

# Writing a press release that stands out

Press releases are the most common way of letting your local media know about a story such as an event, a new report or the launch of a new service, but newsdesks are inundated with releases every day. This guidance is designed to help you ensure that yours stands out so you can secure positive media coverage for your agency.

## Things to consider before you start

Before you start writing a release it is worth spending a bit of time thinking about what will make your story interesting to the media; what will make it 'newsworthy'?. You will also need to think about why you want to achieve media coverage for a particular story and what the media will expect from you; can you meet their demands?

### What is 'news'?

Generally speaking 'news' is about the new, the previously unknown. But there are questions you can ask yourself to consider how newsworthy a story might be. Is it:

- unusual?
- important?
- something people need to know about?
- something people want to know about?
- of human interest?

But considering what 'news' is also depends on the specific media you are targeting. Something that is interesting to your local paper, might not be suitable for the 6 o'clock news and vice-versa. The best way to know what your local media will think is a good story is to read and watch the kind of stories they already cover. Make yourself familiar with their style and issues they think are of interest.

Remember that news value is also relative. What makes news on a quiet news day can easily be binned if a bigger story breaks. So considering timing can help ensure your story is 'news'. So-called 'soft' news stories often have a better chance of being covered during quieter periods (e.g. around Christmas, the summer 'Silly Season' or Mondays for a daily paper)

### What do you want to achieve from the media coverage?

Once you have decided that the story is newsworthy, consider why you want to achieve media coverage. This will help you focus and ensure that the coverage is as effective and strategic as possible.

Media coverage can be used to:

- encourage better use of the service
- inform people of their rights
- raise the profile or enhance the reputation of your agency
- highlight the relevance and importance of your agency to the local community
- carry a 'call to action', e.g. encourage the local community to get involved in a campaign.

Thinking about what you want your readers or viewers to do or think after they have seen the media coverage is a good place to start planning. Do you want them to avoid falling victim to a new scam? Do you want them to check to make sure they are receiving all the benefits they are entitled to, or to seek advice to help with their unmanageable debt? Or do you want them to offer to volunteer with you?

## What do the local media want?

Once you know what you want to achieve from sending your press release, you should consider what the media want from you.

Your local media are looking for:

- local stories
- local takes on national stories
- local statistics
- human interest angles from local residents.

Seeing your story is based in the local community, is based on local statistics or a resident willing to share their experience will help your story look relevant.

## How to write your release

Once you have considered the news angle and what you want to achieve from the media coverage, you need to make sure your press release is well written and contains all the information the journalists need in an easily accessible style. Getting the format, structure and style right will increase the chances of your release being used.

### Format

Press releases are written in a standard format and should include the following:

- the name of the organisation
- the logo (if not too big a file)
- an attention grabbing headline
- the date for intended release (either 'immediate' or embargoed for a future date and time)
- contact details, ideally including email, telephone number and ideally a mobile for out of hours media queries
- a 'notes to editors' section including a paragraph about your agency and a summary of any additional background information
- information about where and when the photocall will be (if you are organising one)
- a caption for your photograph (if you are sending one).

## Structure

Press releases are written like newspaper articles – they are ‘front loaded’ with the most important information at the start. They don’t have a beginning, middle and end in the traditional sense. Assume your reader may only read the first paragraph to get a taste for the story, so try and get the following into the first paragraph:

- who (usually your agency)
- what (the event, report etc.)
- where (location, if relevant)
- when (date and time)
- why (the point of the exercise).

Subsequent paragraphs should expand on points made in the first paragraph giving more details of the issue. Information should be presented in declining order of importance as journalists will cut from the bottom upwards.

## Style

The style of your press release should reflect a newspaper article so should be written in the third person (“local charity [agency name] is holding a fundraiser next week to raise money for ...”). Don’t use the first person, ‘we’.

Other than this important point, there are various other dos and don’ts.

Do:

- use the present tense
- be factual (opinion can be saved for a quote)
- make every word count
- try and use active sentences
- include a quote (allowing you to use the first person and be subjective)
- use short sentences to keep it easy to read and understand.

Don’t:

- use acronyms
- use jargon
- state the obvious.

If in doubt, consider George Orwell’s 5 rules for effective writing:

- never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print
- never use a long word where a short one will do
- if it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out
- never use the passive where you can use the active
- never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

## Sending your press release and following up

- When you have finished the release, proofread it for errors and double check your facts (statistics, dates etc.) for accuracy. It will be harder to correct errors once they have been printed in the paper and it could affect your reputation if journalists think they can't trust your information.
- When your release is ready to go, cut and paste the text into the body of the email. Attachments are less likely to be read and may not always get through SPAM filters.
- If you are emailing it to more than one contact always put the email addresses in the BCC field.
- You can email it to the newsdesk, or call the outlet and find out if there is a specific person to send it to (such as the consumer correspondent). Don't be afraid to follow up with a phone call to find out if they are interested in the story or if they need any more details.
- Once you have sent it (and after your embargo time, if you have one), put the release on your website.
- Keep a list of good contacts for future use.
- And don't forget to evaluate the release. Did it get you the coverage you wanted? Did you make a good contact you can keep for next time? Did you learn anything worth avoiding next time?



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