

Keynotes

Writing press releases

Simon Crompton offers some advice on how to put together a news release which will get you the publicity you want.

You are organising an event, and you are wondering how to get publicity. Your first thought is to write a press release. This is a good idea – but only if you do it well. Writing a bad press release can do you more harm than good. Not only does it get you no publicity, it creates a bad impression which may not help you the next time you want to use the press.

The task deserves some thought. This Keynotes makes some suggestions which may help you put together a professional, effective press release.

WHAT'S A PRESS RELEASE FOR?

A press release is not the be-all and end-all of getting publicity. It should always form part of a campaign. Any campaign, no matter how big or small, will have a clear set of aims, and a clear plan for how it is going to deal with any interest generated.

So before writing your press release, think about what you would like to achieve as an end result and the best way of achieving that. It may be best to make a personal approach to a journalist rather than spreading your news far and wide – for example, if you don't want to be bombarded with phone calls from reporters, or the story requires a journalist with specialist knowledge.

If, however, you decide you want to get as many people as possible interested and want to write a press release, your first task is to imagine yourself as the news editor of your local newspaper.

Every day you have to plough through a large pile of press releases on your desk. You want to clear that pile as quickly as possible, (you probably have an important lunch appointment) and the easiest way to do that is to put as many as possible in your waste paper bin. Each press release gets around five seconds of your attention before being thrown away.

But if a press release keeps your attention for ten seconds, it has passed the first test. It is sufficiently interesting for you to pass it to a reporter. If that reporter dials the contact number on the press release, it has done its job.

The press release is a baited hook. If it seduces a journalist into talking to you, it has worked. But make sure that in trying to attract the journalist, you don't make your press release too bizarre, and you don't exaggerate the facts.

THE GOLDEN RULE

People who tell you to follow a strict set of rules when writing should be treated with some scepticism. Following rules can knock all the life and interest out of what you write.

On the other hand, if you don't bear in mind certain principles when putting together your release, it is unlikely to succeed.

There is one principle which over-rides all others: try and make life easy for the journalist. Like most of us, journalists have too little time and too much to do. If there is the prospect of a good colourful report which isn't going to require too much effort and might look good in their cuttings book, it's likely they'll turn to that instead of following up more obscure leads. Remember you have competition, so helping the journalist will help you.

You can do this by doing the following.

Give them a story

Look at any news report in a good newspaper and you will see that it tells a story. It isn't a "report" as most health professionals think of it.

It would be unusual, for example, to see a newspaper report that started: "The National Physiotherapy Association held its conference in Sometown last week". That would be an announcement. You'd be far more likely to see a news item that began: "Physiotherapists should get a five hundred per cent pay rise, delegates at the National Physiotherapy Association were told last week". That would be a story.

A story deals in specifics, and takes a selective look at one particular event or chain of events. Stories have an "angle". Even if there is lots going on at a conference, it is likely that the individual strands of what is said and done will make the stories, not the whole event.

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The whole event might produce a story, however, if there is an angle: for example, if it were a disaster; if it were the first; if it made massive profits.

Journalists deal in stories because they appeal far more to the human imagination than announcements. So you should try and grab attention with your press release by being selective or giving your information an angle. This might not be the story or angle that the journalist eventually takes, but it could alert him or her to the potential.

Look for human interest angles in what you are trying to publicise. Journalists like words such as first, last, only, unique, unprecedented. Do any of them apply to what you want to publicise? If so, use them: they are a good selling point.

Give them a quote

Most news stories involve a quote. Make life easy for the journalist you are dealing with by providing a well thought-out, ready-made quote in your press release. This should be from someone at the heart of what you are writing about. It often has more force if it comes from a senior manager or the head of the organisation concerned. Quotes should express opinion rather than fact.

Get to the point

Get to your selling point before the press release goes into the news editor's bin. It should be right up there in the first paragraph.

For example: a Physical Therapy Faculty member at your local university has just won substantial extra funding. You think a good selling point for the story could be the fact that this will use to carry out new research on lower back pain, which is the first research of its type in your country.

So don't start your press release with something fuzzy like: "Physical therapy researchers at Camford University have received a generous research grant", and mention the back pain research half-way down the page.

Your first paragraph should be something like: "Physical therapy researchers at Camford University will be the first in the country to carry out ground-breaking research into lower back pain. This is the result of a \$50,000 private donation."

Keep it short and simple

You should keep your language simple and to the point, and not assume any form of specialist knowledge from your readers. Clinical or technical jargon will put off journalists, so don't be afraid of spelling out things in simple terms.

Equally, don't try and pack too much information into your press release. Some people say a press release should take up no more than one side of typed paper. That is not always possible, but bear in mind that you can always attach an additional information sheet. Remember to think of your release as bait. Once you have landed your journalist you can give him or her as much information as you want.

There are, however, some things which every press release must include.

WHAT PRESS RELEASES SHOULD INCLUDE

- The Who, What, Where, When and Why: the bare, essential facts of your story – preferably near the top of your press release.
- A date, and the date the information is being released. If you want the information to be freely available from the moment you send out the press release, you can put "For immediate release" at the top. If you want the journalist to keep it quiet until a certain date, for example 1st May, write "Embargoed until 1st May."
- Contact details. Perhaps most important of all is the name and phone number of someone who can be easily contacted to answer questions and provide more information. Remember that journalists won't necessarily work the same hours as you, so make sure you give them an out-of-hours contact number.

WHAT PRESS RELEASES SHOULD LOOK LIKE

Everyone in the media has their own ideas on how a press release should be laid out. There are no rules, but once again there are principles, which you would do well to follow:

- Make it look professional – type it neatly, and with plenty of white space so that it is easy for the reader to find what they want.
- Make sure it looks like a press release. Using your organisation's headed paper is the least you can do, but it is even better to have special paper in your corporate style clearly headed "Press Release".
- Different countries have different conventions on how press release are laid out. Try and get hold of press releases from major organisations to get an idea of what is "normal". If you follow the norm, you will make it easier for journalists to find what they want.

A PRESS RELEASE IS JUST THE BEGINNING

Press releases are a beginning, not an end. When you've sent them off in the post, your work is just starting. As well as helping out any journalists who respond, you'll need to be politely persuading those who so carelessly threw it in the bin to have another look.

A phone call to the people you sent your press release to a few days after they will have received it – just to see if there is interest in your story, and whether there is anything you can do to help – may give you a second chance. If the journalist says he or she seems to have lost your press release, but would you mind faxing over another copy, you know you are in with a chance. But don't pester journalists too much – they'll just stop taking your calls.

Keynotes paper 5, "Getting publicity and dealing with the press", looks in more detail at the best ways of using press releases in the context of a publicity campaign.

Reading list

Getting Publicity and Dealing with the Press, Keynotes paper 5, Volume 1, 1997
 C. J. ...
Physical Therapy on the Move, Public Relations Kit, American Physical Therapy Association, 1111 North Fairfax Street, Alexandria, VA 22314-1488.
 International Physiotherapy Day Resource Kit, Australian Physiotherapy Association, PO Box 6465, Melbourne, Vic 3004, Level 3, 201 Fitzroy St, St Kilda 3182. Fax: +61 3 9534 9199

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