Sample Query That Sold: Health Magazine

The Query: By Alicia Potter

You’re in the middle of a do-or-die presentation and your throat gurgles. Loudly. Or maybe you’re leaning in for a romantic moment and your stomach growls (and growls …). Likewise, shoulder, knee, and hip joints crack and pop throughout the day. And nose whistles? The worst.

What’s up with the symphony of sounds that your body makes? Are they simply harmless embarrassments or something to worry about? I’d like to propose a “Healthy Body” article titled “Snap, Gurgle, Pop!”: What Your Body Is Telling You â€” And When You Should Listen.” With experts’ help, the piece will explain the source of the noises, which are harmless, the reasons others might require a doctor’s attention, and tips on how to shush them. The tone will be informative, thorough, and, where appropriate, funny.

Among the bodily sounds featured will be:

1. Gurgling — Sounds in the throat may be a sign of GERD or other GI problems; in some cases, they can even accompany anxiety. Robert Maisel, MD, of the University of Minnesota Medical School and member of the American Academy of Otolaryngology, will comment.

2. Popping/cracking: Called “crepitus,” persistent popping and cracking near the joints can be a sign of normal cartilage wear and tear but also the onset of rheumatoid or osteoarthritis. Shawn Bonsell, MD, an arthroscopy and sports medicine fellow at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas, explains at what point this sometimes daily source of discomfort merits medical attention. Takeaway: exercise regimes that help.

3. Whistling: Serious sinus problem or just a sign you need a Kleenex? Melissa A. Pyonnen, MD, of the Michigan Sinus Center, comments on our odd nasal noises and if they’re ever cause for concern.

4. Tooting: Yes, we all laugh about flatulence, but, in some cases, it’s no laughing matter. Experts share tips on how to deal with this mortifying problem, which unfortunately becomes more common with age, during PMS and pregnancy, and as a side effect of many prescription drugs. Cynthia Yoshida, MD, author of NO MORE DIGESTIVE PROBLEMS and a gastroenterologist specializing in women’s health at the University of Virginia Health System, and Michael D. Levitt, MD, a gastroenterologist at the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center and the world’s leading authority on gas (he’s published 275 journal articles on the topic) will be interviewed.

5. Growling: Usually, stomach rumblings (called, technically, “borborygmi”) are a sign that your digestive system is hard at work. However, a chronically and unusually loud belly can indicate an underlying condition such as irritable bowel syndrome, infection, intestinal blockage, or a food allergy. It can even affect sleep. What’s more, according to Robert Shmerling, MD, of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and Harvard Medical
School in Boston, stomach growling, in the absence of hunger, doesn’t mean that we should grab a snack — an interesting point for those watching their weight.

Let me know if this of interest to you. I am happy to answer any questions or tweak the angle.

Thanks so much!

Best,

Alicia

The Editor: Adam Martin is a Senior Editor at Health magazine.

RW: What’s the first thing that grabbed you about this query?

AM: The writer tried to craft the query in a way that would be appealing — and by ‘‘craft,’’ I mean she threw in a few turns of phrase and talked about the subject in a conversational way that would appeal to our readers. It wasn’t wonky, and it was a little funny. When I see that kind of stuff, it tells me the writer understands the readers and understands what I’m looking for.

The writer mentioned that she would try to be thorough and also funny. That’s helpful, because it tells me that she understands what our mission is. I like to work with all types of writers, but I want them to know what we’re trying to do. Rather than the writer trying to steer Health in the direction the writer wants to go, I want the writer to go in our direction. There’s a formula to what we do in many stories; though each story is different and creative approaches are fine, it’s a retail magazine, and it’s a women’s magazine, so it needs to be servicey and punchy and have multiple points of entry. When a writer shows that she understands that, it’s a draw.

RW: What did you think of the length of the query?

AM: Alicia laid out a lot of what the story would do. I don’t want to read a four-page query, but I also don’t want queries that are three sentences. That’s just too short, and I can’t figure out what will happen with the idea. I’m not sure where the writer is going, and I don’t think what the writer has done enough legwork to sell the story. I’d rather see a query that’s a little longer that has more details that give me an understanding of what the structure might be and what the article might say. Tell me where is the news — why should that idea go in Health right now?

We editors know freelancing can be a challenge and that you can put in lots of work and feel like you’re underpaid, and that you want to limit the initial work that you might not be paid for. I understand that, but the truth is, it’s not my responsibility to find ways to make it economically feasible for you to work. It’s my job to get good stories and make
sure the people pitching me know what they’re talking about, do enough legwork to sell the piece, and are willing to go the extra mile instead of constantly nickel-and-diming.

We have a relatively new policy in which we ask for a detailed outline of the story before the manuscript is submitted; it’s called a “breakout.” We ask for a solid lede, a list of sources, and a lot of information on what the story will say, though a few TKs are no problem. We can do a lot with this: We can get a clear indication of whether the writer is on the right track and steer her in the right direction so there aren’t any surprises. We can also get into the process of producing the story much sooner in terms of art and layout. We’re a magazine, after all…the writer needs to understand that we have a lot to do with the story when we assign and produce it besides editing it.

I get tons of queries — probably three to five per day. That’s a lot of queries, and most of them I’m saying “no” to. One reason might be I don’t feel the writer is right for us. Another might be that the query stinks. Another reason might be that the writer hasn’t put in any effort. I don’t want a writer yanking my chain.

If you do a detailed query and it gets rejected by me, you can try somewhere else with that query. There are a lot of these magazines and they’re all competing and each editor has a different agenda. If an editor rejects a query and is able to tell you in some way what’s wrong, you can try to sell it somewhere else with the benefit of that additional information.

**RW:** You mentioned that you want to know in the query why the idea is right for Health right now. What if you have a great idea, but it has no news hook?

**AM:** It’s not always necessary, but it’s helpful. If the story has some sort of hook, that can grab an editor. If you’re constantly pitching evergreen stuff, you’re less likely to attract me because it’s a health magazine — we do a lot of news.

The hook can be seasonal. With your story [Linda wrote the story on "Summer Bummers" in a recent issue], it had the hook that we’re looking ahead to your summer months. If you don’t have an obvious answer to the “why now” question, do a little digging and look for one. If the editor has the executive editor breathing down his neck and saying, “You have too much evergreen,” the editor will push the freelancer to get more news. If you can do this, it’s a card you’re holding to help your pitch get through.

**RW:** I notice that Alicia consulted experts for the query. Do you think it’s necessary to interview experts for a pitch?

**AM:** I like to see it. It tells me the writer knows who to go to, and that the writer has been able to vet her idea through experts to verify the validity of it. If you say, “I want to do this great idea on body noises and I’ll go to experts at Stanford and Yale,” well, what do those experts at Stanford and Yale say? Maybe they’ll say, “There’s nothing we can do about body noises.” I need to have full confidence that the idea will pan out; if I don’t, I’m risking my career on it.
We want to believe in these stories we’re assigning, and the way to do that is to know that the writer knows what she’s talking about, is comfortable talking to experts, and knows which experts to go to. I even like seeing some information on the credibility of the source; for example, in the pitch Alicia says Dr. Leavitt has published 275 journal articles on the topic of gas. Certainly she knows who to go to.

Some writers say, “Why should I do a long interview with someone if I won’t get a story out of it?” Well, maybe you do a short initial interview and say you’d like to get back to the source at some point, and you develop a rapport with the source that can pay off down the road. It’s sometimes hard to nail these people down, but you’re a reporter, and you need to be persistent. This is part of your job.

**RW:** Alicia’s idea and execution were both excellent, but what if someone comes to you with a great idea that isn’t executed as well as you’d like? In other words, would you have accepted this idea even if the query weren’t so wonderfully written?

**AM:** All of those things matter, from the execution to the other things we’ve talked about. If something is missing, more likely that not I’ll respond with a tentative positive response asking for additional information. I’ve done that with Alicia’s pitches in the past. She did one query on how if your posture is a little off, it can lead to back pain. The story was ways to improve posture and as a result improve back pain. I went back and said I kind of liked it, but I felt there was nothing new there — no new research or studies. She went back and dug up some more stuff and it ended up working for us.

If a pitch is a little off or the writer is relatively new or the execution isn’t there, it’s okay if the next back-and-forth is positive, like the writer really digs to get answers to my questions. It shows me that she is looking to me as a legitimate editor who wants to know the full story, is willing to talk to her about it, and may even assign the piece to her. It’s okay if it’s not a perfect query, but I think you need to be prepared to improve it if I find a nugget in there I like. If you’re not, then you’re likely not to get a good response from me.

**RW:** What are your thoughts on following up?

**AM:** I’d say it’s okay to follow up once if you don’t hear from me in two to three weeks. It could be because I overlooked the e-mail or it got lost. Any more than that, and it seems kind of pointless. But one follow-up is fine, and I do get them regularly. It also shows me that the writer is interested in pursuing the story and has a strong interest in the magazine, which is good.

**RW:** Do you have any other query advice for writers?

**AW:** I don’t have a problem with follow-ups, but I do have a problem when a writer says in the query, “This is a non-exclusive query.” What could be more insulting than that? The writer doesn’t have the honesty and respect to do a pitch especially for you and is just throwing darts against the wall. Economically I can see why writers do this, but if
you’re sending the same query out to other editors, don’t tell me…make it seem like it’s especially for me. If you’re pitching me and Glamour and Self on body noises, quietly change each pitch to talk about why the pitch is right for each magazine.

**The Writer:** Alicia Potter is a Boston-based writer who has been freelancing since 1995. She’s written for *Health, Family Fun, WonderTime, Elle, Self,* and other magazines, and has two children’s books coming out in 2009.

**RW:** How did you come up with this idea?

**AP:** Most of my queries originate with me trying to be aware of things I think and wonder about in my day-to-day life. This started with an idea that ended up not making it in: I’m a hardcore blusher, and I started thinking about ways your body can betray you. I thought it would be interesting to look at other ways people feel betrayed by their bodies. For example, since having children a friend of mine has become very flatulent, and it’s so bad she can’t even go to yoga anymore.

As I looked at different ways your body can embarrass you, more often than not they were noises. So I dropped blushing and focused on the head-to-toe noises your body makes — ones that could be embarrassing and could also point to something else going on.

**RW:** Did the final article turn out like your query?

**AP:** It was contracted at 700 words but became much longer in the writing process because the editors ended up adding a snoring section. Then they wanted to put throat clearing in, but that didn’t end up in there. The length was easily double what they had contracted, and we’re trying to figure out what the final length will be and whether we need to look at renegotiating the contract.

Even the format changed: The noises stayed the same except for the addition of snoring, but each symptom was broken up into two sections: why it happens, and what to do.

This article is more feature-y than other stories in the Healthy Living section, but I think they’re changing some of the format with the new editor, so maybe they were open to changing that section.

**RW:** Did you interview the sources you included?

**AP:** No, but I did Web searches and felt pretty solid that they were among the best people to talk to. I’d interviewed Robert Shmerling before and knew he’d written on this topic himself and could talk about it in a conversational way. As for Levitt, if you were going to talk about flatulence, you have to talk to him. Not all of the sources ended up being in the article…I think two of them didn’t get in.
RW: How did you find your sources, and how did you determine who were the best and more credible sources?

AP: Some of it was just Google, and I often go on Medline and PubMed for research. I also use ScienceDirect.com to read the articles I find on PubMed and Medline; I have access through the Boston Public Library.

RW: How much research did you do on this query?

AP: I can’t remember the number of hours, but it was enough to feel confident that my points would pan out. It wasn’t just one source saying these things… I saw the same information from multiple sources. That way I felt there was enough meat on the story.

RW: The query is funny in just the right places. How did you develop the style?

AP: That’s my natural voice. With Health, there’s often a little humor in the articles. I didn’t have three issues open trying to copy the writing style — it’s a natural fit for me in terms of voice.

RW: You mentioned that you’re happy to tweak the angle. Why?

AP: I do this with all queries. If an editor is interested but they see things slightly differently, I’m always open to that. Maybe they know of some research I haven’t come across. Adam asked for more of a hook in the lede, like a study or something going on in popular culture, so I did some more research.

If I didn’t have that line in my query, he would still have asked for that. I think it shows an openness to working with them. It’s their magazine — they know it better than anyone else. I’m not sure [adding that line] is a make-or-break thing, but it shows you’re open to working with someone. I think often these articles end up being pretty collaborative.

RW: Do you have any query advice for writers?

AP: Know the section of the magazine you see your piece in. Don’t send it in and let them decide if it’s going to be a feature or a Healthy Living piece.

Also, find places where you can write naturally to your voice. After years of trying to change your voice from magazine to magazine, it can get tiring. I would definitely suggest finding where your natural fits are and make those magazines your priority markets.