

How to Guarantee Your Press Releases Will Be Used and Read

By Henry Stimpson

Press releases, also called news releases, are the workhorses of public relations. Editors, however, receive buckets of them every day and use only a small percentage. How can you make sure that your release has the best odds of getting used?

Make it a real news story. The news media won't run advertisements lightly disguised as news releases. So only send releases when your organization has some real news—such as opening a new facility, offering a new program or service, hiring or promoting an executive or key staff member, winning an award or achieving a milestone. And make you write it like a news story, not a commercial.

Keep the writing clean and easy to understand at first glance. Start with a tight, short headline that's clear and includes a verb. A subhead is optional, but a good way to provide some information beyond the headline if your story is complex.

Make sure your opening paragraph—the lead—includes the classic 5 W's: "who, what, where, why"—just like any news story you read in newspapers.

Many communicators are so eager to stress that what their company or nonprofit doing is so wonderful that they pack in so many buzzwords that the poor editor or reporter can't easily grasp what the story is. Don't do it.

Never make readers strain to get your meaning. Use simple, direct words. Simplify and dramatize, especially in the lead paragraphs. Superlatives and

fluff just hide the real news editors and reporters are hungry for. Bragging and claiming greatness, but not supplying any facts to back up your claims, turns off the media.

Include the local angle. When sending releases to your local newspaper, always mention up-front where your organization is based. The local angle can be played in a couple of ways. Let's say you hire a new vice president. Your organization is based in Boston, but she lives in Worcester, Mass. The release for Boston-area and general distribution should lead with the fact that your organization is located Boston. For the Worcester media, do another version leading off with her Worcester residence.

When possible, cite objective outside sources like research reports and government statistics. This adds credibility.

Maintain well-tended, up-to-date email lists that include everyone who's relevant. Make sure to include freelance writers on your lists.

Email releases as straight text. Avoid fancy headers. "Just the facts ma'am," as they used to say on Dragnet. Graphics or photos should be sent as attachments, not as part of the body of the release.

Always proofread. Of course, use spell-and-grammar check, but don't stop there. Nothing substitutes for thorough proofreading.

Length is proportional to importance or complexity. If the release is routine, like the promotion of



Henry Stimpson, APR, "PR Czar" at emersongroup, has ghostwritten hundreds of articles and placed them in publications of all types, including The New York Times, and has written under his own name for The Boston Globe, Yankee and numerous trade publications. Henry provides public relations, marketing communications and writing services to organizations in many industries. He can be reached at inq@thoughtleading.com

a staff member, keep it shorter. More complex stories can be longer, but never make them longer than necessary.

Supplement your own lists with distribution via a paid wire service.

For a reasonable price, these services will distribute your release to the media—both general and trade or professional publications and to hundreds of Web sites worldwide. That means that many people can read your release online before the traditional print media pick it up.

Specify citywide or statewide distribution from the wire service. That will get you to just as many Web sites as "national distribution," which is a big waste of money.