

Strong news releases - more important than ever

By

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It's not about the press or media

Telling war stories about bad news releases is easy and sometimes fun if you're teaching students or professional groups how to write them. Bad releases are a good touchstone for showing what should or should not be done to make a release effective. Inevitably, the fundamental flaw in a bad release can be identified as the writer's inability to focus on news.

Differentiating between news and information is essential, and that's why anyone writing a release should be encouraged to think of it -- and call it -- a news release. Not a press release. Not a media release. Not anything other than a news release. News implies immediacy and activity. Media (and the "press") are conduits to your audience, but they do not reflect the basic content of the release, and its very *raison d'être*. Call it a news release, and suddenly, you're writing news.

Why strong news releases are more important than ever

Electronic communication gives news releases an unprecedented avenue to readers as direct downloads. And as news gathering gets speedier and more sophisticated, releases likewise have a better chance of being read in a broadcast. So, if they're likely to run alongside news stories written by others, won't their likelihood of being published increase if they're written like news stories? Absolutely!

It's even possible to balance a news release, as you would a news story. Talented news releases writers (who command a decent rate for their ability to show uptake) know balance means anticipating troublesome questions about the news, and answering it in the release. The media outlet may embellish whatever point you've raised, which in a democracy is fair game. But at least you've led them to it and stated your perspective on it, so they don't have to wonder about it and chase it, or worse, ignore it while they pursue someone else's perspective.

Sorting through your decisions

How often should you issue a news release? Well, the media publish and broadcast every day, right? So, why not issue a news release every day? That inane thinking is as poor as the agency, organization or individual that arbitrarily sets a target of sending out a release weekly, or monthly, or bi-monthly, or quarterly. The golden rule is: issue a news release when you have news to release. Maybe that's weekly or quarterly if you have business activity to report.

But don't issue news for the wrong reasons. On a blog from U.K. guild president Joe Watson, Cedric Porter, of U.K.'s Farm Business publication and a judge of the guild's writing competition, entertained the idea of giving what he called a wooden spoon award for bad news release writing. Porter forecast the prize would likely go to "a release without a particularly different story to tell, that comes from a PR agency that can show it is putting out a certain number of...releases a month." For an agency, the temptation to release a significant quantity of news is understandable, to show the client productivity (and charge accordingly). But clearly, it annoys editors.

And isn't journalism about relationship building? Sure it is. Then too, news release writing should be the same. Why alienate those who are the pipeline to your readers or customers, those who will be on the receiving line time and again of your news release? They are the best source of feedback when a release gets used, or more significantly, when it doesn't. And how powerful a tool you can have at your disposal when you go to your client or boss and say "The editor told me he didn't use the release because the news was buried, the angle was fluff and we spent too much time thanking politicians." That will get someone's attention.

These are fundamental and powerful news release concepts. From there, many of us go on to add our personal likes and dislikes. For example, Porter looks for genuine newness in a news release (he says that of the hundreds of releases he receives in a week, he follows up on 10 per cent or less). He also thinks too many releases are merely variations on previous ones. "These can be very frustrating and from a PR point of view very counter-productive - too many releases means that I'm likely to ignore them, potentially leading to the loss of a good and useful story," he says.

More tips for preparing strong news releases

- Can it pass the "So what?" and "Who cares?" tests? You need to answer these two questions quickly when you invite an editor to consider your news release, according to Dave Yewman of DASH Consulting, Inc. Speaking at the 2006 conference of Cooperative Communicators Association, he advised putting your story "in a nutshell" that answers these two questions and assures your release is news. Lane Palmer, former editor of *Farm Journal* magazine, was among others who, over the decades, have emphasized importance of the "So what?" question. [Barnhill, p. 3, and Palmer, p. 48]
- Use examples, stories and analogies to establish a common understanding. They help readers relate to points made in the release. [Primer > Avoiding Pitfalls]

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- Use visuals to emphasize key points. Be alert to content that cries for visuals that can clarify and explain beyond the capabilities of words. [Primer > Avoiding Pitfalls]
- Make it short. "Two pages is maximum and one page is better," according to a news release writing guide from CanadaOne.
- Give the draft version of your news release to "cold eyes." Bretislav Turecek of the Czech Republic used that expression to suggest that you give the final draft to a person who knows nothing about the issue you are depicting. Ask for reactions and suggestions. [Turecek > Page 11]

The Turf and Ornamental Communicators Association (TOCA) offers these news release guidelines for marketers:

- I will distribute news releases to the appropriate publications. "Understanding the publications and the audiences they write for is critical."
- My media list will be updated frequently to determine current contact information and editor preferences. "Incorrect addresses, e-mails or fax numbers may delay the review of your release or cause its loss altogether."
- I will not call editors to confirm that a release has been received. I will also not call editors to ask whether or if a news release will be published. "Contacting editors about news releases is the biggest complaint editors have against PR practitioners. It is considered acceptable to call editors to pitch story ideas. However, virtually all editors state that they do not have the time to track news releases."
- I will not call editors to ask for clips of my published news release. "If a copy of the published news release is needed, contact the magazine's sales or circulation department."
- I will never use advertising as a leverage for placement. "To use advertising to 'strong arm' editors to publish news releases or other editorials is a serious breach of professional ethics."

Other ways to drive an editor crazy.

Here are several more how-not-to tips from two Cooperative Communicators Association members who routinely spend their days reviewing releases. These tongue-in-cheek suggestions appeared in the April 2006 issue of *CCA News* as "surefire ways to drive [editors] nuts, bonkers, over the edge - assuring that your news never gets published:"

- Send the information in PDF format. "If sending your co-op letterhead is more important than the news you're trying to communicate, by all means send it as a PDF file. Busy editors have plenty of time to extract your piece of news and reformat it."
- List a contact person who can't be contacted. "Editors love nothing more than scrambling to find someone who knows the answer to a question and can be quoted."
- Send the release by regular mail. "Since the whole idea behind news is that it is timely information, do choose the slowest method of delivery while others are speeding their information via e-mail." Instead: "If you can't send it by e-mail, fax is my second choice."
- Don't offer a photo. "Announcing the appointment of a new CEO? Don't bother to offer a photo of the new leader; make editors beg for it." Instead: Provide a photo or explain that a photo is available on request.
- Provide a routine grip-and-grin photo. "Every editor wants to fill his publication with uninteresting photos."
- Submit a low-resolution photo. "Along with your release, send a 72 dpi shot that's the size of a postage stamp."

What suggestions about news releases would you add to these?

Can you pass along examples of problems you have seen in agricultural news releases?

Please send them to Owen (at owen@uoguelph.ca) or Jim (at evansj@uiuc.edu).

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