

How to Write Effective Press Releases That Reporters Will Actually Read

The press release is far from dead. Yet some elements of writing an effective release have changed. Some of the tips below whack at sacred cows, ie ditch the boilerplate. Other tips are variations on more familiar lessons, such as not only “think like a journalist” but “be a journalist” and “think like a cinematographer.”

✓ TOSS THAT BOILERPLATE

The boilerplate takes up space that could be better used. Journalists who cover your brand rarely need to use your boilerplate. Should they need to, point them to your website. An added bonus: This drives traffic to your site.

✓ WRITE A STORY NOT A PRESS RELEASE

You’ve heard it countless times: “Think like a journalist.” Better yet, *be* the journalist. Begin by crafting your release to read like a bylined, self-contained article. Write a news release, not a press release. The release should provide information the journalist lacks, including links to bios and photos of those mentioned in the release as well as graphics journalists can use. Releases should be written with a single audience in mind—reporters.

✓ AVOID BEING A SLAVE TO SEO

Headlines are critical. They’re your first opportunity to grab the reader. If the headline fails to catch the reader’s attention, he/she likely skips your release. Still, as you’re crafting headline, don’t become a slave to SEO. SEO rules change often, so avoid letting it limit your creativity. Above all else, keep the headline compelling.

✓ THINK LIKE A CINEMATOGRAPHER

Do you like to read large blocks of text? Neither do journalists. Even if you have a long, complicated release, such as an earnings report, always think visually. In fact, think like a cinematographer. Break up long releases into manageable bites. Use visuals that are appealing, easy to understand and which tell a story. Make sure visuals are easy for journalists to access and use in their reports or tweets. That said, avoid using visuals just to use them. Use the tool that will help you tell your story best and will be most appealing to your readers. Don’t think about visuals strictly in terms of images and video, use listicles, infographics, bullets, numbers, charts and short paragraphs.

✓ DISTRIBUTION, DISTRIBUTION, DISTRIBUTION

This aspect of the release process often is ignored. Yet distribution should receive as much attention as the writing and layout of the release. Instead of buying the standard U.S. list, try distributing to specific cities or states to get similar engagement for less money.

✓ DO THE TWO-STEP

Not to worry, no dancing’s involved. Step one: When seeking coverage for special, one-off stories, as opposed to standard earnings statements and personnel announcements, target your release. Remember, the personal touch works best. Find out which journalists should receive your release and personalize each release email. If you have time, angle some aspect, perhaps the subhead, to the individual reporter. You’ll find that sharing your release with fewer reporters instead of using the blanket list will yield more and better coverage. Step two: Follow up. It really matters. Take time to know what the journalist has written lately—it will make your pitch more relevant.

✓ BUILD A RELATIONSHIP

Most journalists make placement decisions based on a release’s news value, but having a solid relationship with a reporter can tip the scales in your favor. The reporter must trust that you won’t waste his/her time; that if you say you will do something you will; and that you’ll be available (never issue a release with yourself as the contact on a day when you’re on vacation). ■

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