The trade says that we ask questions which are deeper than other magazines because we have some kind of clue about what's going on!
- We actually care about our industry and about playing a positive and helpful part in it. We despise trade papers which are just a leech on their industries - we are contributing something to the coffee trade, and the trade is good enough to recognise it.

I think having a 'mission statement' always sounds posey, but nevertheless, we've got one. It has a couple of words you don't usually hear from the trade press - it is 'to inform, enthuse and encourage the retail beverage trade'.



Ian Boughton

Do you produce a features list? Why? Why not?

Apart from the major exhibitions (Caffe Culture in May, and a Beverage Service Association event in autumn, then Hospitality/Hotelympia/Restaurant Show as applicable) we prefer not to. I'd far rather react quickly to something that crops up, when it's timely, than say : 'oh, we're not looking at that subject for another two months...' So, if you've got something interesting, we'll always be interested... right now.

About PRs:**Do you work closely with PRs (e.g. for supplements, round tables, events) or do you keep them at arm's length?**

I've been in the trade press for a whole variety of sectors from commercial office equipment to cranes (the lifting things, not the birds) so I've come across hundreds of PR companies. It's always fun when the PR and the editor recognise each other from a previous life! We take the view that a good PR, who understands their role, is a pearl beyond price, and they are a joy to work with. You don't need me to describe the other kind.

Creative, constructive, helpful, friendly, imaginative PRs are very welcome. Call us up at Coffee House, any time. Officious little account-junior madams who think their role in the 'meeja' allows them to treat the trade press like **** can go off to their wine bars - their presence is not required here.

Do you have any advice for PRs?

Is it possible, I wonder, to give a list of things without sounding like a grumpy old editor?

a) Please remember who knows best.

All trade editors should have a sign up above their desks saying 'the readers know this subject better than I do', and it is a very good thing for the PR to stop and think about that before sitting down to write a press release.

A trade or industry is a closed community. The Coffee House target market has tens of thousands of people working in it, but it's still a closed community, and it's a community of experienced people who may have lived all their lives with the subject. They know that subject far better than you do, and to be honest, far better than I do. Every trade also has a series of grapevines which are closed to many trade editors... and most certainly the PR community doesn't get into them.

So, you and I have the very difficult job of finding something to tell these experts that they don't already know.

Let's say we're talking about a product - any product. In a retail/trade situation, the person who knows the product best is probably the retailer, the guy facing the customer. He knows best because he will have experience of selling, or trying to sell, many different types of it. He will have had contact with a lot of different manufacturers who want him to stock their brand. He will have heard the approval and moans of customers about each brand. This guy is the expert ... and he is my reader.

Your client is probably the manufacturer/supplier, and of course it is your job to promote the idea that he is the absolute expert on the subject - but he may not be, because manufacturers suffer widely from tunnel vision, and many marketing managers really don't understand the world beyond their own product.

The trade editor may not know the individual product as well as the manufacturer, but may have a wider overall experience of the product sector, because like the retailer, he too has had contact with a vast number of suppliers telling him about similar products.

At the wrong end of the hierarchy of information is the PR agent. I'm sorry about this, but you, the PR, may be the least informed of all. This is not intended as a criticism or an insult,

but it really is extremely unlikely that you have an intimate knowledge of the trade which you are writing for, certainly not to the degree of those who work in the sector every day, and who are going to be reading the result.

So please... just stop and think before you start writing that release. It may be going to people who know better than you do.

b) Please remember that when in contact with the trade press, you're not communicating with people who might want to buy the product. You're trying to interest people in selling it.

I'm always surprised that principals of PR agencies don't teach their staff the difference between trade and consumer work... I'd love to know whether it crops up in any college courses on the subject.

The problem is that the trade editor receives a pile of releases and notices, all of which gush about the product. Take the case of a drinking chocolate product – we'll get a release saying: "... so put your feet up, get your favourite mug (cliché!) and enjoy an luxurious (cliché) indulgent (cliché) chocolate drink from Bloggo and Company."

But we're writing for a trade readership. They aren't the ones putting their feet up. What they want to know is – why should I stock Bloggo? Why should I offer it to my customers? What are the properties of this drinking chocolate which are going to make customers enjoy it? Is it an easy chocolate to work with? (the making of hot chocolate is actually quite difficult – it's a skill to do it well). And – what's my margin going to be?

Very few PRs understand the needs and interests of a trade readership. If you take time to do so, your clients will be extremely happy with you, and on a pitch, you'll show yourself to be a step ahead of rival agencies.

c) Please try to understand the product. There's an old rule which says 'if you don't understand it, don't write it'. OK, we all break that occasionally, but it's still a good principle.

I used to know a guy whose company made a famous brand of security envelopes. When a new member of staff arrived, however senior his position, he was told to wear jeans for the first week, as he would be on the factory floor making the things. This was to instil a respect for, and understanding of, the product. Confucius would have approved, because he is reported to have said: 'I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember - but I do, and I understand'.

Clients really should demand that account execs go on a product-training course, but they never think of it. It would be a stroke of genius for account managers to demand something similar from the clients – for a Coffee House magazine example, if your client is a coffee-roaster, ask for samples of all their blends to taste and talk about in your office. And then go and buy the competitor product and taste that, as well, so you know the difference. If the client makes espresso machines, ask him to put you on a barista course, and ask for a machine to put in your office – and use it. You will actually enjoy the skill of knowing how to make a cappuccino, and you'll promote it better as a result.

If your client makes muffins, demand a box - and then go and buy the competing brand, and taste-test that. If your client is a chain of coffee-houses, send your account team out to taste all the products and services on offer... then go and do the same in the competitor coffee-shops down the road. (You'll not be alone in this – I can tell you, the managers of the tea lounges in the Park Lane hotels are constantly sending staff out as spies to take afternoon tea in the rival hotels, and report back!)

If you do this, you'll impress the trade editor as someone who has really understood the product, not just some copy-typist junior banging out a production-line press release. And when you go to pitch for another client in a similar sector, you'll knock his socks off with your practical understanding.

On the other hand, if you don't try to understand the product and the issues, you can really embarrass your client. We have recently had an item in which the agency had their client saying how exciting it is that 'all their coffee is grown in exotic tropical locations'. Where else, please? Coffee only grows in the tropics, so they made their client look stupid. We have the same problem with PRs promoting Fairtrade products – if you take the time to listen about the issues, you'll understand why so many suppliers are anti-Fairtrade, for very good and extremely ethical reasons. Understand that, and you can do a better job of putting your client's argument forward.

d) Make yourself indispensable.

The PR job is not just about taking a brief from a client and adding a couple of adjectives to every sentence. Any office junior can do that cheaper than you! The PR who creates for themselves a role as an extension of the client's marketing department, and works with initiative rather than reactively, can achieve great things for all of us.

I know several PRs who have created for themselves niches which cannot easily be replicated or replaced... as an old editor once said to me, 'make yourself indispensable'. No names, but I know one PR agency in Pewsey, Wiltshire, whose skill at compiling data for trade exhibitions is absolutely superb, an object lesson in imagination and helpfulness, and I would be astonished if they lost any of those show contracts – because nobody else doing show PR comes anywhere near them. There's a PR guy in Kingswood, Surrey, who has actually just written a guide for clients on how to manage their corporate PR (it's about £25, I think) – many agencies wouldn't have the nerve to give clients clues on how to do their job, but he can do so, because he is confident enough of his value to the client.

Both of these agencies have managed to set themselves aside from the general mass, and have shown creativity which gets them recognised as agencies of value. When they get in touch, editors tend to take rather more notice.

What's the best starting point for a PR who wants to tell you about their client?

First, appreciate that the trade editor may already know the client better than you do. You see the client at briefing meetings, but we may know his wife and kids. Only last week, we had, yet again, a new PR come on and say 'I'd like to introduce you to...' and it just hadn't occurred to them that we had been writing about him for years.

Instead, the very best starting point is to ring and say, quite frankly, that you want to get coverage for client X, and can we spare a few minutes to chat about what might be possible. No editor in their right mind would say 'no' to learning about a possible story. But please don't try and sell it to me. Please don't try to be clever. You're not a salesman, I'm not a target. We're both working to put information out, so let's have a friendly informal discussion. And I can tell you – the result is always an idea.

Here's a good starting point – read our rather opinionated reader survey, at <http://www.coffee-house.org.uk/Readersurvey%202007.pdf>. Once you've got past the 'we're the best' figures, there are a lot of observations in there which you might find helpful.

What information/input from PRs is most useful to you?

That brief introductory call. This can avoid a lot of unnecessary work – for example, I happen to dislike 'application stories' or 'case studies', because the vast majority of them are full of made-up quotes from the customer saying how wonderful the product is. Only yesterday a PR said they would be preparing a case study, and I offered them some pointers on the kind of detail that would be useful to me. Between the two of us, we might get a result.

Advance information is always wonderful. If something is happening in three months' time, tell us about it in confidence. You would be staggered how many PRs wait until the thing has happened, and then send a 'release' (I dislike that word!) which is inadequate. By the time we've got the kind of information we need, the news value has gone cold.

So... talk to us constantly about your client !

Do you have a PR pet hate?

Oh dear, please don't take this as being grumpy again...

a) PRs who manufacture quotes. I will tell you that the average trade reader is a practical businessman who can spot a made-up quote from a mile off in thick fog. By contrast, real words in real language from a client who is enthusiastic about his product will always ring true. (That's why Coffee House magazine always carries a great many real quotes in everyday language).

b) This is even worse than 'polished' quotes. There actually are PRs who give me a list of statements and say 'any of these may be attributed to my client...' If the client did not actually say them, that is dishonest. You may think that's how the game is played, but I say it's unethical.

d) PRs who call looking for trade information, and refuse to say why, or claim that 'they can't disclose the client's identity'. They're preparing a pitch, of course. If you're trying to win an account, be honest and say so, and we'll try to help. Try and pull the wool over our eyes in your search for information, and even if you win that client, you'll have lost a press contact – you'll not get any help from us again.

e) PRs who say imperiously 'I will be your contact with Bloggo from now on'. If I've known the MD of Bloggo for five years, you've just sidelined yourself. Never try to get in the way of press/client relationships.

When is the best time for PRs to contact you & what is your deadline for contributions?

To hell with the deadline. If it's happening, please call me... if necessary, we'll shift deadlines to get a big story out the fastest way.

As for contributions, we don't take them – every word in Coffee House is written by us. It follows that to call us in advance about the story and discuss how we'll handle it is far better than spending time writing the thing and getting it approved before you send it to us.

About you:**What interests you most about your job?**

Oh, this is going to sound so twee... I get enthused and excited about passing on information to an audience willing to receive it. I get a great kick from finding a story and putting it on my page, or on an email newsflash, and I get an equally great kick from hearing people say they appreciate what we do. I believe that every trade has its fascinations and its characters, and that all readers are open to being fascinated... and we prove that, time after time.

Some people reckon the trade press is boring? Well, *****s to that. I actually saw in a very recent 'how to be a journalist' book the old idea that the trade press the first step on the path to a career in the dailies. The truth is that the dailies are where you go if you're not good enough to handle the demands of the specialist press. But that's another lecture...

Here's a good clue for both PRs and writers – always be willing to be excited. If you're excited by some information, you'll do a better job of exciting your readers.

What led to you becoming editor for Boughton's Coffee House?

The classic reason for anyone starting their own business is that they have been working in the sector already, and are certain that they can do a better job by themselves. In my case, I was invited to edit a magazine which brought me into contact with the café trade, and became fascinated by it. I realised that a sparky trade needs a sparky paper, and that the only way to achieve that was to go out and do it myself. Trade response proved us right.

The use of my own name in the title was not ego. I was outvoted (Trudi has an equal vote, which somehow always wins) and I am still slightly embarrassed about having a tour jacket with my name on the back... but I have to concede that it did help us establish an identity.

Describe a typical day.

The great thing about working from home is that time doesn't matter. If I don't get back from walking the dog on the moors until 11am, who cares? I'll be carrying on until 9pm anyway - and if I don't get that job finished by 5pm on Friday, I have the freedom to work Saturday and Sunday.

I will readily confess that I am a disorganised worker. Yes, I have my 'must-do' lists, but I'm writing this at almost 10pm, and I see that only one of my 'got to do' items has been ticked off. On the other hand, when press day comes, I may work from mid-morning one day until mid-afternoon the next day without a break... 30 hours at a stretch. I've done that twice in the last few months, and it's a killer.

You see, we produce the coffee trade's leading news magazine with only two people, me and Trudi. We are writer, sub, photographer, layout man, page designer, advertising designer when required, and advertising salespeople. Oh, and we're accountants and admin as well. And we freelance for many other papers, covering subjects from beverages to facilities-management.

I do confess to getting very narked with those editors (and PRs) who work five-day weeks, and get things like salaries and holidays and expenses. We don't. But we do have a very exciting life, and we are enthusiasts. And we recognise and respect enthusiasm in those who come to us with stories.

A typical day ends with me being ordered to shut down the computer at about 9pm... with me convinced it's still only mid-day.

What was your first job?

I quit school, to my father's disgust, and at 15 became a copy-boy on the old Daily Mail when it was a broadsheet. I learned that a real hack stirs his tea with the business end of a ballpoint, and I heard hardbitten reporters complain that 'murders always happen in foul weather'. To this day I can hear the rattle of the hot-metal machines, and I can still see pages being made up by those men who could read type backwards. And both the writers and the production men were really proud of what they did... do PRs recognize real pride in the editors they work with, I wonder?

In a dream world, if you could do any job, what would it be?

Exactly the same, but with the resources of a big company behind me, to allow time off to work more for the charity we support, Health Help International. It pays for healthcare for destitute and disabled people in Zambia and India, and we write books and record CDs to sell as fund-raisers.

If you were stranded on a desert island, what one thing would you hope to have with you?

A double bass. As an ex-hippie, I've been playing electric bass in rock bands for thirty years, and two months ago my other half, Trudi, bought me a double-bass so I could get into some jazz. But we've been so busy, I've hardly had time to take the thing out of its case ... roll on the shipwreck!

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