

## **How to Write a Media Release**

By Penny Jones

### ***Why is a Media Release Important?***

The media release is an important promotional tool that can generate a huge amount of **free** publicity for whatever you want to market. An eye-catching, succinct and well targeted media release will spark the interest of an editor, staff writer or columnist and entice them to follow up your story in more detail.

### ***Basic Answer***

Many people view the media as an intimidating and unpredictable beast and could perhaps sympathise with Mother Teresa’s famous quote that “facing the media is more difficult than bathing a leper.”

But learning how the media operates and how news is generated will enable you to exploit this power to your own advantage. In fact, once you know the right techniques you’ll find it easy to accomplish your objectives when dealing with the media.

The importance of a well-crafted media release cannot be underestimated. Even if you have discovered a cure for cancer or the secret to world peace if you don’t manage to tell anyone about it the chances are your idea won’t get off the ground.

So, in view of the fact that as much as 39 percent of the news in major newspapers is generated from media releases<sup>1</sup> and this percentage is even higher in smaller newspapers,<sup>2</sup> learning how to write an effective media release could be your ultimate catalyst for successful promotion.

### ***Advanced Answer***

#### **What is News?**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines news as: “newly received or noteworthy information about recent events” and “information not previously known.”

#### **What is the Media?**

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<sup>1</sup> S Lacy and D C Couson, “Comparative Case Study: Newspaper Source Use on the Environmental Beat.” *Newspaper Research Journal* 21(1) (2000): 13-25

<sup>2</sup> Y Song, “Sourcing Patterns of National and Local Newspapers,” 16 September 2002, <<http://list.msu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0209C&L=aejmc&P=530>> (14 July 2009)

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The Media can be defined as “communication channels through which news, entertainment, education, data, or promotional messages are disseminated. Media includes every broadcasting and narrowcasting medium such as newspapers, magazines, TV, radio, billboards, direct mail, telephone, fax, and internet”<sup>3</sup>.

### **What is a media release?**

A media release “introduces a new product, service or idea; reports new findings from a survey; alerts the media to an upcoming event; announces a staff change; or simply presents new information.”<sup>4</sup>

As the media is deluged by thousands of releases every day, for yours to be considered for coverage it must be engaging<sup>5</sup> and presented in the appropriate manner to the relevant person. Most importantly, it must be **newsworthy**. If your story isn’t newsworthy then writing a media release won’t just be a waste of your time but could damage your credibility with the media outlet.<sup>6</sup> An editors’ time is precious. Don’t waste it!

### **Your Key Message and your Target Market**

The first things you need to consider before putting pen to paper are your **Key Message** and your **Target Market** i.e. what do you want to say and who do you want to tell?

*Key Message:* Your key message is your story hook and aims to lure the target publication to either publish your media release verbatim (especially common in trade papers), or to follow the story up as a feature (more common in consumer press)<sup>7</sup>

*Target Market:* Thoroughly researching suitable media outlets at this stage is critical because there is no point in sending a media release about your wonderful new scheme to create sustainable jobs for the unemployed to a parenting magazine! When researching your target market it is essential to bear in mind the needs of the reader. Focus on how your product, service or event can make their life easier.

### **How do you develop an unbeatable story ‘hook’?**

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<sup>3</sup> *Online Business Dictionary* <<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/media.html>> (14 July 2009)

<sup>4</sup> Merry Aronson et al., *The Public Relations Handbook. The Digital Age Second Edition* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 14

<sup>5</sup> John Foster. *Effective Writing Skills for Public Relations Fourth Edition* (Kogan Page, 2008), 99

<sup>6</sup> Foster, 101.

<sup>7</sup> Aronson et al, 14

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According to Pam Lontos “your hook is like a headline that makes someone want to read the whole story.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore a successful media release requires a hook that must first attract the publisher’s attention.

When writing your hook, make the (often true) assumption that journalists are easily bored, irritated and confused by media releases. This allows you to focus on making your hook engaging, simple and outstanding.

REMEMBER: Editors, reporters and publications are only concerned with newsworthiness and the specific interests of their audience, not your story. Your hook **must** link in with current events and be tailored to immediately resonate with the needs of readers making them eager to find out more. A common technique is to use the emotional selling point or the human interest aspect to capture attention.

In view of this, you’ll need to spend as much time crafting the headline and first paragraph as you spend writing the rest of the release.

Although it can be time consuming, you should also consider tailoring the emphasis of your hook for each of the publications you approach. To increase your chances of publication, read back copies of the publications you wish to appear in and try to emulate their style when writing your release.

### **How to Write a Media Release**

So now you know the importance of thorough research and the necessity of grabbing the editor’s attention, what are the components that go into a winning media release?

- **Letterhead** – Use company letterhead for your media release
- **Style** – Use familiar, easy to read fonts such as Arial or Times. Make your copy (or text) neat and avoid different type size and colour. Don’t use indents for paragraphs and set the copy at ragged right, not justified.<sup>9</sup>
- **Heading** – Your media release **MUST** be immediately identifiable as “communication for publication or broadcast.” Other similar terms include News Release, Press Release or Press Notice.

The heading should be bold and in upper case and any subheadings should be slightly smaller, bold and in upper and lower case. Headings should never be underlined.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> P Lontos *Develop Your HOOK - Create Your Own Unique Angle to Become a Marketing Machine*  
<http://prpr.net/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/Develop%20Your%20Hook.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Foster, 102.

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- **Headline** - A summary of the story in no more than 8 words. Should be snappy and attention grabbing. Remember: you only have one chance to hook the editor's attention.
- **First Paragraph** – Otherwise known as the lead. The first paragraph must be newsworthy, attention grabbing and read like a news story. It must answer journalism's five W's – WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE and WHY. The most crucial information must come first so the reader can get the main points of the story even if they don't finish the article.<sup>11</sup>
- **Quotes and Anecdotes** – These can be a great way to grab the reader's attention and can be used to lend personal authority to statements.<sup>12</sup> Double quotation marks for direct quotes follow standard newspaper style.<sup>13</sup>

Quotes are also good for product endorsement and making your story more human. Ensure you include the name, date and job title of the person quoted and if applicable where the statement was made.

A good tip is to include this information a little later in the piece when you're expanding the story if you don't want it to clutter up your first paragraph.<sup>14</sup>

- **Length** – Ideally limit your media release to one page and allow plenty of white space. Long rambling releases irritate editors.
- **Photography** – If you have a stand-out photo include it, or if you know your event or product launch will create an interesting photo opportunity, be sure to include details of this at the end of your release.
- **Content** – Use brief, factual, positive and interesting language with short concise sentences. Avoid too many adjectives, jargon, clichés, acronyms and "puffery"<sup>15</sup>. Write in the third person and use plain English. Describe the benefits of your subject to the reader. Always start with the most important points and save the less important details for last. This is called the Inverted-Pyramid News Style.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Foster, 102.

<sup>11</sup> Aronson et al, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Foster,109.

<sup>14</sup> Foster,103.

<sup>15</sup> Foster,101.

<sup>16</sup> Aronson et al, 14.

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- **Fact Check** – BE ACCURATE! To be treated as a professional, it's essential to double and triple fact check your media release. Ensure it's proofread for spelling and grammar and clearly dated.
- **Ending** – At the end of the release type "END" or "ENDS" in capitals and if you want to add extra information such as technical explanations write these under a subheading titled "Note to Editor". Also include a word count.<sup>17</sup>
- **Boilerplate** – A boilerplate is a paragraph or more of further information and background about an organisation which can be useful to journalists. It often contains an organisation's vision, mission statement and facts including years in operation, business structure, size and activities, aiming to answer the question 'what does the organisation do?'<sup>18</sup>
- **Contact Information** – It's vital to include the name, email address, fax number and contact numbers (including after-hours) of the person responsible for fielding questions from the press. This person must be fully prepared to answer any questions about the content of the media release.

#### **How and When to Send a Media Release**

When you're ready to issue your media release make a spreadsheet of your media contacts to keep track of who you've sent it to and when. This will be an invaluable tool when following up on your release and making notes when enquiries start rolling in. If you're organised and produce quality releases that make journalists' jobs easier, you'll win their respect and start a blossoming working relationship which could serve you well into the future.

Think of your dealings with the media as reciprocal case of *I scratch your back, you scratch mine!*

Before you send your release check the:

- **Editor's Contact Information** – Research the name and email address of the appropriate person (editor, staff writer or chiefs-of-staff) and email your release directly to them in the body of the email. Don't use an attachment because it is less likely to be opened. Take time to get this right.
- **Timing** – Give the media at least two weeks advance notice for an event or coincide your media release with a national event to make it newsworthy. Chase's Calendar

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<sup>17</sup> Foster, 109.

<sup>18</sup> Treadwell, 218.

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of Events (published by McGraw-Hill Professional) provides a comprehensive list of national and international special days and events throughout the year.

After the media release has been sent, always follow it up the next day by calling your media contact to check they received it. This will make you look like a pro and keep you top of mind.

### **The Benefits of a Media Release**

A successful media release will:

1. Be picked up by the media and generate free publicity for your mission
2. Generate positive energy and enthusiasm within your team
3. Increase the public exposure and name recognition of your organisation
4. Promote you as an expert in your field giving you credibility in both the community and business worlds.
5. Make you stand out from the crowd
6. Help establish, build and cement your important media connections

### **What are the DOs and DON'Ts of writing a media release?**

**Do** know your audience. What do they watch and read?

**Don't** pitch your story to a non-relevant publication.

**Do** study the house style of the publication you wish to approach so you can write your release in a similar way.

**Do** use quotes. They can add colour and interest to your media release.

**Do** check your facts. Then double and triple check them!

**Don't** try to control what the journalist writes

**Don't** ask to read the article prior to publication

**Don't** issue a blatant advertisement and pretend that it's news

**Do** use simple English. Even if the subject matter is technical it must be understandable by the lay person (unless specifically aimed at industry or trade press)

**When editors won't follow your lead**

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Editors will commonly abandon a news lead if it evokes one or more of the following responses<sup>19</sup>:

“No link to our area” – the content of the story is not within our area or the content is relevant but the organisation is outside the area covered by the publication and will therefore not be mentioned in the article.

“Who cares?” – the content is not news.

“Good background” – the editor will keep the release on record as background but the story itself is not interesting enough to make the cut.

“Organisational bias” – the release is basically advertising for an organisation.

### **The Press Kit or Press Pack**

Sometimes you may want to take the media release a little further and develop a Press Kit. A Press Kit is a portfolio of editorial and promotional literature including biographies, fact sheets, photographs, audio and video tapes, DVDs and CDs<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Media releases can be a hugely successful medium to promote your event, cause or product and if you learn to write them yourself, this promotion is free. Media releases are the most effective way to communicate with the media and can lead to important reciprocal working relationships that will help keep your cause in the media spotlight into the future.

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*Online Business Dictionary* <<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/media.html>> (14 July 2009)

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<sup>19</sup> Treadwell, 234.

<sup>20</sup> John Foster. *Effective Writing Skills for Public Relations Fourth Edition* (Kogan Page, 2008), 114

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Song, Y. "Sourcing Patterns of National and Local Newspapers," 16 September 2002, <<http://list.msu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0209C&L=aejmc&P=530>> (14 July 2009)

***Further Reading:***

Public Relations Newsletter: <http://prpr.net/prpr-publicity-newsletter/>