

Press Releases

The press release is the most basic tool for getting earned media. It should be short, sweet, and to the point. A press release can cover any number of topics, from responding to a major current event to announcing something newsworthy. Be careful about what you deem newsworthy. Your upcoming organizational picnic isn't—unless, of course, your organizational picnic is a nude hotdog roast in front of the state capitol.

Press releases should help reporters write interesting articles with minimal effort on their part. On occasion, media outlets (especially online media) will pick up your press release and publish it with little or no modification. More commonly, journalists use them as a springboard for a larger story. Before you sign off on your next press release, read it from a reporter's perspective. Is it newsworthy? Does it answer all the "w" questions (who, what, when, where, and why)? Does it have a good news hook? Use real-life examples to create human interest and make your press release timely. Finally, make sure it integrates with the messages of your larger campaign.

Press Release Format

Press releases follow a straightforward format. Take a look at the press releases on the websites of organizations such as HRC or GLAAD. A typical press release includes:

- **Release instructions.** Tell the reader when the information can be released (e.g., "For immediate release" or "for release on February 15, 2008").
- **Headline.** Grab attention with a short, concise headline, ideally under 80 characters. It should transmit the core topics covered in the release, so an editor immediately knows what the story is about.
- **Summary paragraph.** One or two sentences outlining the major points of the release. It should answer the five to six basic questions of Journalism 101: who, what, when, where, how, and why? Note that some press services only receive the headline, summary, and a link to the release. Hence, the summary can make or break your efforts.
- **Body and dateline.** The body of the release begins with a dateline that includes the city, state, and the date of the announcement. The



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lead sentence contains the most important information in 25 words or less. Don't assume your reader has read your headline or summary paragraph; the lead should stand on its own. Keep your sentences short and introduce new paragraphs every five to six lines. The body copy of the release shouldn't exceed 500 words; write in a direct, straightforward manner. Short and terse is good. Long, drawn-out and superfluous is bad. The body fully describes the issue, event, etc., and should bolster and explain the points made in the lead. Include a quote or two from credible and compelling people. Consider quoting an important ally or public figure instead of your organization's executive director.

- **Further information.** This section tells readers where they can gain further details (e.g., your website).
- **About/organization boilerplate.** Include a standard sentence or two about your organization.
- **Contact.** This usually includes Contact Person, Company Name, Phone, Fax, and URL.

What Makes a Press Release Good?

It goes without saying (but we're going to say it anyway) that a press release should be well written. Some things to consider:

- **Where's the news in this news release?** If you have more bun than burger, it might not be the right time to do a press release. If your releases aren't newsworthy, no one will pay attention when the time comes to make a valid, big news splash. Sending out press releases for the sake of sending out press releases simply reduces your credibility.
- **Calm down those "excited" EDs.** If you're compelled to write a quote on behalf of your organization's ED, make it meaningful. A quote should add something new to the body of the release. It's an opportunity to provide insight, not necessarily express boundless joy or frustration.
- **Keep the writing clear, active and grammatically correct.** No one likes to read convoluted, passive-voice sentences. Verbs and an active voice bring your press release to life. Rather than writing "reached an agreement" use "agreed." If you use acronyms, make sure to completely spell out the word or phrase on the first use, followed by the acronym in parentheses.
- **Economy of words.** Use only enough words to tell your story. Avoid using unnecessary adjectives or flowery language. If you can tell your story with fewer words, do so. Wordiness distracts from your story. Keep it concise. Make each word count.
- **Type font.** Choose a font that's simple, clear and easy to read. Some of the most popular ones include Times New Roman, Arial, and Helvetica. Avoid special fonts. If the person receiving your document doesn't have them, your release will look horrible on their screen. If you're sending out press kits that contain longer printed documents, use serif fonts like Times, Garamond, and Palatino.
- **Line spacing.** Leave at least one and a half spaces between lines so the copy is easy to read.

- **Sub-heads.** If the body copy of the release runs long, break it up with subheads. Short, bold-faced phrases can introduce specific areas of information within the narrative while providing a logical progression of ideas.
- **Numbering.** Make sure you number your pages! Include the line-centered word "more" at the bottom of each page, so the reader knows to read further—and let them know they've reached the end of the release with the word "END" or "###" (pound/number signs).
- **No HTML or attachments.** Never embed HTML or other markup languages in a press release submitted electronically. HTML formatting may make your press release unreadable for many outlets, and email servers often reject emails with attachments.

Submitting a Press Release

For a small fee, you can use a PR service to submit your press release to journalists and news editors at both print and online media outlets. A couple of the better known services are PR Web and PR Newswire.

Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor

In addition to submitting press releases, you can get good media coverage by writing letters to the editor and op-eds. Letters to the editor usually offer a rebuttal or support of an event or article. They should be no more than 250 words.

Op-eds are guest opinion pieces of 500 to 800 words that summarize an issue, develop an argument or propose a solution. They can be a terrific tool for getting detailed and sympathetic coverage on your issue. Before submitting an op-ed, look at several weeks of back-issues to understand the format, tone, and topic areas previously published by the newspaper you're targeting.

Newspapers usually publish letters to the editor and op-eds on a daily basis.