

## WRITING A PRESS RELEASE: COMMON ERROR TO AVOID

By: Dan Janal

Press releases can be an excellent tool for business promotion, if they are properly written and presented. A problem occurs because most people are oblivious to their special requirements. So what is a press release, and what other mistakes should you be avoiding in order to maximize the chances of a media placement?

### 1) Sounding like an advertisement

Companies and individuals quite frequently focus their news releases on how to use their product, or why their product is the best over the competition. Some companies may also focus on the features and benefits of a particular product or service they offer. A press release is not a tell-all promotional piece that is full of detail. Remember, journalists are not your marketing partners. Their job is to relay newsworthy information to their audience, and not to sell.

### 2) Writing a press release with your business target audience in mind

Unlike advertising copy, which is written to appeal to your customer, a press release is written to appeal to a journalist. The journalist is not someone who is seeking to buy your product or service; instead they are seeking to fill a news need. When writing a press release you must meet that need by filling the reporter's requirements. Instead of answering the question, "What's in it for me", answer the questions, "Why would this publication's readers, television station's viewers, or radio station's listeners care?" Do your homework, before writing and distributing press releases. Read the publication or watch the television segment or listen to the radio station. Become familiar with their format, and what type of articles and press releases the publication prints. Most newspapers receive anywhere from fifty to one hundred press releases a week with approximately 10-25 percent of those have nothing to do with the publication to which they are sent.

### 3) Inappropriate Headlines

The headline should take a new focus. One of the best ways to entice journalists to read the press release is to develop an eye-catching headline that proclaims its newsworthiness, instead of pronouncing the benefits of the product or service.

### 4) Writing too much

Clear and concise press releases get read, and get used quite often. If you think that using flowery descriptions will help stimulate the editor's interest, I am sorry but you are sadly mistaken. Avoid trite, overused words like "fabulous" and "wonderful." Stick to the facts. When writing your press releases remember the acronym:

K.I.S.S. - Keep It Simple Silly. Press releases are not novels and are not meant to tell the whole story. Think of your press release as being the “Cliff Notes” of your PR campaign. It should be a quick summary to inform the media of issues within your business that you feel your audience needs to know about. Most press releases should not be any longer than 400-500 words maximum. Find the shortest, simplest way to make your points in order to avoid wordiness. You can always provide in-depth details later to a reporter interested in knowing more.

#### 5) Not enough content

Make sure you answer all of the “W” questions to ensure a complete press release. If you are sending a release as a result of an event your organization is planning, be sure to include the answers to: who, what, where, when, how and why in your first two sentences. The person handling your press release is most likely under a tight deadline, which might only be minutes away. Your press release will be prioritized in a quick scan of the first line to determine if it fits the criteria of the publication and whether the day of the event mandates the event’s inclusion in the day’s news.

#### 6) Missing Contact Information

If a reporter has any questions concerning your press release, he or she must be able to contact the appropriate manager or department. When writing your press release, do not forget to clearly state whom the contact person is and how to reach them.

#### 7) All Upper Case Characters

Never submit a press release in all upper case letters. The headline and body of your press release should be in proper case form.

#### 8) Hype Flags

If you are emailing press releases, be careful of too many “hype flags”. This will cause spam filters to intercept your press release before it reaches to its destination. A “hype flag” is anything that challenges the credibility of your press release such as abundance of exclamation points or wild product and service claims.

#### 9) Grammatical Errors

Even the best writers occasionally miss grammatical errors and typos. Please proof read, edit and reproof all press releases. If a press release has too many spelling and grammatical errors, you are demonstrating a lack of professionalism, which leaves editors and reporters with bad tastes in their mouths. The Associate Press Stylebook is an excellent resource for those writing press releases.

#### 10) Including Dates in Press Releases:

This is perhaps the most common mistake. If your new release is not about an upcoming event, DO NOT PUT A DATE ON IT. By the time a reporter may be interested in your news release, some considerable time may have passed. Don't discourage the reporter that what you submitted is old news. Always remember that even if your news release wasn't used right away, that it will be kept (if written well and containing useful information) by a particular department and may be used as late as a year from the date you submitted it.

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