

**Writing a Press Release – An Art, Not Rocket
Science**

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press release

an official statement issued to the media giving information on a particular matter

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Introduction

I started out my PR career as an Account Assistant in an 'Ab Fab' style basement office in London in the mid-90s. My Account Director, and her red pen, scared me to death but her discipline, hours spent photocopying and weekly fax sessions for Kwik-Save, the discount supermarket chain, served me well.

Whilst working for International TV channels, IT companies, fashion houses, supermarkets, charities, start-ups and many more, I have written more press releases than I care to remember and more than one has landed me a top job.

From saving turtles, launching TV channels in Russia, raising awareness of hip dysplasia, promoting youth hostels, selling stories from celebrities and helping women get their pre-baby bodies back, I have written press releases about them all.

Now, as a writer and blogger, I receive hundreds of press releases a week and whilst some impress me, I am increasingly disillusioned with the standard of copy, lack of news and inability to get to the point - fast.

Writing a press release is not rocket science, it is an art you can learn and finely tune over time and I hope this eBook will allow you to do just that.

What is a Press Release?

A press release is a written statement and a fundamental PR tool for communicating 'news' to the media.

If written well and targeted properly, it will give a journalist the whole story at a glance, make everyone's lives easier and increase your chances of getting those all important column inches.

Forget fluffy, overly exuberant words and a host of exclamation marks, what the press want is news, real stories, hard facts and ultimately something their readers will want to read and their editors will want to publish.

Despite the explosion of social media and the instant nature of the digital revolution, press releases remain an effective way of securing media coverage and a step towards building important relationships that will serve you well in your career.

It is important to understand that whilst you might send a journalist a press release, there is no rule to say they have to read, use or like it. Once it is in the public domain, the press can delete it; laugh at it, demand you take them off your database and even block you from their Twitter account (yes, really).

The best way to ensure this doesn't happen to you is to send them press releases that are relevant, well written and of potential use to them – who can ask for more?

What Do You Write About in a Press Release?

That's easy – news.

Sounds obvious, but if it's gone, it's too late. Write about what's happening now or what's about to happen in the future.

News includes:

- A new campaign
- A new app
- A new website
- A new product, shop or service
- An exciting competition
- New events or entertainment offerings
- The announcement of company profits, or losses
- The appointment of a new member or staff, celebrity supporter or ambassador

Human-interest stories, with a news element, are popular with local and consumer media as are stories with a charity or fundraising angle.

Controversy and scandal are always of interest but you should have a crisis management plan in place, just in case things back fire.

Quirky, unusual or unexpected events and activities are often newsworthy. If you can support these with strong photography, even better.

Planning Your Press Release

Once you have all your information in place, it is a good idea to use the “Inverted Pyramid Style”, or the *‘five Ws and the one H’* to ensure you have everything covered.

What?

What is the story, news and call to action? Sounds obvious but really stop and think before you invest time and resources on a release with no legs. If you have a story that you want to push out but it doesn’t have a strong enough news angle, you should think about selling it in as an exclusive to one paper and offering an interview, case study or competition alongside it to strengthen your sell-in.

Who?

- Who are the key players?
- Who is affected by your news?
- Who does it benefit?
- Who is your target audience?

Why?

- Why is this news?

What is your call to action for your target audience?

- Visit your website
- Buy your product
- Donate to your charity
- Download your app

Where?

- Where is this happening?

When?

- When is this happening?

How?

How did this come about?

What Style Should I Write My Release In?

When writing a press release think tight and bright – using as few words as possible to make your point. Copy needs to be engaging and interesting for the journalist but at the same time it needs to use simple, ‘down the pub’ language that the average man on the street will ‘get’.

Remember to use the third person - don't write "We did this" or "I think that" unless it is a quote. Use the name of the company and remember companies are always singular.

The first sentence, or paragraph, should give the journalist the essence of the story, which means don't waffle and avoid wordy, unnecessary explanations.

Try and keep all sentences to around 25 words so each one delivers a 'punch' and keeps the journalist interested.

Remember you are not writing an advert so ensure what you write is not overly promotional, but instead remains factual and objective.

How Do I Layout My Press Release?

Format and Style

- Ensure you have 'Press Release' at the top of the document and include your company logo
- Add the distribution date for the press release at the top of the release
- Use your company house style font throughout in 11 point
- To double space or not to double space? Views are mixed but with email and computer editing it's probably not necessary as long as your release *is easy to read*. Short paragraphs with a space between each and slightly wider than normal margins are helpful. [Personally, I think 1.5 spacing is enough. but don't be tempted to drop it to single-line spacing or reduce the font size.]

Length

A press release should ideally be one side of A4, two at a push. If you reach three this indicates you have written a feature, so go back to the drawing board and decide if this really is a press release.

Heading

A strong headline will immediately pull in journalists so ensure yours is engaging and accurate. A humorous title helps to entice the reader, but don't use a pun or other 'comedy' title unless it really adds to the story.

Paragraph One

The first paragraph is the most important as it has to tell the story in a nutshell, and the test of success is whether the full story can be understood if the first paragraph was reproduced in print.

Paragraph Two

The second paragraph expands on information in the first, giving a bit more detail and adding another angle.

Paragraph Three / Quotes

Often, the third paragraph provides a quote from a designated spokesperson, which has been signed off. Quotes can't be changed, so ensure they contain strong key messages and use them to sell yourself. Keep quotes upbeat and to the point but true and transparent. Very often, quotes tend to repeat something that has already been said in the release. Make sure that the quote is insightful and interesting and that it makes a more personal, opinionated comment about the story.

Paragraph Four

The fourth, and last, paragraph outlines final information, such as referencing websites, ordering and pricing details or mentions other products in development.

End

Signal the end of the press release with the word **“Ends”** in bold and centered.

Notes to Editors

Sometimes it is necessary to include extra information and rather than clutter your release, the best option is a section at the end of the release entitled **“Notes to Editors”**.

This can be as long as required and can include:

- Facts and figures
- Full research and survey details
- Sales figures
- Biographies
- Company website
- Any additional company background information
- Notes about photography, samples and press trips

Don't forget contact details.

It is important to check all contact details and ensure that someone is available and expecting calls on the day that the release goes out. Alongside the contact details you can let the journalist know that there are images, spokespeople and/or case studies available.

Sample Press Release

[Include logo – right hand corner]

Press Release

Date

Headline

Paragraph 1

Paragraph 2

Paragraph 3

Paragraph 4

- Ends -

Notes for Editors

Contact Details

Who Should I Send My Press Release To?

It is really important to research the media you want to talk to and start to build a contact database.

For every story, there are many press and media outlets to target both in print and online:

- National press
- Local press
- Specialist / trade press
- Consumer press
- Bloggers
- News agencies
- Freelance media journalists

Whilst you can subscribe to databases, these can be expensive and there are other ways to collate the information you need.

Get hold of back copies of publications and tune in to relevant radio and TV programmes to identify the correct contacts.

Call up publications and ask for contact details – some publishers will be happier than others to help. If in doubt, ask to speak to the Editorial Assistant who should either accept your release or give you the name of the correct person – usually a news reporter. Try and get a name, rather than being fobbed off with the generic ‘newsdesk’ email address.

Use the internet and social media to find contact details and niche publications.

It is also key to understand how the media work and how their deadlines operate.

Online publications can offer almost instant coverage if you send over stories that are newsworthy and targeted. Just be sure that you are ready for the story to break then and there.

Many weekly local papers have a Tuesday night deadline for Thursday publication. This means you need to get stories to them before that time and don't chase your story on a Wednesday when they are going to print – they won't be happy to hear from you.

Weekly titles work around six weeks in advance.

Monthly publications work around three months ahead, so the December issue is compiled in September. If you have a time specific news story – say a Christmas or Valentine's story – be sure to contact monthly publications at least four months in advance so that you catch the editorial team at the issue planning stage. Then be sure to follow up at regular intervals so they don't forget you.

How Do I Send Out My Press Release?

In today's fast paced, instant media world, generally the best way to send out your press release is via email.

Copy and paste your press release into the body of an email, do not send it as an attachment.

Do not send out blanket emails to hundreds of contacts who are blind copied, this is rude and press tend not to even open such unsolicited communications. Ensure each email is sent personally, with the right name.

Use your press release title as the header of your email, again this will catch the reader's attention and prevent the delete button being pressed.

Many journalists and media organisations have automatic blocks on attachments so they won't even reach your desired recipient.

Should I Send Photos?

Appropriate photography is valuable and in some cases secures coverage and adds value.

Offer images, logos and headshots in the 'Notes to Editors' but do not send unless asked.

If asked to send photography, always include a caption and any copyright/credit details.

It is a good idea to check what resolution is needed (usually at least 300dpi) and which format the publication would like them in and send exactly what is requested. Don't send a huge file – limit the size to 3MB at the absolute maximum.

You can use Dropbox, or a similar programme to send file links and this will make life easier for everyone.

What Do I Do Next?

I will be honest here and say, in the main, if a journalist wants to use something they will either go straight ahead or contact you for more details. Many journalists find it annoying when a PR calls when they are on deadline asking if you got their press release about X,Y or Z. They will let you know if they want to use it and need anything more.

That said, you can call journalists but prepare what you want to say and be prepared for the response – good or bad.

If they do cover your story, make sure you send an acknowledgement and thank you. As with many things in life, manners go a long way and this will be appreciated.

If you have specific press you want to target, why not invite them out for a coffee or an event and get to know them? Whilst PR is all about good stories and content, it is also heavily dependent on relationships and trust and this is something that comes from good practice and mutual respect.

If you do decide to follow up, try and have something extra to offer the journalist. There's nothing worse than simply calling to say, "Did you get my release?", but if you call and say "I've now secured a case study/spokesperson who can give additional insight", it is much more interesting for the journalist.

Press Release Checklist

I have put together a checklist of tips that will not only make your press release shine in any inbox but also make your company look professional, your story interesting and ensure your call to action is obvious.

Double check that your story has news value and is a release rather than a case study or feature.

Remember to ask and answer who, what, why, where, when and how?

Give your heading the XFactor as it is the first thing a journalist will see.

Get right to the point in the first paragraph and work on the assumption that a journalist will only read the first sentence of your release so get to the point fast.

One page is best, two is the maximum and three is a big, fat no.

Use quotes, double-check they are accurate and ensure they are signed off and approved. Check that they add something more to the story.

If you offer images, make sure you really do have them at a high resolution; this can be a make or break for coverage and relationship. Check that you have a caption and know who everyone is in the picture and that they are happy to be included.

Research your target media and be sure to know about the publications you really want to be featured in and how they work. This is especially important with bloggers – do not approach a blogger unless you have read their blog – they will see through you immediately.

Offer the right amount of information and do not waffle.

Include facts and figures and cut out fluff, jargon and acronyms.

Ensure your press release has been proofread and is grammatically flawless. Spelling mistakes are unforgiveable!

Double check quotes are correct and the whole release is signed off before it leaves your inbox.

Include your contact information (yes it happens) as well as access to more information even if it is just your website.

Good Luck.

If you need any more advice, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me.