

TV's Huckman turns tables, tries PR

Mike Huckman spent 27 years in television – the last eight of them covering the pharma beat for CNBC – before joining healthcare PR powerhouse MS&L as SVP, director of media strategy last month. So what's it like “on the dark side?”

Reporters like to joke that colleagues leaving the newsroom for a gig in corporate communications or at a PR agency are “going over to The Dark Side,” as though another journalistic Jedi has been corrupted by the Sith Lords of spin. So how is life over there, Darth Huckman?

“There's no question my stress level has plummeted,” he says. “Television is such a unique beast. It has to be fed many times a day and it has a large appetite, and in today's media environment, so much multitasking and multi-platforming is required, so I'm finding that on this side I move very quickly.”

Today's TV reporter must also keep a Twitter feed and a blog thrumming along, and it looks like tomorrow's will be shooting and editing much of their own video, too, as ABC News recently mandated amid a severe newsroom downsizing. That was part of the impetus for Huckman's move.

“I thought to myself, ‘The writing's on the wall,’” says Huckman, who's nonetheless sanguine on the future of pharma reporting.

“The old setup of pharma journalists is gone or going away, but the coverage of the space is not diminishing overall; in fact, it's going to get noisier.”

What is changing is the news media ecosystem? “I think the whole old way of thinking and pitching to ‘top-tier reporters’ needs to be blown up,” says Huckman. “You need to start putting everybody on a level playing field because of the multimedia

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Mike Huckman

*SVP, media strategy,
MS&L healthcare practice*

2000–2010

Pharmaceuticals reporter, CNBC

1991–2000

General assignment reporter,
WXYZ-TV (ABC) Detroit

1987–1991

General assignment reporter,
KGUN-TV (ABC) Tucson

and social media environment we're finding ourselves in. Does that mean you elevate all bloggers to top-tier? No, you evaluate them on a blogger-by-blogger basis, just as you would reporters. But you do need to keep an eye on what's out there, what's being said, who's driving the conversation.”

Huckman started out in local television, working as a general assignment reporter for stations in Billings, MO, Boise, ID, Tucson, AZ and Detroit, MI. In 2000, he joined CNBC, where he started out as a business reporter before taking on the pharma beat. It was a tough nut to crack at first, “especially coming from the TV side,” he says.

“This was an industry that was so used to dealing with the top tiers of the *Journal* and the *Times* and the wires. They didn't know what to make of me. And it was great because I was able to have a monopoly, but it took a lot of time to carve out that niche and earn people's respect.”

He loved the scientific side of the business. “It's pretty easy for me as a guy who came out of local TV news to understand that here's an industry that develops products, gets them approved and sells them,” says Huckman. “But the science—that's the part I loved so much, because after so many years of reporting it stimulated my brain. I felt like I'd gone back to school for an MBA and an MD.”

Getting used to keeping track of billable hours and learning the etiquette of agency/corporate email culture have proven challenging for an ex-reporter.

“I'm a newsroom guy,” he says. “We yell across the office and we're constantly communicating via IM missives, and that just doesn't happen on this side.”

Huckman says the industry needs to can the PR spam—untargeted mass email blasts. One of his hats at MS&L is that of mentor, and in that guise, he's putting on a brownbag lunch for younger MS&L staff dubbed “How to Avoid the PR Fail” (or, in Twitterese, #howtoavoidthepfail).

More generally, the drug industry needs to be less reactive and more proactive in its messaging, particularly around drug safety and the balance of risks and benefits, says Huckman. And it needs to be more timely.

“The deadline isn't midnight tonight for the print edition of tomorrow's *New York Times*,” he says. “It's right now. I need to Tweet this before someone else does.”

—Matthew Arnold

