

Make it news - a guide to writing news releases

produced by John Foster FIPR

Top Fifteen Tips

- The first question to ask is 'Is it news?' If it isn't then there is little point in going any further. But it's not quite as easy as that: what is news to one medium, might not be so for another. A piece about a new range of office furniture is hardly going to be of interest to a national daily, but for a trade paper covering that market, yes, it might be. Again, an item announcing the newly-elected leader of your local council might be right for a regional radio station but will never make the six o'clock news.
- News is news if it is something that is not known before. News value is relative: a minor story can make the paper or provide a few seconds of air time on a slow news day, but will be binned when a major story breaks. If that happens it is better to wait a day or two. A release for publication on a Monday has a better chance of being published than on any other weekday unless some disaster has occurred over the weekend.
- Target the release to ensure that it goes only to the media who need it and is written in the right style for the particular medium chosen. Refer to your media guide, media contacts programme or to the Media Directory page of the IPR website which lists all national dailies and radio/TV stations; digital/cable/satellite TV; regional dailies, radio and TV stations; and news organisations. It will take time to compile a list relevant to your story but correct targeting will pay dividends.
- Write a first draft and polish later. If the deadline is tight, in many ways that's a help because you will write better under pressure. How it is written will make all the difference. Write in a snappy, lively way the way journalists do. Make it clear, concise and complete. Look for synonyms instead of repeating a phrase or word. Out with waffle, hard-to-grasp jargon, clichés. Keep sentences short, no more than 25-30 words and not more than two or three to a paragraph. Brevity is your watchword.
- Put the main facts in the opening paragraph. Say who, why, where, when. Write subsequent points in descending order of importance. Study newspaper style, listen to radio news broadcasts, watch TV news bulletins to see how the professional journalists do it. If there's a human interest angle, that's a plus point particularly for the tabloids. Stories with a hint of rags-to-riches, a big financial win, anything to do with children or animals will always stand a good chance of publication. Most readers and listeners prefer stories about people to things. Include, if possible, a direct quotation. For instance, put in a significant statement by the chairman or managing director on forward plans or profit figures. For new appointments, insert a quote from the chief executive saying what he or she will be doing. Use double quote marks and keep it short a single sentence of about 20 words will usually be enough. And don't forget to send a photograph.
- Layout and presentation are important. Double-space the copy to give the sub-editor (or sub for short) room to make changes. Most will insist on rewriting, or at the very least make substantial amendments. But you might be lucky once you have written a few releases for a given medium and have built close contacts. Don't underline anything in the release itself, and don't put anything in italics or bold. Restrict capitals to proper nouns. Keep the release to a single sheet of A4 if you can, but if the copy runs to a second page don't break a paragraph at the foot of the page, take the whole paragraph to the next page or start a new

one. Don't let a single word, or even just a few, dangle over on page 2 either (known as a 'widow' to printers).

- Give the story a snappy heading with a present-tense verb, saying what the release is about, preferably in a single line of capitals. If secondary headings or side-heads are needed, these can go in upper and lower-case, either in plain or bold type. The heading will help to 'sell' the story and it is worth spending time to get it right.
- Write in a factual style and avoid flowery adjectives and superlatives like exciting, lovely, superb. If it is something new don't hesitate to say so. Don't write puffery containing blatant advertising messages. Don't put recently if you can't be precise: say last week/month with the date in brackets. If there is much technical data, include it as an attachment. The same goes for speeches: the release should give salient points with the full text attached on separate sheets.
- The story should carry a date of issue at the top. Journalists dislike embargoes, but these are sometimes unavoidable, say for advance copies of speeches or for important announcements. This can be helpful for follow-up research. Be careful, however, since advance information often leaks out and could cause embarrassment.
- Timing is crucial. If it is going by post, remember it takes at least a day to reach its destination. A release posted on Friday night will not be seen until Monday. But if it is e-mailed (as many are these days) delivery is instant. A telephone call to the news desk to say the release is on its way might help, but you risk alienating the journalists if you do this too often. E-mailed releases, especially stories for local and trade papers, can go straight to sub-editor and typesetting without the journalist having to key-in the copy.
- Always include contact information at the end. Give names and day/night telephone and mobile numbers, fax, e-mail and website addresses for additional information. Make sure out-of-hours numbers are shown. Give brief background notes on the company/organisation/ product or service. Include correctly captioned photographs where appropriate, or say they are available on request.
- The release should be identifiable as a communication for publication or broadcast. It should carry a printed heading like 'News Release', 'Press Notice', 'Press Information' or simply 'News from XYZ company', 'XYZ Information Service'. If it is from a consultancy, make sure it is issued on behalf of the client company or organisation. Print it in house colours and style and include the logo if there is one.
- Include a list of current releases on your company website for direct downloading and printing-out. Full background information on the company or organisation should be available at the click of the mouse.
- If you are tempted to produce a video news release (VNR), use a specialist company to make it. But VNRs are expensive and may not be worth it in the end.
- Remember - keep it short!