Press Releases –

How to write them and get them published

Expert knowledge means success

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Introduction

It's the least costly (usually anyway) and simplest form of marketing and business promotion yet issuing press releases often seems to scare most people to death. On top of that, not many people take the time to even think of writing their own press releases.

We hope this publication will help clear up some of the mysteries that surround this simple form of marketing and promotion.

What is a Press Release?

A press release is a prepared statement that can be distributed to various media outlets - such as newspapers, magazines, trade associations etc. Another way of looking at it is to think of a press release as a simplified story about your business, or a particular aspect of it, written from a news point of view. The advantage of press coverage is that it provides a free means of communication with potential customers through a medium that might otherwise have been too expensive.

A press release is a written news release and should contain only information you want to become public and that favourably promotes and enhances the image that others have about your business. It should not contain "puffery" nor should it be an "advert" in another guise.

There are many reasons for sending out press releases. A press release can be issued for any important development or event in your company - any event that is newsworthy and of interest to others, such as:

- New products or product upgrades.
- Participation in charitable events.
- Taking on new managers and other employees.
- The launch of a new product or service, and you want consumers and your trade or professional press to know about it.

- Your business may be changing its image or going through some other major event in its development.
- Your business may have a new innovation, giving it an edge over your competitors.

Try to determine precisely what the press release will be about; this will help you to focus the piece so that it answers the question 'Why will people be interested in this information?' Keeping this point in mind will be vital to the success of any press release; it will not even be printed if the editor cannot see any newsworthy point within it.

All press releases should answer most of the following questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? If you have clear answers to these questions, you will have covered everything. Your press release should have the following characteristics:

- **Strong headline**
  - make the headline concise and creative, one that grabs readers' attention. This type of headline will help editors who receive it to read the whole release and it will influence the decision on whether or not it should be published.

- **Good introduction**
  - remember to include key points in the lead paragraph (no more than 35 words). Make sure that you answer who, what, where, when, why, and if possible, how.

- **Good copy**
  - make sure it is well written. Keep paragraphs short and put the most important information at the top. The less that editors have to work on your copy to make it clear, the more certain it is that they will use your release.

- **Clear target**
  - target your release to editors you think will have an interest in what you are announcing where the publication covers the industry or sector that will be affected by your news.

- **Show pictures**
  - include a black-and-white photo of your product, employees, or the function/special events that is being written about. Photos will enhance the chances of your press release being published. In addition, you make it easier for the editors since they won't have to make the extra effort to phone and ask you for a photo.

Down to basics

The first thing you ought to think about is that a press release is a "news" item. If it isn't, newsworthy or interesting, then it's chances of getting published are fairly remote. Your press release needs to "inform" people - it shouldn't be designed to sell them something (you do that by advertising or other forms of promotion).

After reviewing all of the facts in your release, find out which information is most *important* and which is *supporting* information:

- Write on paper that identifies your business or your product (such as your letterhead) and show that it is a press release by writing clearly "PRESS RELEASE" or "For Immediate Release" (with the date) at the top of the first page.

- A successful press release is one that's newsworthy and should always include "Who", "What", "Where", "When", "Why" and "How".

- Make your press release realistic and ensure that any quotes come from someone who has an involvement in the story.

- The content of the press release should be objective. If you want to use phrases that are by way of an opinion, include them as part of a quotation.

- Always give each release a title (headline) but don't worry if it isn't witty - just ensure that it identifies what's in the story. The headline will often be the determining factor in whether your press release will be published or broadcast; it will have to "hook" the media contact and audience into paying attention to it. Wait until you have finished writing the release, then write out several headlines, until you have the one that best captures the slant and purpose of your press release.

- The "lead" or first paragraph should contain the information that is most important. Most editors won't read beyond the first paragraph, so make sure all the important facts are covered at the front end of your press release.

- Include any relevant information you want to cover about the topic in your release.

- The last paragraph should discuss company information such as your business specialty and experience and provide accurate statistics and facts that set your company's product or service apart from similar companies.

- Conclude with contact information for the reader (contact name, telephone and fax number and e-mail address).

- If your release is more than one page, then type "–MORE–" at the bottom of each continuing page.

- At the end of the press release, type "-END-" or "# # #" which indicates that there is no more text.

- It's not necessary to include a cover letter with your release.

Sending out a Press Release

However, you choose to send your press release, you must know who to send it to. Find out who the editor or reporter is for the section you want your release to appear in and include their name (with the correct spelling) on the press release when possible.

If you're sending a press release mail or by fax:

- It should generally be typewritten and 1½ or double-spaced, with wide margins.

- You can include negatives of your product but black and white photos are preferred.

- Always include a Header and Contact information (preferably on each page).

- Use standard A4 paper typed on one side only - this will not only make the document look more professional, but will make it easier to read and, importantly, leaves room for the editor to make changes if required.

- Never fold your press release like a letter - fold it so that the headline and date will be the first thing the recipient will see when opening the envelope.

A press release sent by email is usually 2-3 short paragraphs. In this electronic day and age, the press often prefers press releases by e-mail but you should check with them first to find out which distribution medium they prefer.

When sending out a press release, remember these points**:**

1. Target your audience. Only contact editors who write about your industry or topic.

2. Find out the best way to contact your audience. Is it by surface mail, e-mail, or fax? Not everyone wants press releases by e-mail.

3. Don't send e-mail releases with attachments. Send the release within the body of the message.

4. Know the editor's deadlines. Don't expect a magazine editor to cover your event scheduled for next week.

5. Update your Website with the "news" at the same time as issuing your press release. If it's a new product, update that section of your site. If it's not important enough to be added to your own site, why should anyone write about it?

6. Don't make a nuisance of yourself by pestering editors with too many follow up calls.

Characteristics of good press releases

A good press release should inform the reader (the prospective customer) exactly how your product or service will benefit them or their business. You can achieve this by:

1. *Making it newsworthy* - are you solving a problem or filling your readers' needs? Identify and focus on what that need or problem is and write the release from that perspective.

2. *Having a headline that gets to the point* - write a headline which conveys immediately why this news is important. Avoid promotional sounding words. What you say here determines whether the reader will read the rest of the release.

3. *Having a strong leading paragraph* - answer who, what, where, when, why, and how. Use this paragraph as an abstract or summary for the release.

4. *Providing a detailed explanation from the reader's perspective* - give details of the news so the editor understands why it's important to his/her readers. Any background information, quotes of note, comparisons to similar products or services, etc., which illustrate the importance of this news should be included here. If you're announcing a new product, mention publication/release date(s), price, and other points of interest.

5. *Giving a short corporate summary* - include any information about products or services that help establish your expertise. Also mention your location, years in business, etc, but keep it short.

6. *Including complete contact information* - remember to provide contact name(s), company name, full address, phone number, e-mail address, and Website URL. The contact name should be someone who's available and capable of answering questions.

7. *Keeping it short* - the maximum length of a press release should be one to two pages and no more than 500 words.

Target Media

In order to make sure that your press release is read by the audience you have in mind, it's important to select media carefully. The following is a guide to which media you may wish to send press releases.

- Local press (Daily & Evenings) – these feature local business stories and often have business sections.

- Regional business publications - usually monthly or quarterly publications.

- Free press - run features on local companies.

- Trade publications - cover a wide range of business types, eg accountancy, computers.

- National press - such as the Times, Telegraph, - often having a specialist business section.

Your local library should be able provide you with a list of addresses and phone numbers. Your point of contact for each publication will usually be the business editor and they should be able to provide advice as to the submission of features.

As well as being clear about what you want to say, the choice of publication you make will determine your audience and this will have a large effect upon the style that you adopt. A trade release may concentrate upon giving information to retailers about why your product will sell, to whom and the marketing strategies that you will adopt. A more informative tone will be used to present this information. On the other hand, a consumer publication on the other hand might adopt a more friendly tone, addressing the customer directly, whilst a local paper will be more interested in the prospects for employment that your new venture brings to the locality rather than the scientific details of the development.

Points on style

The most important paragraph in a press release is the first one, as this is where you either grab the reader's attention or create disinterest. Make the first paragraph as interesting and exciting as possible. Above all make it relevant – to the reader and to the editor.

Other points on style are:

- Through addressing the release to the reader (eg "Do you want the chance to win……") you will create a more

personal relationship. This may increase the reader's interest. However, trade releases should use the passive, or "the user", when talking about the end buyer.

- Write the release on the assumption that the reader knows nothing about the subject. Avoid the use of long words when a short one will do and don't use jargon!

- A press release should not read like an advert, concentrate on the facts of the merits of your news and any explanations that are needed to describe these.

- Pay attention to spelling, punctuation and grammar. Make effective use of full stops, semi-colons and commas to break up long phrases.

- Make the copy consistent with the house style, but generally:
  - don't insert full stops after capital letter abbreviations, eg PYBT, HMRC;
  - write out numbers one to ten using letters, and 11, 12, 13, etc in numbers;
  - do not underline;
  - if you spell a word in an unusual way write the common spelling beside it.

Photographs

Where possible include a photograph with a press release. This will increase its appeal for both the reader and editor, but needs to be thought out carefully in advance:

- Photographs taken by a press photographer are more likely to be used, so invite one along to any newsworthy events.

- Use a photographer with a good reputation. Brief him/her very carefully as to what you want to achieve.

- Most newspapers require black and white glossy prints sized 8" x 6" or 10" x 8". Colour magazines usually require 35mm colour transparencies. Always attach a caption to your photograph. This should be a description of the event, and include a contact name, address and telephone number if these are not featured elsewhere.

Think before you act!

- Don't send out one standard press release to all media outlets. Instead, tailor the press release to each particular outlet.

- Always write in a style that you feel comfortable with. If you have the ability to write creatively do so; if you do not, straightforward presentation is acceptable or even preferable for some publications.

- When writing the release put yourself into the position of the journalist. A main fault of press releases which fail to get published is a lack of news value, but if you try to reread a piece as through the eyes of a journalist, you shouldn't go wrong.

- Read other people's work to find out what gets published, and learn from it. If writing for the press will become a major marketing activity for your firm, the Institute of Public Relations run courses and workshops on this subject.

- Always write your press release so that it will still make sense if the editor deletes paragraphs from the bottom. This may happen if space is short and the piece has to be cut down.

- Always chase up your story to find out if it will be used (but don't make a nuisance of yourself). This can be done by contacting the editor. If your press release isn't published, try to find out why and try to avoid making the same mistakes on another occasion.

- Publications such as "Benn's Media", "BRAD" and "Willings Press Guide" will help you to locate the magazines, newspapers or journals that are most appropriate to your business.

Newspaper style dictates certain things in writing. Most of these rules make sense. One rule is: Use the full proper name of a person, or of anything, only once to avoid clutter in the story. Write, for example: The Mid-Sussex Business Association, then a short form such as "the Association" or "TMSBA"

You shouldn't write, "11 a.m. in the morning." - write "11 o'clock in the morning" or "11 a.m." instead.

Editor's advisories ("Information for Editors") can also be useful at the end of a news release. These are often called "trailers." They should be separated from the main text of the release and clearly labelled. They offer supplementary material, related to the release subject.

20 Top Tips

Susie Willis of Midnight Communications has put together 20 tips to make sure that you succeed with your press releases. Midnight, based in Brighton - the most 'wired city in the UK' - can be contacted via email at enquiries@midnight.co.uk or ring them on +44 (0)1273) 709977.

Some of the following tips may seem blindingly obvious - but as is often the case, simple ideas work best!

1. Remember: if there is no newsworthy angle the press will not be interested.

2. Try to combine several newsworthy angles but don't 'waste' them. Save some for a follow up release or you'll clutter the story.

3. When writing a news release picture an inverted triangle, a release will be cut from the bottom so make sure all the important information is in the first paragraph. Remember the five Ws- Who, When, Why, What, Where.

4. Never use the word 'Revolutionary' - it rarely rings true.

5. Remember to K.I.S.S! (Keep It Short & Simple).

6. Less than one second is spent looking at each release. Keep this in mind when writing yours. Think about how you can improve the style to make it more eye-catching. Use photographs and colour to make it stand out.

7. Use good quality, headed paper to send out releases and case studies.

8. Familiarise yourself with the house style of the publication you're targeting. Write your release with that style in mind. Make it suitable for that publication and don't contact any journalist who works there until you have done so.

9. Timing is crucial. Make sure you know the editorial deadlines of your target publication.

10. Respond to media enquiries immediately. If you keep a journalist waiting they'll go to your competitors.

11. When you get on the phone always ask the journalist if it's a good time to call. Don't waste anyone's time launching into a pitch if they're not free to speak. Remember not to call on press day.

12. Develop your campaign with a SWOT analysis and take an analytical approach. Consider each of the Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities & Threats and be honest about what can be achieved.

13. Get in the habit of using words like: *Strategy*, *Vision*, *Enhance*, *Significantly*, *Expanding*, *Enabling*, *Infrastructure*. These are part of business vocabulary. By using them you will give yourself a professional edge.

14. The more clearly defined a media niche you market and qualify the better success you will have at getting coverage.

15. Aim to develop a media friendly character. This is great for boring or 'techie' products that would otherwise attract little attention. This could be a fictitious character or a real person in the clients' organisation who is charismatic and outgoing.

16. Know your market and the correct audience for the product or service.

17. Competitions and giveaways are a brilliant way of raising your profile and building brand loyalty with customers.

18. Understand the cost of monitoring the news. For your PR effort to be effective you need to be aware of its value. A clippings service is essential - it's how you measure the success of your campaign.

19. It pays to be nice! Get involved with a community project or charity to increase positive coverage.

20. That elusive 'Big Idea' can often come from brainstorming sessions: Invite participants who can bring a new perspective to the proposal, keep the size of the group to no more than 10 and hold the session in the morning when all the participants are fresh.

Further Information

This guide is for general interest - it is always essential to take advice on specific issues.

We believe that the facts are correct as at the date of publication, but there may be certain errors and omissions for which we cannot be responsible.