

Effective news releases



What Is A News Release?

The news release is a stylised letter mirroring the general style of a newspaper news story, sent to the media designed to get their journalists interested in your story. It is the main, established way of attracting media interest.

Depending on who you talk to, it also goes by other names such as press release, press notice and media release. No matter what they're called they are the same thing – a way of attracting media attention.

News releases are designed to give journalists a pithy summary of the 'story' to encourage them to get in touch, to further research the subject and then write a piece or conduct a broadcast interview on it. They typically consist of a couple of hundred words outlining the main points of the story, enough information for the journalist to decide whether or not they are interested in covering it.

We use news releases for 3 good reasons:

1. They are an accepted method for the media to receive stories.
2. They are efficient - one piece of paper can be distributed to many targets.
3. They force the writer to distil and make accessible what can be complex and lengthy base information.

You might decide to issue a news release for a number of reasons, including:

- You might have a new project or campaign being launched.
- You might want to publicise an event such as a conference or public lecture.
- You might be announcing a publication or report.
- You have a project taking place you want to involve other people in.
- You might want to publicly acknowledge the work of local volunteers

- You wish to influence policy and need to use the media to assist with lobbying.

Depending on your circumstances you may be issuing news releases about your own work, you may be working on them on behalf of your organisation, or you may be writing them on behalf of other people. How you write them is crucial to their success.

Releases can be the bane of a journalist's life. Every day of the year, the specialist correspondents will receive scores if not hundreds of releases. More than 90% will only receive a cursory glance. On average just 7.5 seconds is spent looking at each release in the initial scan for stories; as few as two or three will be read *in toto*.

Often the journalist may never even go beyond the stage of registering who sent the release and its headline and few are read beyond the first sentence or two unless they really 'ring a bell' with the journalist.

It seems ironic therefore, for something given such rapid treatment by journalists, that news releases remain their main source of stories.

The four Cardinal Rules to remember are:

- ***Is it news?'***
- ***If so - "Who to?"***
- ***Are you getting the news to the media in time?***
- ***Are you ready to deal with their response?***

Creating an Effective News Release

The first prerequisite is that we have to have something to say, we have to have 'news' which we want to transmit to the public via the media.

As we can't predict which of our stories will 'make it' on any given day then the guiding

principle is - provide the journalists with as much original information as possible and let the media make the decisions. This message needs to be tempered a little however, otherwise journalists will be swamped with paper they can never use.

If you are responsible for the media relations for a large event, then it would not be possible or sensible to write a media release on everything happening at it. So you have to be selective in terms of the aspects of the event you choose to release, but at the same time as sending the releases you should also send the full programme, so that the journalists can assess for themselves the newsworthiness of other items.

The media also has a very short memory, and stories often re-surface after a while – some time and time again. So, if you had a story appear, in say January, there is nothing to stop you issuing an almost identical story in September.

If it was a 'good story' then, it's likely to still be a 'good story, *as long as* you can find the new topical news peg – that is something up to date to say about it. If there is some extra, or more recent, information in the new release so much the better. So, if you've got past the stage of deciding whether you've got a story and what that story is, how can you put together a release that will attract the journalist?

Masthead

Embargo (if used)

Title

Body Text

- **5 Ws in para 1**
- **Support info**
- **Quote**

Contact Information

Date and reference

Corporate Chimps Ltd



News Release

Embargo: 10.00hrs Monday 1 September 2008

Corporate Chimps launch new tea set

A new tea set, called "Monkey Treats", will be launched at 10am on Monday 1 September 2008 by Corporate Chimps Ltd, manufacturers and testers of fine bone china at the "Tea for two" mug and cup exhibition in Brighton.

Depicting scenes from famous tea advertising the Monkey Treats tea service includes cups saucers, side plates and a special egg cup inspired by the classic 1920's designs of Ernest Chimp himself.

The set is being launched at a time when the tea service market has been slowing down, however Corporate Chimps believe this is the perfect opportunity to launch a new tea set.

Head of product development and marketing, Miss Oran Guteng said "We believe the classic design and competitive pricing of this tea service will kick start the market. It's been a long time since such an innovative design has been launched and we strongly believe this is what customers will want to have their high tea off".

The launch of the "Monkey Treats" tea set at the "Tea for Two" exhibition will mark a new development for Corporate Chimps Ltd who have not previously launched products at trade shows. "Tea for Two" however is the the premier trade show for the table ware industry and offers a chance to reach professional tea service buyers.

For further information contact : Mark Caques Press Officer 01290 538 756 (office) 0778 182 398 (mobile)

E-mail Mark@corporatechimps.com

Monday 28 August 2008

Ref : PR199a

Masthead

It is vital that the journalist knows the originating organisation and that what they've received is a media release. These may seem ridiculously simplistic points but journalists receive hundreds of bits of paper without this basic information. They then have to decide whether they have received a release, a letter for publication, or a private letter, and who it is from.

Your normal letterhead will probably do as long as you add the words 'News Release'.

The consistent use of a masthead has another very important rationale. In the great plethora of releases in the journalist's in-tray each day, the sight of a recognisable masthead is like a lighthouse to a lost sailor.

You can train a journalist to read your releases just by the sight of the masthead (a practical demonstration of 'operant conditioning'). If in the past a journalist got a good story from your source, then whenever your masthead pops into view the release will be read - and that's more than half the battle. Remember, you have just 7.5 seconds to get their attention.

Embargo

This line is a request to journalists to refrain from running the story before the time and date given. The embargo gives them time to find some extra background if required, and stops competitors stealing a march.

The breaking of embargoes by news organisations is rare, as they know that if they consistently do it then you, the originator, will stop sending those miscreants your releases. This is a serious sanction and one no journalist wants to be responsible for.

You can set the embargo to whatever time suits you, but the two most used conventions are either 00:01hrs (one minute past midnight) on the day of the event or the time of the event itself.

The 00.01hrs embargo allows news-papers, radio and TV to report your event in that morning's editions - 'Dr So and So ***will tell***

the Saltby Society meeting ***today***'.

The 'time of delivery' embargo results in the following day's papers reporting the story - 'Dr So-and-So ***told*** the Saltby Society ***yesterday***', although of course radio and TV will still be able to cover the story at any time after the embargo.

The value of the 'time of delivery' embargo is that it can actually persuade journalists to attend the event rather than doing all the work by phone in the one or two days before. Actually having a journalist in attendance improves your chances of coverage as the investment of money and time will have already been made.

Title/headline

Very few of us have the skill to write Guardian style headlines which will grab the attention of the readers, so just try to be snappy, simple and write three, four or five words which factually state the subject of the release.

A useful tip is to leave the writing of the title until you have written the body text of the release. The risk in writing it before the body is that it can shape the story, rather than the other way around.

Don't get too wrapped up in the title. It is almost certain that it won't end up as the headline in the papers. These are written by the sub-editors who rarely see your news release at all. All they will see is the copy from the journalist, then they will write a headline to fit the space available on the page.

Body text

The release should be no longer than one side of A4 (200—250 words maximum). One side of A4 because no journalist has got time to read more.

Even if your story ends up as an 800-word feature the writer will come to you for the extra information, so you don't need to provide any more than the nub of the story. Double spaced and wide left margin are

essential so that the journalist can make notes in the margin, and for ease of reading.

Contact details

This is perhaps the most vital element of any release. No matter how well written your release, it is almost inevitable that, if the story is going to be used, the journalist will want to talk it through. So the names and numbers cannot be missed off. A mobile telephone number is a must. Journalists tend not to work 9-5 office hours, and early evening and Sunday mornings are prime times for them to call.

Dateline and reference

The dateline should be the date that you actually issue the release. Again, it has its use in that the journalist needs to know, at a glance, that the piece of paper is current and not something which can be instantly discarded.

Content

A media release is a self-contained story, told in 200—250 words, which contains 'the news' and an explanation of that news story.

A good media release should therefore mimic a newspaper news story in terms of form and style. The most flattering thing as a writer of news releases is to see your work appear in the paper just as you wrote it – but it only happens if you can accurately mirror the style for the paper.

So, the first thing to say is: read newspapers; see what words they use; how they structure a story; and how long the average story is – become an active consumer of the media. This kind of basic research is essential if you are going to produce a usable release. Writing for the media is a totally different discipline to writing for your usual audiences.

When you read the news pages of your daily paper you'll quickly see that the intro - the first paragraph - always contains 'the news'. The object of this is that if the reader does no more than read the first paragraph of every single news story, then they will have

got the news of the day.

So, the intro is vital because it is the hook to get the reader to read on into the body of the story; it should summarise the whole story. A boring or irrelevant intro will guarantee your story is unread.

A useful trick when you have finished writing your news release is to ask yourself 'If all that is printed is first paragraph, will we get the message across?'

The internal logic of the intro is that it must answer what is known in the journalistic trade as the five 'Ws'

- **Who?**
- **What?**
- **When?**
- **Where?**
- **Why?**

Explanations and subsidiary information should only come after you have given the journalist these five basic facts.

You have to grab the journalist's attention in a short space of time, so this means you must

"Keep it short and keep it simple" for maximum impact. Be prepared to compromise on detail. The journalists will chase up the finer points afterwards. The task of the release is to tip them off that there is a story and point them in the right direction.

News is always about facts. Make sure you get the key facts in your story.

Check and double check that the facts are correct throughout the release and that everyone involved is happy with the way you have presented them.

Statistics can be a powerful tool in a news release. But make sure they are clear, unambiguous, and easy to understand. For instance 'one in ten children' or 'an area the size of three tennis courts' are better than exact figures and statistics.

There are five writing principles to bear in mind as you choose how to word your release

1. Use active language
2. Be positive
3. Keep words short
4. Keep sentences simple
5. Check for accuracy

Use active language!

You have to use the active voice in your writing. By this we mean use the active rather than the passive voice in it. The news is all about people, things, events and interaction; news is about activity, and to bring these stories to life we have to use the active voice.

It's easy to write passively, but besides being dull and sometimes difficult to understand, it is nearly always long winded, and in a media release where every word is valuable the active voice is therefore a distinct advantage.

For example:

Wrong!

New observations were made by a team of sociologists

Correct

A team of sociologists made new observations

Wrong

The effects of the behaviours were assessed by Dr Smith

Correct

Dr Smith assessed the effects of the behaviour

The rule is SUBJECT-VERB-OBJECT

Be positive!

Tell the reader what happened rather than what didn't happen.

Wrong

The experiment was not a success

Correct

The experiment failed

Wrong

The Council says it will not proceed with its plans

Correct

The Council says it has dropped its plans

Keep words short!

The shorter you keep the words the better. Shorter words are easier to read, and easy to read means easy to understand and work with for the journalist. For every long word there is a shorter alternative. e.g.

In consequence of - **so**

In excess of - **more than**

Initiate - **start**

Economical - **cheap**

Endeavour - **try**

Erroneous - **wrong**

Facilitate - **help**

As well as avoiding long words you should be aware of the risks of using jargon or technical language.

When writing a news release never assume the journalists will have any background knowledge whatsoever - you have to write for a lay person who knows nothing about your subject area.

You should also remember to explain any acronyms and don't assume journalists will know what these letters stand for, no matter how well known you think they may be.

If you have to use a technical word or phrase explain it in simple terms. The average reading age in the UK is that of an 11 year old, therefore that's what you should be aiming for with your language. Newspapers are written to take account of this (some tabloids actually write in a style accessible by someone with the reading age

of a seven year old). If your copy can't be understood by an 11 year old it will struggle to find its way onto the pages.

A good tip is to run what you write past someone who isn't in your area of business. Ask if it is clear to them what you are trying to say. If they can't summarise the story back to you in their own words you have failed to express it clearly enough and it's back to the drawing board!

Keep sentences simple!

As well as simple words, you have to use simple constructions. Your sentences need to be clear and easy to read.

A complex sentence might read – *"The researcher, who works in Liverpool, one of several centres where such investigations are carried out, tested the effects of the drug which, in other studies, had proved to have only limited efficacy, though, it must be said, the circumstances were not exactly replicated"*.

A complex sentence has one main statement, but one (or more) subordinate and qualifying clauses. You want to avoid these complex sentences at all costs.

A compound sentence might read – *"The researcher tested the effects of the drug and showed it reduced infection"*. A compound sentence is two simple sentences joined together (usually with the word and).

A simple sentence might read – *"The researcher tested the effects of the drug"*. A simple sentence has one subject and one statement. There is one idea per sentence.

Try to use a mix of simple and compound sentences throughout to make your writing easy to read.

If you read newspapers, listen to the radio and watch TV news you will find there is a preponderance of "simple" and "compound" sentences. There are relatively few "complex" sentences.

This is very deliberate. The journalists know

their audience.

Ape their style and you won't go far wrong.

Distribution

You may have a beautifully designed and carefully laid out release. You may have polished the words to perfection. You may even have a great story. But, unless you can get it to the right people at the right time, the whole exercise has been a waste of effort. So the first piece of decision making is: who should receive your release? You need to consider who could possibly use it, who would find your story/news/event of greatest interest?

Specialist correspondents with an interest in your area of work are likely to be few and far between and may often be responsible for much wider briefs. So they are deluged with more material than they can use across an enormously wide field. It therefore helps to try to use lateral thinking to identify other correspondents who might be a better (and/or additional) target.

What is needed for each and every release is to look carefully at the content and then target appropriately.

Like so much in media work, the more you actively consume the media the better you will be placed to understand their needs and ensure you give the right stories to the right people.

Using Your Local Media

If you are starting out in the media release business then start local. This means compiling a list of all your local media: newspapers both daily and weekly (and the freesheets); radio (both BBC and independent); the TV companies which cover your patch; any local news agencies; and any local freelance reporters.

If you work in an academic department or large organisation you may have access to an in house press office or PR Team who can work with you to identify where best to send

you release.

Drawn by the fame of big national titles people often forget about their local media and this is a great mistake. Firstly, the take-up of stories is likely to be greater than on the national scene.

Secondly, the more local material you have appearing then the closer the bonds between you and your local community. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it can be a cost-effective way of getting your story into the national media. Local papers, local radio and local TV all feed into their respective national networks and if the local media see the wider potential of your story then they will pass it on up the chain.

Starting in your own geographical neck of the woods has a further advantage. You can use it to train yourself gently in both the skills of release writing and the skills of appearing on local radio and being interviewed by the local newspaper. Local media journalists are particularly good at developing long term contacts too, so they're well worth cultivating.

Final Tips

There are a couple of further points to note when you feel you are ready to release your story nationally. A trick used by many release distributors is to identify the two, three or four specialist correspondents on a title who may/ should be interested and send the release to all of them, plus a copy to both the news and the features editors.

This may sound wasteful, but if your resources allow then it can be and is a successful strategy as it exploits the internal dynamics of the news room, encouraging more than one individual to raise the story at the meetings when the news agenda for the day is being discussed.

News agencies, both local and national are well worth including in your distribution plans as they exist by selling stories to the rest of the media. At local level just about every

town in the country has a news agency which survives on a diet of sports and court coverage as well as trying to sell 'local' stories into the regional and national outlets.

At national level, the biggest and most respected agency is the Press Association (PA) and many organisations distribute their releases solely to PA. The advantage is that it is only one piece of paper, the disadvantage is that there is no guarantee that PA will decide to put your story out on its service.

The other press agencies which you should be aware of are the National News Agency, which also feeds into the UK media, Reuters, Associated Press, and United Press International which are all international agencies. Distribution of your material to these last three can mean your story ending up literally anywhere in the world.

Timing

You've got your release beautifully presented and you've decided who to send it to, but when should you send it? In news terms, news happens today and tomorrow, not yesterday, so your release has got to reach its target audience in time for them to react.

Your decision making on timing for newspapers and magazines will depend greatly on whom you have chosen as your targets. If you just want to hit the monthly magazine sector then you have to understand how that sector works and the deadlines to which they work. The general interest monthlies are usually working at least two, and in some cases three, months ahead.

The deadlines for the weekly mags and/or papers usually mean that no copy can be included after two or three days prior to publication day. For instance, the *Times Higher Education Supplement's* deadline is usually Tuesday lunchtime for Friday publication, so anything which arrives on or after that time will not go into that week's edition.

The daily papers need a minimum of 24 hours (unless it's a mega-story). This time is essential so that the journalist can convince the news editor that the story is worth writing; so that the writing can actually be done; and so that the editing process can be completed by the various daily deadlines that operate within the newspaper offices.

While television news may appear to be instant with satellite link-up to remote areas of conflict, this is only true for very major stories. TV has to have pictures, which means that the logistics of getting camera and sound equipment to wherever they are required has to be minutely planned; this takes time and a series of positive decisions. You must also realise that equipment is limited, and therefore TV is constantly having to make priority decisions.

Sometimes these are not made on the editorial strength of a story but on logistical considerations such as: can we get a crew there, and is it an efficient use of resources? Because live news is so expensive it is without doubt the most cost-conscious sector of the media.

TV documentary or factual programmes such as *Panorama* or *Horizon* can take months and months to prepare but this should not dissuade you from sending them your release. Your piece of paper may be just the prompt needed for a programme idea a year or so down the line.

Radio news has the shortest lead-time of all. It is possible for them to receive a media release in the morning post and for you and your story to appear on the lunchtime bulletins. However, again it is worth realising that all stories have to be 'sold' up the managerial decision-making chain, so time needs to be built into the process to allow this to happen.

Whilst radio news is very fast, radio features and magazine programmes usually need at least three to five days to decide,

plan and act. These are usually weekly programmes and the planning for next week's show will start as soon as they have finished recording this week's.

Freelance journalists work predominantly in the features area and they have to sell their ideas to the features or news desk before they can start work. This can take some time, so the freelance writer will always be pleased to receive your release as far in advance as possible.

There is no single best time to catch all sectors of the media, but in terms of hitting a majority and especially hitting the news part of the media send your release out about 10 or 14 days before the event. This allows the specialist correspondent to evaluate your story, perhaps do some background research or talk to other experts. Both radio and TV can then enter your news event in their forward planning diaries and make decisions about allocating the necessary resources. This time also allows the freelance journalist to sell on your story into the features sections.