News Releases and Public Service Announcements[1]

Ricky Telg and Lisa Lundy[2]

This publication about news release and public service announcement writing is the third of a four-part series on media relations. This series also covers media relations strategies, working with the media, and media interview skills.

Introduction

You may be called upon to write a **news release** – also called a *press release*– or **public service announcements** (PSAs) about your organization's activities, interesting news, or important events. This publication provides tips about how to write news releases and PSAs.

News Releases

A news release is sent to news media to announce something that has news value. A news release provides reporters with the basics they need to develop a news story.

Your news release needs to be local and newsworthy. Your news release should be brief, no more than two double-spaced pages in length. Most importantly, your news release must be well written. It is a good idea to send the release to the person who likely would cover the event; do not just send it to "The Editor." Most news media outlets list reporters, their phone numbers, and e-mail addresses on their Web sites.

Writing the News Release

A news release is written in just the same way that reporters write news stories. Here are some elements of news writing style to keep in mind:

Inverted pyramid structure: You want to include the most important information first, followed in descending order by less-important information.

5 Ws and H: The most important of the questions (who, what, when, where, why, or how) should be answered in the lead. Others are answered later in the story.

Lead: The first paragraph that is used to grab the reader's attention.

Short paragraphs: Paragraphs usually run one to two sentences in length. Rarely do you see paragraphs of more than three sentences in a news story.

Quotations: Quotations are the exact words of someone talking. It is a good idea to use quotations to bring "life" to your story. Providing quotations for a reporter saves him/her time and makes it more likely they will cover your story.

Associated Press Style: The news release must follow AP Style. This is the standard style for news writing.

Proofreading: The news release should be as free of grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors as possible. Proofread the news release several times.

The *lead*, or first sentence, provides the most important information. The second paragraph should provide any information that will immediately help the reader. For example, for a news release about an upcoming event, the second paragraph may provide the location and exact time of the event. Do they need to register ahead of time? Will there be a registration fee? This part of the news release often explains the "how" question.

Follow the "how" with information that provides context. This may be the "why" of the story. For example, why is it important for people to attend your event? The last part of the story provides useful detail and history. Many times this will be a brief paragraph at the end of the story that explains a little bit about the event. For news releases that feature an organization, the last paragraph usually contains information about the organization, such as the number of members, the history and how the organization supports the community.

In addition to imitating news writing style, news releases also should follow the following structure:

Spacing and length: The news release should be double-spaced. A news release should never be handwritten. The news release should be one to no more than two pages in length.

Identification: The name, phone number, and e-mail address of the news release writer or contact person should be provided, as well as the name, phone number, and e-mail address(es) of the person(s) interviewed.

Release date: The release date is at the top of the news release and indicates when the news release should be run and when it should not be considered. If a news release can be run or aired as soon as a reporter receives it, the phrase "For Immediate Release" is written. If the release has an ending date, then the release date will include something like this: "Run Until Dec. 4." Some news releases are "embargoed" because the information isn't public until a certain date. If this is the case, arrangements are usually made ahead of time to embargo or hold the story until a certain date.

News releases about events can either be pre-event or post-event stories. A *pre-event news release* is sent to news media before an event happens, in order to generate coverage of the event in newspapers and on television and radio broadcasts. A *post-event news release* is provided to news media after an event happens. These are used frequently at county fairs to summarize to news media who won fair competitions. These tend to be perceived as less newsworthy by news media.

Public Service Announcements

A **public service announcement (PSA)** is a free advertisement that radio and television stations air or newspapers and magazines print to highlight information about nonprofit organizations' programs, activities, or events. The message in the PSA should be clear. Include the day and time of the event and any information that the listener may need, such as a Web address or telephone number to learn more.

Keep in mind that you do not have control over when or if PSAs run. On television, PSAs may run during late night or early morning hours when few paid advertisements run. However, any free airtime is better than nothing. Radio stations can be better about airing PSAs because they do not take much time to produce. Radio announcers also may read the information live on-air.

Writing the PSA

Radio and TV announcers may help you write the PSA. If you have "live" copy for announcers to read on-air, make sure it is complete. It should have the phone number and e-mail address of someone in your organization to contact. Try to make the PSA as brief and as easily readable as possible. A 15-second radio PSA, for example, will only be about 38 words, and a 30-second radio PSA will be approximately 75 words, so your message will need to be to the point. Write the PSA in a conversational style with sentences of 12 to 15 words each. Do not use jargon.

For PSAs found in newspapers and some magazines, you will want to design the PSA so that people's eyes are drawn to it. This usually means to make the visual design appealing with an eye-catching headline, infographic, or photograph.

Additional Information

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