

News Release Guidelines

Written and Formatted as News Release

(covers Traditional and Online Versions)

By Don Bates, APR, Fellow PRSA

Don is Instructor in Writing, New York University MS Program in Public Relations and Corporate Communications, and Founding Director, Strategic Public Relations Master's Degree Program at George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management, Washington, DC. Don also conducts private and public business and PR writing workshops and tutorials.

Introduction: Short History

The workhorse of professional public relations, the news release (*aka* press release), was invented in the mid to late 1800s by most historical accounts.

Written in the form of a news story or short feature article by early publicists (now largely referred to as public relations practitioners), the typical news release [**See example below**] presents the point of view of the organization that disseminates it.

Although there is no guarantee, the reporters and editors who receive news releases often use them as is, edited, or as background for a feature article, editorial or column. Trade media (publications that cover particular industries or professions) often use them with no or limited editing, but mainstream media rarely do; instead, they edit and/or rewrite them to assure greater editorial objectivity as well as conformance with their particular editorial styles.

Business, government and not-for-profit organizations use news releases to report all kinds of news and information. Here is a small sample of conventional topics:

- New products, services, patents
- Product and service sales
- Financial and investor information
- Fundraising results
- Business plans
- Survey results, research studies
- New plants, stores, offices, hires
- Social responsibility activities
- Positions on legislation, issues, crises
- Trends and issues
- Inventions, discoveries
- New lines of business
- Laws and regulations
- New construction
- Special events
- Public alerts
- VIP visits
- Official announcements

Apparently, news releases were first used by the country's big railroads, although they rapidly became the norm in most corporations and other large organizations, including government agencies, NGO's and not-for-profit charities and associations.

Early in the 20th century, Ohio Bell Telephone allegedly discovered that if it distributed "canned" news, newspaper reporters would stop going to telephone rate hearings to get the information in person, thereby minimizing uncomfortable inquiries about the rates and related matters or wasting time. Today, tens of thousands of releases are distributed daily by email, mail, fax and messenger to the 50,000 print and broadcast media – and that's only in the U.S. At least as many are distributed daily outside the U.S., with the largest concentration in Western Europe. The worldwide total is easily in the hundreds of thousands.

Initially considered a form of advertising because of their self-serving content (and charged for accordingly by some media), releases quickly became accepted for what they are today – a free source of news and information that can be used by print and broadcast media in developing their coverage. The coverage releases generate is referred to as “earned” media as opposed to paid (advertising) media.

The traditional news release format (one or two pages of double-spaced text with standardized spelling, punctuation and style) evolved to satisfy such things as the needs of editors for space between lines for their hand-written editing, and typesetters who required a certain style they could easily follow when setting “hot” type.

With most releases now sent via e-mail, the format of news releases has become far less important; i.e., recipients don’t need or want double-spaced text in e-mails and “hot” type has all but gone the way of the horse and carriage.

Because of digital technology, online or electronic news releases can also contain photos, audio and video, although the media, at least for now, much prefer hyperlinks to these items than attachments. Attachments often contain computer viruses and can be difficult to work with.

Introduction: Search Engine Optimization

A new trend in e-mail news release is to imbed the popular search terms throughout the text in order to get bigger pick up from search engines. This is an interesting technique but one that is fraught with the possibility of being flamed or otherwise criticized by recipients as false and/or manipulative. The release might get looked at by more editors, reporters and researchers but it might not be taken seriously because the language is so forced and unnatural. The next news release from the same source might not only get ignored but blocked.

Many public relations practitioners also disseminate their news releases well beyond the media, especially to key audiences such as employees and investors – people who are as interested as the media are in what the companies or organizations they support are doing.

Examples of news releases abound in the online pressrooms of most major corporations. Thousands can also be found on the websites of major public relations wire services (e.g., Business Wire or PR Newswire). For bad examples of news releases and related publicity tools, visit <http://badpitch.blogspot.com>.

**SEE NEXT FEW PAGES FOR NEWS RELEASE WRITTEN
AND FORMATTED IN TRADITIONAL PR AND MEDIA STYLE.
RELEASES IN THE BODY OF EMAILS (AS OPPOSED
TO ATTACHMENTS) CAN LOOK QUITE DIFFERENT.
EXAMPLE USES AP STYLE THROUGHOUT.**

1) *Masthead and/or Name and Address of News Release Source:*

WritingRX.com

2) *Release Date:*

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date of Release [Immediate or Embargoed]

3) *Contact Information:*

FOR MORE INFORMATION

NAME OF CONTACT

Tel: 000-000-0000

E-mail: dbates@gwu.edu

4) *Headline [one line, two lines maximum]:*

BUSINESS WRITING EXPERT SUMMARIZES NEWS RELEASE GUIDELINES

5) *Link to images if available and needed:*

[CLICK HERE FOR PHOTOS \(OR VIDEO\)](#)

6) *Dateline [city, state, date of release] followed by text:*

NEW YORK (January 1, 2011) — News releases are an important tool for informing the press and their audiences. Releases should convey newsworthy information about the companies or organizations for which they are disseminated. Thousands are emailed, mailed, faxed or hand delivered daily to the nation's 50,000 print and broadcast media. Public relations practitioners – “publicists” – write the releases on behalf of people and organizations who hire them.

According to Don Bates, writing instructor at New York University, and founding director of the strategic public relations master's degree program at George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management, Washington, DC, releases should be written and formatted in keeping with media needs and preferences.

Bates, a former reporter and public relations executive who has written hundreds of news releases for business, government and not-for-profit enterprises, as well as for authors, musicians and writers, said the document's traditional format makes it easier for the press to use the information provided – as is, edited, or as background. This is especially true if the releases are printed and mailed.

If the releasers are emailed, which is most often the case these days, the style and format can be quite different. In fact, Bates added, email and electronic distribution are dramatically altering how news releases are written, styled and distributed.

Bates advised publicists and their employers to “Prepare releases properly and your publicity efforts will lead to significant payoffs – to ‘third-party endorsements,’ in particular – and greater visibility and credibility among the people who read the information they contain.” He adds, “Most important, releases open the door to media coverage by helping editors and reporters understand whether the products, services, people or issues described deserve their attention.”

Structurally and stylistically, news releases must address several essentials.

WRITING STYLE: Meet the standards of journalistic writing — simple and direct language (factual, to the point, not “pluggy”), short words, short sentences, short paragraphs, active verbs, meaningful quotes. Writing that follows AP style, is accurate, credible, appropriately substantiated, properly punctuated, carefully proofread. Clear writing and newsworthy content are crucial.

LENGTH: As short as possible. One page is ideal, two OK, but three or more is too long unless the release constitutes a “feature” – i.e., a more detailed release, such as this one, which might run as a bylined how-to article rather than a news story. Fact sheets and other documents can be attached or enclosed. “The idea is to give the media only what they need for their purposes,” Bates explained, “which in most cases are the facts embodied in the classic 5 W’s – the who, what, where, when and why of the story in question.”

TYPOGRAPHICS: Formatted for copying on one side of a standard 8-1/2 x 11 plain white sheet of paper or letterhead. Use same weight paper for each page and standard 10 pt. or 12 pt. “serif” typeface (not italic, “artsy” or “sans serif”). Serif is far more readable than sans serif, which is why virtually all newspaper and book publishers use Times Roman or other common serif fonts for text. Leave ample margins (at least 1 inch) top and bottom, right and left. Indent paragraphs. Use unjustified right margins. Number the pages. Put “more” or “continued” at the bottom of each page. Put -30- or ### to mark the end.

For email-only releases, formatting can be more flexible if the text is in the message window – i.e., without headlines and graphics. Bates’s research shows that most reporters and editors favor text-only email releases, preferring a 200-300 word summary hyperlinked to the full release. They can read the summary quickly and decide if they want to dig deeper. Ditto for photos. Link the journalists to a server where they can make their choices. Putting images in the emails only complicates matters. Make it easy for editors and reporters to do their jobs.

RELEASE DATE: Most releases are sent “FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE,” but occasionally some are “embargoed.” In this instance, the release date would say “FOR RELEASE ON OR AFTER” (a

specific date). Important lengthy reports are often embargoed. The report along with or without an accompanying news release arrives several days in advance of its official availability, accompanied by an embargoed news release which gives all of the recipients an equal chance to digest it and prepare their stories before the public announcement.

IDENTIFICATION: Name, address, phone numbers (during and after hours), and e-mail address of author and other contact(s) at the top the first page. Many organizations – hospitals, for example, the police and other “emergency” services – include the contact’s office and home phone/fax/e-mail numbers to make sure the media can get answers to questions day or night. “But everyone should provide information for 24/7 contact,” advised Bates. “When reporters or editors want something, they usually want it right away. Why miss their calls, especially if they want to cover your story? And trust me; they won’t call you unless they must.”

DATELINE: Date of the release and place of origin should lead the first paragraph.

HEADLINES: Headlines are common in news releases but they aren’t required – at least for reporters and editors. One-line pithy headlines are sufficient. With a few simple words, they should give recipients a snapshot of what the release covers. They shouldn’t repeat the release’s lead sentence. In email releases, the subject line acts as the headline although many PR practitioners put a headline in the body of the email, as well.

FOLLOW-UP: Once distributed, most publicists will call, email or meet with the recipients to see if they need more information or assistance. “Be careful,” warned Bates. “Don’t badger reporters and editors. And certainly don’t call them to find out if they received your releases. They are busy people with lots of deadlines. Be considerate. Be helpful. They’ll remember the courtesy.”

Follow these rules, Mr. Bates emphasized, and your news releases not only will get more attention; they also will become the basis of news stories and feature articles that wouldn’t have materialized otherwise.

MISCELLANEOUS AND OPTIONAL: Add production code (at bottom left or right side of last page); single space the last paragraph or sentence on the final page if it will eliminate a sheet of paper; include a brief boilerplate description of your organization.

Example of boilerplate description of the organization sending the news release:

Located in the nation’s capital, The George Washington University’s prestigious Graduate School of Political Management (GSPM) was founded in 1987 as the first school of applied politics in the U.S. Its programs include degrees and certificates in political management, legislative affairs, and strategic public relations. The New York Times called it “The West Point of practical politics.” For information, call 202-994-6000 or visit www.gwu.edu.

###

01/01/2011-5, News Release Guidelines

(Sample production code for month, day, year plus number of pages and subject)