

30 Reasons to Write a Press Release

Offer newsworthy information to editors, and they just might bite.

November 19, 2001

Q: I want to publicize my business, but I can't think of a topic worthy of a press release. What are some ideas, and will it really help my business?

A: It's a well-known fact that a company's visibility will increase with powerful publicity. After all, publicity aims to bring the news of your company to the world. The basic weapons you'll need to do this include a press kit, a company background piece, press releases, story ideas and articles or columns about your business. The most important of all, though, is the press release.

If you're wondering what exactly should be covered in a press release, think along the lines of "newsy" and interesting topics. Examples include: your online presence; important information and tools regarding a change in management or the business components you offer; special information that can be obtained online; any proprietary product or methodology that you offer through your consulting services; the announcement of articles, events and appearances; relevant worksheets, tips and techniques; and so on.

A publicity campaign that uses press releases should begin with a master plan. The more newsworthy you make your company, the more coverage you'll get. And coverage is important because it earns the kind of credibility that advertising just can't buy. When writing a press release, your goals should be uniqueness, timeliness and top-of-the-mind awareness. Once you achieve publicity and visibility, both your company profile and your client and prospect levels will rise. One successful story about your company resulting in free publicity is advertising worth hundreds and thousands of dollars.

There is definitely a knack to writing a "newsworthy" press release, even though the ultimate goals are usually awareness and promotion. Editors don't like promotion, though, so crafting a press release to appeal to an editor is key. If you provide reporters with news that appeals to their readers, you'll gain instant credibility and be on your way to forming a valuable promotional relationship. This can be very powerful from a marketing point of view.

There's no guarantee that any press release will ever be published, but by taking a consistent, professional and newsworthy approach with the reputable editors of respected publications, the probability is good that you'll get some coverage. Press releases are also great vehicles for communicating with clients and prospects. Putting them on your Web site is a very effective means of promoting to your captive markets. It also further substantiates your marketing efforts, as well as your credibility.

If you're not sure about what you should cover in a press release, consider these ideas to see if any apply to your business:

1. Starting a new business
2. Introducing a new product
3. Celebrating an anniversary
4. Announcing a restructuring of the company
5. Offering an article series for publishing
6. Opening up branch or satellite offices
7. Receiving an award
8. Receiving an appointment
9. Participating in a philanthropic event
10. Introducing a unique strategy/approach
11. Announcing a partnership
12. Changing the company or product name
13. Earning recognition of the company, product or executives by a publication
14. Announcing that you're available to speak on particular subjects of interest
15. Issuing a statement of position regarding a local, regional or national issue
16. Announcing a public appearance on television, radio or in person
17. Launching a website
18. Announcing free information available
19. Announcing that you've reached a major milestone
20. Obtaining a new, significant customer
21. Expanding or renovating the business
22. Establishing a unique vendor agreement
23. Meeting some kind of unusual challenge or rising above adversity
24. Restructuring your business or its business model
25. Setting up a customer advisory group
26. Announcing the results of research or surveys you have conducted
27. Announcing that an individual in your business has been named to serve in a leadership position in a community, professional or charitable organization
28. Sponsoring a workshop or seminar
29. Making public statements on future business trends or conditions
30. Forming a new strategic partnership or alliance

Of course, these are just a few ideas to get you started. Just remember this: If a press release is well-written, almost any event can be turned into news.

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Learner Materials for the

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- Specifics sell – 49 is more believable than 50.
- Use a headline that attracts your audience based on who they are, or their interests. Prospects are more likely to buy from you when they feel that you are talking directly to them about their unique needs.
- Identify a problem or need, then hint at a solution and explain how your product or service will solve the problem.
- Make believable claims. If the actual results you can produce for your customers sound too good to be true, they will assume they are being misled and not buy. Understate any claims that sound exaggerated, even if they are true.
- Stress benefits before features. People seldom buy something to obtain a feature, they usually purchase a product or service to access the benefits produced by the feature.
- Overcome skepticism in prospective customers by offering 'proof' of specific results. This can be done through the use of testimonials or endorsements, offering warranties or money back guarantees, citing test results or case studies, and using comparison charts that illustrate how the features and benefits of your product or service are better than those of your competitors.
- Give your audience a compelling reason to buy. Spur them into responding by making an offer and rewarding customers for taking immediate action, for example, "offer ends March 31", or using a coupon or response device.
- Include an enticing offer in every sales message, for example, free information, special discount, free bonus with order.
- Review the advertisements that have worked most effectively for you, to see whether you can identify a common theme or feature in them.
- A customer needs to see your advertisement on an average of seven times before they will buy from you. The more often and more different places a customer sees your advertisement, the more likely they are to recognise your business and your products and services.

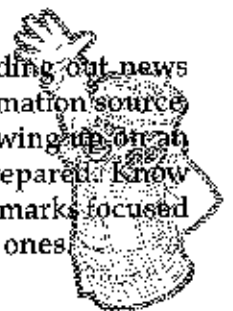
2. MEDIA ANNOUNCEMENTS

Media coverage, like advertising, is a promotional method directed at the mass market. It can be an effective means of creating an awareness, particularly of new developments in your business, or new products and services to be introduced into the market place.

In this section we will limit our discussion to two forms of media announcements, namely interviews and press releases.

(i) INTERVIEWS

While there are many ways for you to contact the news media, such as sending out news releases, requesting publicity for an event or establishing yourself as an information source, you also need to be ready when the media calls you. Whether they are following up on an idea you presented or working on their own topic, the key to success is to be prepared. Know what points you want to make and practice what you want to say. Keep your remarks focused and anticipate hard questions, including negative, controversial and financial ones.



Most of the information presented in this section applies to prearranged, structured interviews, however, much of it can be adapted to on-the-spot interviews and telephone interviews. For example, if you are attending a trade show or conference event where reporters are present, think about the key points you would like to make if a reporter was to approach you. You can also take the initiative and approach a reporter yourself. Whatever the circumstances, be sure to adapt to the situation and the specific media, whether you are being interviewed for a 30-second television news spot, a lengthy newspaper feature or a radio talk show.

Step 1: Plan Ahead...

- When a reporter calls to set up an interview, ask them what the focus will be and what kinds of questions they will ask.
- Take time to think about these questions. There is no need to write down formal answers to memorise, just jot down the points you want to make.
- During the interview itself, the reporter may not ask the initial questions they indicated, but some variation of them and/or new questions based on your response. Try to anticipate related questions, and difficult questions, and decide how to answer them. If appropriate, have background materials and statistics available to increase your credibility.
- Once you are familiar with the topic and what you want to say, take as much time as you can to rehearse and refine your message. It may be beneficial to rehearse with an associate or practice with a tape recorder. This allows you to listen to your answers and to work on making them brief, but effective. These qualities are especially important with radio and television because of the limited ability to edit what you say.
- Be sure you know if the reporter only wants an interview, or if they also want to photograph or videotape you, and who else, if anyone, should be available for those shots.

Step 2: Keep the Focus...

- The best way to interest a reporter and audience in your products and services is to focus on the message you want to give. In developing this message, think about how you want the audience to respond and the desired outcome.

Step 3: Influence the Reporter's Perspective...

- Before a reporter can inform the public about your products and services, you need to educate the reporter. Discuss with them the message you wish to impart and the desired tone and language of the interview required to facilitate this.
- Be careful that you don't get carried away by being the center of attention, and avoid any remarks and embellishments that a reporter could use to make unrealistic or unsubstantiated claims about your products and services.

Step 4: During the Interview...

- During the interview, relax, stay calm and talk about the issues in simple, friendly terms. Speak with the reporter one-to-one, using a conversational tone. Avoid jargon and acronyms the audience might not know.



- Be sure that you get your key points across even if you have to repeat them several times, in several different ways.
- Be brief and speak in 10-20 second soundbites, especially for radio and television.
- If you are going to be photographed or videoed, dress smartly, but remain subdued. Solid colours work well. Don't overdress or let jewelry detract from what you say. With television, ask if the interviewer will be included in the shot and whether you should look at the interviewer or the camera. Use your eyes naturally, as you would in a conversation.
- Do not say anything that you don't want printed or broadcast. Everything a reporter hears or sees is fair game. Do not lie, guess or answer hypothetical questions. If you can't answer, explain why. If you don't know the answer, think about other sources of information the reporter can try.
- Be careful that you don't repeat a reporter's negative words, because then the reporter can quote you as saying them. Instead, try to turn the negative question into a positive statement.
- While most reporters conduct themselves professionally and ethically, their experience and knowledge varies.
- Occasionally check with the reporter to make sure they understand what you are saying, as well as the concepts and message involved.
- Be aware that reporters may not always ask the right question. You may have to rephrase a question so that the reporter is not misled or missing an important point. If the reporter does miss something, you can introduce it by saying something like, "One thing most people want to know more about is..."

Step 5: After the Interview

- Thank the reporter for the opportunity to publicise your product or service, and ask if there is anything else you can do. If the reporter needs additional information, find out their deadline. If you think of something important that you left out, call the reporter and share it, if the interview was for print media.
- Don't expect to see a story before it is printed or airs, and don't be surprised if it does not come out just exactly as you anticipated. It is important to realise that reporters work for editors and news directors. Much of their work is assigned, and therefore their stories are subject to changes by other people. Additionally, stories are not always printed or broadcast – other stories may take the place of yours.
- After your story has run, take time to send a thank you note and/or call the reporter. If the reporter made a serious mistake or emphasized the wrong thing, promptly let them know what was wrong and why, but be tactful and don't destroy your relationship. Keep in mind that the goal is not to get a perfect story, but to obtain ongoing coverage and to increase customer awareness and support.

Table 3.3.3 on the following page presents a checklist for media interviews.



TABLE 3.3.3: CHECKLIST FOR INTERVIEWING WITH THE MEDIA

MEDIA INTERVIEW CHECKLIST	
Before the Interview	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Plan ahead and adapt to the specific news media, reporter and story.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Be clear on whether or not you will be photographed/videotaped.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Inquire about what questions to expect.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Jot down points you want to make.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Anticipate difficult questions, including negative, controversial and financial.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Have background material, facts and statistics available and know their source.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Keep the focus on your products and services.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Consider how you want the audience to respond.
<input type="checkbox"/>	If there is time to do so, rehearse and refine your message.
During the Interview	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Dress appropriately.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Stay calm and speak conversationally with the reporter.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Discuss the story's focus and the tone and language that is appropriate.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Be quotable. Keep to the point and use acceptable language that is easy to understand.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Avoid jargon and acronyms.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Talk in 10-20 second sound bites, especially for radio and television.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Be sure you get your key points across.
<input type="checkbox"/>	If the reporter gets sidetracked, return the focus to the message you wish to convey.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Do not say anything that you don't want printed or broadcast.
<input type="checkbox"/>	If you cannot answer a question, explain why.
<input type="checkbox"/>	If you believe that you can find the answer, volunteer to do so.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Answer negative questions with a positive response.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Do not repeat a reporter's negative words.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Bring up any key points that the reporter misses.

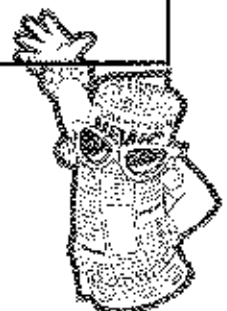


Table 3.3.3 Continued...

After the Interview	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Thank the reporter.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Ask if there is anything else you can do, keeping deadlines in mind.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Remember that the reporter does not have final control over the story.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Do not expect to see a story before it is printed or airs.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Call to talk about the story after it runs, to say thank you and to clarify any mistakes.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Work to develop an ongoing relationship and coverage of your products and services.

(ii) PREPARING PRESS RELEASES

One of the most common ways to obtain media coverage is to prepare a press release. It is a particularly useful tool to publicise the launch of a new product or service. A press release can be designed as a complete story, or a short 'teaser' to catch the media's attention and sell a story idea. The media may use a release as is, edit or rewrite it to fit their style and size requirements, or call you for more information.

While the press release is an easy way to contact the media, most releases are not used, because they are competing with hundreds of other releases and stories from news services every day. Therefore, it is crucial that your press release stands out, to have any chance of being used.

Press releases can be used with all types of media, from newspapers to radio and television stations, as well as newsletters and news wires.

- When you use a release to spark the media's interest so they will contact you about doing a story, you should include the most important points and provide enough information for them to understand the basic story. Generally, you should limit this type of release to one page. If more information is needed, attach it as a background sheet.
- If you prepare a full story for the media, include all important and interesting details, but limit the release to two pages, or a maximum of three.

Meeting the Different Media's Needs

Each type of media has different needs, deadlines, operating procedures, styles and formats that must be accommodated. The first step is to find out whether the local media will use a finished story, with or without photos, or if they prefer just the 'idea' for one of their staff to complete. Small daily and weekly papers, neighborhood papers and newsletters are more likely to use finished news stories, while the larger media usually write their own.

Because most radio stations do not have reporters, they usually prefer complete news releases. However, they may call you to record a quote for the story. Television stations generally want ideas for stories that have strong visuals which they can videotape, such as people engaged in activities, special events, children and animals. Both radio and television

prefer short, substantial quotes, referred to as sound bites, which last 10 to 20 seconds, because their average story length is only 30 to 90 seconds.

Catching the Media's Attention

Because your press release is competing with hundreds of other stories for the same space and air time, you must make your material stand out and grab the audience's attention, usually within five to 10 seconds. To do this, you need to focus on characteristics that all the media look for in stories, such as timeliness, news value or human interest, a local connection, the human side of statistics, eye-catching visuals, anything new or different, and appeal to a large audience. Ask yourself, "Why should the media like this story?" "Why should readers/viewers care about the story?" "How can I make the media and public see the importance of the story?"

Put the most important or intriguing part in your opening, and use it to sell your story. Then weave in the details you want people to learn. Present your ideas clearly, simply and briefly, starting with the most important information and working down to the least important.

Adopting Releases for Radio and Television

While written press releases for radio and television are similar to those for print media, there are some differences. Because they are designed to be read out loud, formatting requirements do differ. To adapt a release for radio and television, type it triple-spaced in ALL CAPS, and keep it short. Do not use abbreviations, such as 'St', which could be read as street or saint. Further, include the phonetic spelling in parentheses after unusual words and names, such as Gaujers (Gow-yers).

You can also submit video news releases. While effective visuals are important, be sure these releases have the same characteristics desired in a print release, such as newsworthiness or human interest, a local angle and timeliness. In addition to using completed releases, TV stations also like to have raw footage of interviews, activities and scenes so they can prepare the final story. It is advisable to provide both, but talk with your local station about what they might use and how to prepare it, before videotaping. Be aware of the deadlines and make sure they receive it in sufficient time to work with it.

Submitting News Stories/Ideas

It is crucial that you submit your press release to the correct individual, so that it is not discarded without being considered. Generally it is the:

- assignment editor for television
- news director or program director for radio
- appropriate editor – news, feature, editorial, column, calendar, or a beat reporter for newspapers. Beat reporters cover a specific area, such as health and human services.

Call each paper, radio and television station and ask for the name and title of the person to contact in order to submit a story idea or press release. Also request their mailing and street address, and a fax number or email address. Remember to ask about their deadlines.



Before submitting a press release, be sure it includes both your daytime and evening phone numbers, since reporters work around the clock. Releases may be mailed, faxed, hand-delivered, or emailed. Be sure it is addressed to the correct individual, and call to confirm receipt if mailed or faxed and to let the media know you are available to answer questions.

Tips for Writing a News Release

- Make your writing lively and interesting so it catches and holds the audience's attention.
- Write in a conversational tone, using active verbs.
- Use short, common words. Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Keep most sentences short, and use short paragraphs of two to three sentences.
- Include numbers and statistics, if appropriate. Be sure they are correct.
- Use quotes to make the story more alive and personal. You can even create quotes to strengthen your message, but be sure to clear them with the 'speaker'.
- Do not use editorial comments/opinionated words unless they are in a quote.
- Remove unnecessary words, including extra adjectives, flowery or overly-descriptive language and long transitions.
- Avoid superlatives, such as the first, most, biggest and oldest, unless backed up with facts.
- Omit points that do not support the message.
- Be sure your writing conveys desired attitudes and use politically correct terminology.
- Have someone proofread your release to ensure that it contains all the important details and is accurate and easy to understand. They should also check for errors in spelling and grammar, and that all titles and names, of both people and organizations, are correct.

A sample press release is presented in Figure 3.3.2 on the following page.

Requesting Coverage of Events

In addition to submitting announcements for publication, you can send a media advisory/news alert to invite reporters to cover newsworthy events, such as trade shows and product launches. Use a simple outline or bullet format to summarise what will happen, who is involved, when, where and why. Additional details and background information can be attached in a news release or fact sheet.

Send media alerts at least seven to 10 days before an event, if possible, then follow up with a phone call one or two days before the event, or fax an updated alert/reminder. A sample media alert is presented in Figure 3.3.3.



SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE

(Use letterhead, if appropriate. If not, put your name and return address at the top.)

Date

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE or RELEASE ON (date)

Contacts: Names to be contacted for enquiries

(Contact number/email)

THE PRESS RELEASE

Use a short, catchy headline in capital letters to grab the media's attention while introducing your topic. However, don't spend too much time trying to be clever, because the media tend to write their own headlines based on available space.

The first paragraph, known as the lead, usually has one or two sentences. Like the headline, it is designed to capture attention while providing key information.

Present the most important or most interesting facts first. Briefly answer the questions of who, what, when, where, why and how in the first sentence or paragraph. If you are writing a feature, the lead can be more creative, allowing you to set a scene, give an example, present a compelling statistic, relate an short anecdotal story or otherwise coax readers into your release.

Begin with the most important information and progress to the least important. Including a quote in the first few paragraphs, as well as scattering others throughout the release, will help to make it more personal and engaging. Indent each paragraph and double space, with one-inch margins on the sides to give editors room to make changes.

If the release ends on the first page, type "###" centred at the bottom of the page to indicate the end of the story. Use "more" if the release continues on another page. Do not split a sentence or paragraph between pages, even if you have to leave blank space on the page.

-more-

SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE Continued...

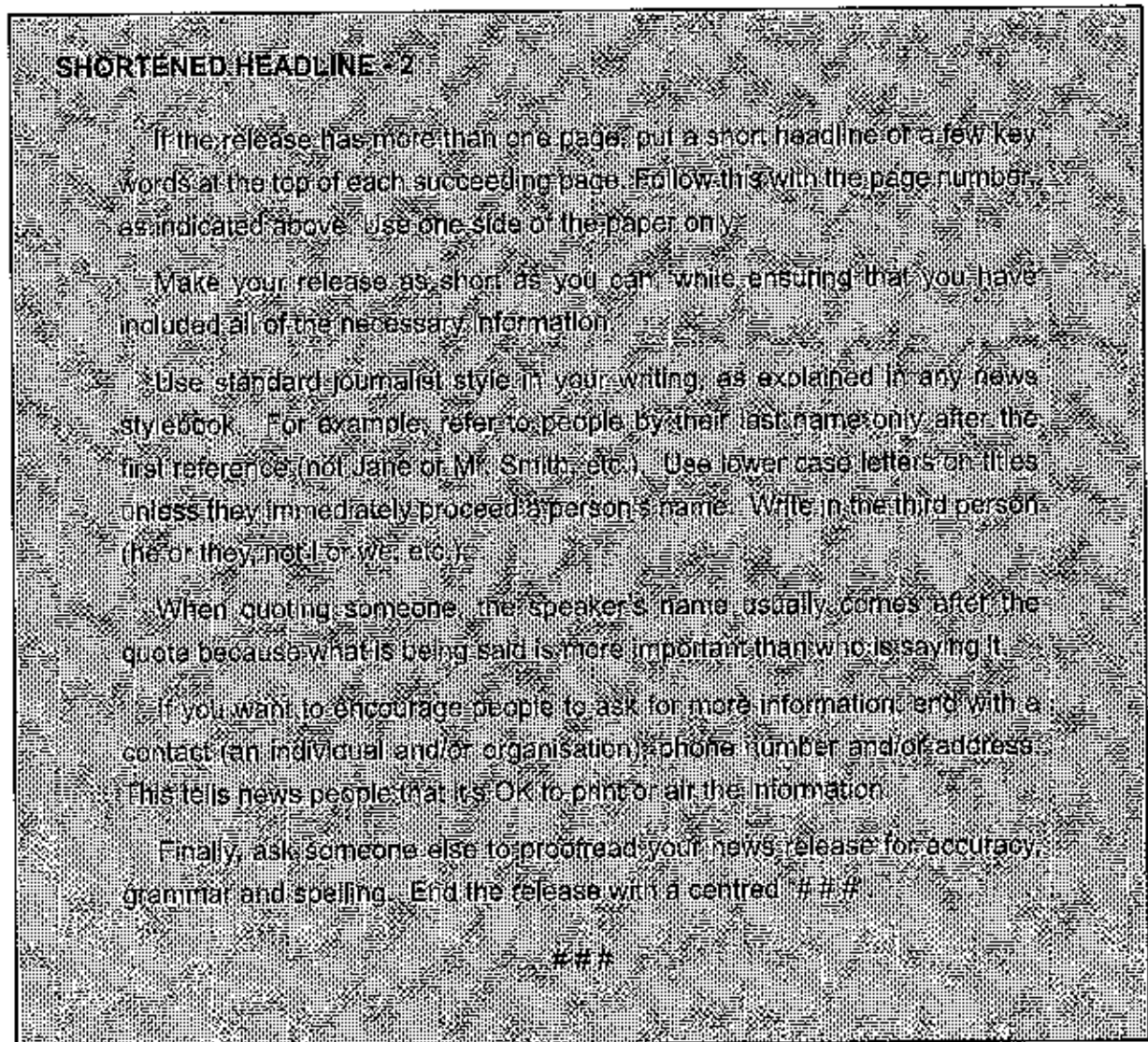


FIGURE 3.3.2: SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE

Note to Editors: If desired, you can include a note to the editors at the end of your press release to provide related information, such as photograph opportunities, a few sentences about yourself or your business, or a list of other people who can be contacted for a quote on the story. If you provide other contacts, be sure they know this and are comfortable with it. Also brief these individuals regarding your subject matter and goal, so that they can reinforce your message. An alternative option is to include additional information in a short covering letter.

SAMPLE MEDIA ALERT

(Use letterhead if appropriate. If not, put your name and return address at the top.)

Media Alert Date:

Contacts: Names to be contacted for enquiries
Contact number/email

Headline: (Something to capture the reader's attention)

Event: Description of the event in one short paragraph (attach additional information if required)

When: Day, date and time of the event

Where: Address and contact details of the venue

Background: Description of the background to the event in one short paragraph (attach additional information if required)

FIGURE 3.3.3: SAMPLE MEDIA ALERT

ACTIVITY 3.3.5 PREPARING A PRESS RELEASE

Check the Sample Press Release provided on page 64 and the guidelines presented on the preceding pages.

Develop a press release for your product or services.

Work with other members of the group to analyse and discuss your press releases, and make any necessary amendments.