



Press releases

Introduction

A press release is a written statement distributed to the media and is a fundamental tool of public relations. Press coverage offers a means of communication with potential stakeholders through a medium which might otherwise have been too expensive. Getting to know key journalists, perhaps taking them for lunch occasionally, will make a big difference to whether you get stories published and whether they are accurate.

Writing a good press release

Formatting

To write a good press release, you should follow these basic rules:

- Write on paper that identifies your organisation such as a letterhead.
- Show that it is a release by writing clearly "PRESS RELEASE" or "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" (or "FOR RELEASE ON date") at the top of the page.
- Do not EMBARGO (delay publication) unless it is absolutely essential. It may only serve to deter the editor from using your story.
- Always give each release a title (headline). Don't worry if it isn't witty, but ensure that it identifies what is in the story.
- Use double spacing and wide margins. Use A4 paper but write on one side only. This will not only make the document look more professional, but also will make it easier to read and leave room for the editor to make changes if required.
- Ensure the release follows a logical sequence and that it is not too long.
- Paragraphs should be no longer than 50 words. Be precise and to the point.
- If the release exceeds one side, say so by writing "Continued" at the bottom of each page. Number every page and write "END" when you have finished.
- Try to use quotations when writing your press release. Make it realistic and ensure 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 personal opinions, include them as part of a quotation.
- The release should contain a contact name and telephone number, usually provided after the end of the release.
- Sometimes, it is necessary to follow the contact details with additional background information, perhaps explaining who the organisation is, or explaining the issue, or background to the issue. If so, this should follow the contact details, and should be headed, 'Notes for editors'.

Style

The style of the press release is as important as the format. A press release should be publishable as it stands. Good style can be achieved by following the six rules:

- The most important paragraph in is the first one, as it is this which grabs the reader's attention. So, make the first paragraph as interesting and exciting as possible. Above all make it relevant – to the reader and to the editor.
- Address 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.

- Write the release on the assumption that the reader knows nothing about the subject. Avoid jargon!
- Avoid the use of flowery language. It is more likely that a simple and straightforward story will be printed. A press release should not read like an advert, concentrate on facts and explanations.
- Pay attention to spelling, punctuation and grammar. Make effective use of full stops, semi-colons and commas to break up long phrases.

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. Once again there are guidelines to follow:

- Photographs taken by a press photographer are more likely to be used, so invite such a person along to any newsworthy events.
- Use a photographer with a good reputation. Brief him/her very carefully as to what you require.
- 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.

Useful tips

- Don't send out one standard press release to all media outlets. Instead tailor the release to each particular one.
- Always write in a style with which you feel comfortable. If you have the ability to write creatively, do so. Straightforward presentation is acceptable and even preferable for some publications.
- When writing the release put yourself into the shoes of the journalist. A main fault of press releases which fail to get published is a lack of news value.
- Read other people's work to find out what gets published, and learn from it.
- Always write your press release so that it will still make sense even if the editor deletes paragraphs starting 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. This can be done by contacting the editor. If it is not used, attempt to find out why and try to avoid making the same mistakes.

Seeking publicity in the media

Media coverage should be used carefully. You should not issue press releases without thinking carefully about the implications and whether the publicity may simply result in your target audience digging in their heels and resisting your overtures.

I spent two years advocating to the UK government on behalf of small firms; in many instances the proposal that I was seeking to influence was not yet public knowledge and to have issued a press release would almost certainly have led to Ministers digging in their heels. And on some occasions, even when I was successful, I didn't issue a press release, because this would have embarrassed a Minister in public, and I knew that would backfire the next time there was an issue to fight. In general, press releases are best used when the issue is already in the public domain. But considerable thought is needed about the purpose of the press release – is it to build grass roots support? Or is it to convince Ministers of the merits of a case? Or is it to demonstrate to Ministers that the proposal is already supported by large numbers of people? Or is it to flush out opposition to the proposals for change? All of these need to be handled differently.