

Don't get distracted by these cuties

By Matt Baron

Do you smoke marijuana?

That's the question I asked Peter Lewis in October 2002 as part of Time magazine's coverage of the pro-pot movement. Along with George Soros and John Sperling, Lewis has contributed millions of dollars to various marijuana legalization efforts across the country.

A billionaire insurance mogul, Lewis has been described with more than a few adjectives over the years. But one recurring trait has been "candid," so his reply came as no surprise: Unruffled and seeming to have anticipated the query, Lewis said he smokes pot "regularly".

I pressed him for more specifics. "Does that mean daily?" I asked.

Though he responded at length to other questions, he politely declined to elaborate on just what "regularly" meant. Sometimes, when you're in the reporter's primal hunting-and-gathering mode, all you can do is try.

More than once, however, I have failed to meet even that modest standard. It's not a fun feeling when you hunker down to write a story, only to see a dead-end in your questioning where you should have a new avenue.

And you can't chalk it off to laziness, either, though none of us is immune to that tendency. Rather, letting a trail of questioning go cold often occurs when we don't even realize we're on the trail in the first place.

Here is why: Folks have the darnedest habit of using quantitative terms that are disguised as humdrum everyday words. I call these near-numerical buggers "cuties," in recognition of the QT abbreviation of "quantitative terms."

Occasionally, people actively seek out the cutie costume. Usually, though, it's simply a matter of the way we normally communicate. All right, I'm

being mathematically mischievous—go back and catch the three cuties in the last two sentences.

Find them? If not, you will see them again in this partial listing of cuties compiled now to help you spot the garments they wear:

Consistently, constantly, conventionally, customarily, frequently, habitually, incessantly, increasingly, infrequently, intermittently, mostly, normally, occasionally, oftentimes, periodically, regularly, religiously, repeatedly, routinely, seasonally, sporadically, traditionally, typically, usually.

OK, two dozen cuties ought to be enough to convey the point.

When you are in the semantic/numeric trenches and encounter these or similar cuties, you have three choices:

1. Make a mental or written note of the cutie, and be sure to get back to it.

Don't feel like you have to confront the person immediately. In many cases, capturing the detail simply is not important enough to warrant breaking up the momentum of your interview. Let it wait. Besides, you may get the specifics you seek if you simply allow the conversation to flow a bit longer.

Other times, you may need to pose your question like Columbo, the 1970s TV detective played by Peter Falk. As he was walking away from questioning a suspect, the rumpled investigator would stop and announce, "Just one more thing..." Then, with the suspect's guard down, Columbo would pose the critical query that helped crack the case.

Interviewing isn't always this cat-and-mouse, but there may be occasions where you don't want to tip off your source just how much you want to gather certain details.

2. Get a clarification right away.

Because your source may only have a few more seconds to speak, or it appears that other tangents will take over, there will be times when you want to zero in on the cutie and draw out your source.

Prompt them with some quantitative parameters. If they say something occurs “frequently” or “occasionally,” then offer a range of numbers per day, week, month, year or whatever is appropriate.

If they say “a couple” or “a few” or “several,” try to steer it toward a specific number or range of numbers. And if your efforts irk them, let them know without those specifics, there may not be a story here at all. Of course, you’ll often need to seek out others to verify or refute the information.

3. Don’t sweat it.

Simply jot down the word that is offered and move on. Sometimes, it’s just not that vital a point. The key is to exercise this option with confidence. And in order to gain that level of assurance, you will want to hone your judgment in knowing when to pursue either of the other two options.

And just one more thing: develop your techniques regularly.

BARON BIT: Turn this game around. Next time someone asks you a question that cries out for a specific number, respond with a cutie instead. See how they react, and how far you can get without providing the specifics.

Grappling with a numbers-related issue? Want to suggest a future “Go Figure” topic? E-mail Matt at Matt@InsideEdgePR.com or call him at 708.860.1380. A longtime journalist-turned-publicist, Matt delivers “Go Figure” seminars throughout the country for corporations and associations.