



14 Tips for Writing a Successful News Release

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM SUGGESTS THAT FOLLOWING A COOKIE-CUTTER PATTERN TO FORMAT YOUR NEWS RELEASE WILL ENSURE THAT IT'S USED. AS WITH MUCH CONVENTIONAL WISDOM, THIS IS WRONG.

The first word in the term “news release” is “news”. If the news release contains no news, it fails and will be discarded within 3 seconds. That’s about how long an editor will give your news release to display something that the editor’s readers will be interested in. And with today’s short-staffing of most news organizations, your news release had better be able to sell itself in 2 seconds or less.

Understand What News Is

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines *news* this way: “Information about recent events or happenings, especially as reported by newspapers, periodicals, radio, or television.”

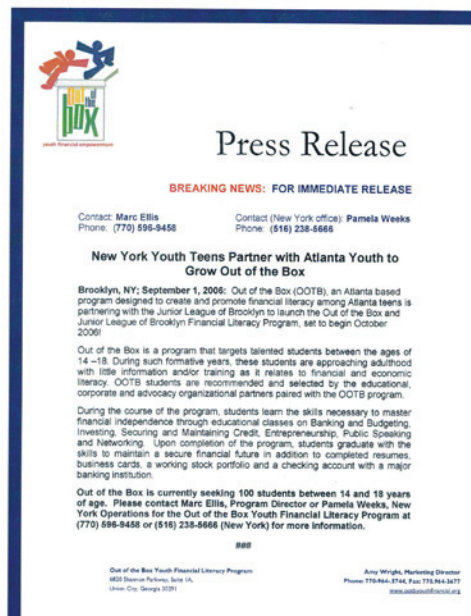
News has time value. Neil Armstrong’s first words from the surface of the moon were reported on the front pages of newspapers worldwide in 1969 but today their primary significance is historical.

News also must be interesting. As I was writing the previous paragraph, a cat climbed up onto my briefcase and looked around. That’s new information but probably of little interest to you or anyone else.

Another definition of *news* is “information you can use”. Although this definition carries dangers when adopted by the news media, it serves well as a starting point for a news release.

Identify Your Audience

Here’s where public relations professionals can take a lesson from direct-response advertising professionals. Direct-response advertising is



This is not the format I prefer and it uses what I consider to be an incorrect term (Press Release) but the format of your news release doesn't matter as much as the content. If the editor who receives the document isn't captivated by the words, the news release will be ignored.

measurable and the most successful marketers talk about the importance of the right audience. The late Ray Jutkins said that even a bad message sent to the right audience had a chance of selling while a perfect message sent to the wrong audience would flop.

Let's turn that concept around, though: For a news release, think about what's important to your target audience and craft the news release to address that need or desire. Singular.

Sell What the Audience Wants

Have you even gone to a hardware store with an overwhelming desire to purchase a drill bit? Unless you enjoy buying tools because you like tools, probably not. When you went to the hardware store to purchase a quarter-inch drill bit, it's probably because you needed a quarter-inch hole.

In antique sales-speak, this is known as *Sell the Sizzle, not the Steak*.

Cost is Not a Factor

Really. Many advertisements and news releases focus far too early on saving money but all consumers know that the best way to save money is not to spend it. Leading with costs or savings gives the reader a clear binary option: *Do I want to spend money or not? Not.* End of news release.

Until the readers know why the product or service will somehow enrich their lives, they are uninterested in the cost.

Don't Overload the Boat

A news release can carry one message. The message may contain several points of interest but everything that's included must support the overarching message.

Address the Reader's Needs

In 1943, Abraham Maslow wrote *A Theory of Human Motivation* in which he suggested that all humans have similar basic needs. He considered physiological needs (breathing, food, water) as the most essential. Once these basic needs are satisfied, other needs can be addressed.

Regardless of how you regard Maslow's work, it provides a compelling framework for identifying needs. Maslow's 1954 book, *Motivation and Personality*, explains the theory in greater depth.

Write the Headline First

Although you may change the headline later, write it first because this will identify the one overarching point that your news release will address.

The headline is what receivers will read first and, if the headline doesn't grab their attention, this will be all they read. Make it compelling.

Write the Body Copy

The more newsworthy you make the copy, the better the chances of it being selected by a journalist for reporting. The first paragraph should be no more than 3 sentences and should summarize the main point clearly.

The most important points go first. Deal with facts. Keep sentences and paragraphs relatively short but include variation so that the overall flow doesn't become monotonous.

Five Ws and an H

Journalists are trained to report who, what, when, where, why, and how. Any given account will place a greater emphasis on one or the other and some may be omitted because they are not known or are unimportant.

One more that I would add: *So?* Every reader wants to know *What's in it for me?* and if you don't answer that question, your news release has failed.

Review Spelling and Grammar

Editors are busy and usually overworked. If the editor can write an introduction and then paste in part of a news release, that news release will move ahead of one that requires substantial rewriting.

So use your application's spelling checker but also read the entire release (aloud works best) to identify errors that a spelling checker won't catch (to, too, two; there, their, they're). While you're checking spelling and grammar, watch for rogue punctuation, too.

Avoid Capital Offenses

In German, nouns are capitalized. In English, only proper nouns are capitalized. Capitalizing a word or phrase Does Not Make It More Important. Instead, it just looks silly and the editor would

have to carefully lowercase all the words that you carefully upcased.

Check the Headline

Now that you've written the body copy, look at the headline again. Does it accurately reflect the contents of the news release? Is there a better way to say it? Can it be shortened? Will it interest the reader?

Don't Call it a Press Release

In *Public Relations Online: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media*, Tom Kelleher says that recipients of your message include bona fide journalists as well as others who read and report news online, so "the term **news** release seems to work better than **press** release". Newspapers and magazines have presses. Radio stations, TV stations, and Internet news organizations do not. Silly as it may seem, some editors who work in electronic media immediately discard anything that's labeled a "press release".

Format the News Release

News releases should follow the general pattern that has evolved:

- Above the headline: "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE."
- Headline: Use bold or a slightly larger type face but maintain sentence capitalization. That is, do not capitalize words within the headline except for proper nouns.
- Dateline: Add a dateline at the beginning of the first paragraph. This should be formatted as "CITY, STATE Month 12, 2012".
- Body copy: Aim for about 500 words. If you have fewer than 300 words, you probably don't have enough material for a news release. If you've written more than 800 words, you have too much.
- Information about the company: This section is usually referred to as *boilerplate text*. It should be repeated in every news release and provides a quick bit of information about the company.
- Contact information: At the end of the news release, include the following contact information with each item on a single-spaced line: Your name, your e-mail address, city, state, postal code, and phone number. Ω

One is Not Enough

Walking past a friend's desk the other day, I noticed something new: 5 screens instead of 3. He was the first person I knew to have 2 monitors and now dual monitors are common.

Monitors have become larger over the years and some people think that adding a huge monitor is better than or at least equal to using 2 monitors. That is not the case.

Replacing a smaller cluttered monitor with a larger monitor just leads to larger clutter.

More than one monitor isn't the right solution for everyone but if you spend a lot of time in front of a computer and realize that you're constantly moving one application out of the way of another, you're a candidate.

The practice of installing more than one monitor has become sufficiently widespread that the *New York Times* recently carried an article that described how people use the extra monitors. One person had 6.

Generally one monitor is used for the primary task at hand and the second monitor is reserved for reference materials and control panels. Users of applications such as Adobe InDesign or Adobe Photoshop find that the second monitor is helpful for those applications' many controls. If you're a video producer, the second monitor is a necessity, not a luxury.

Some people need a third monitor or a fourth. In these cases, the first and second monitors are used as I've described and the third or fourth monitors display other information that needs to be visible at all times. For example, in a data processing center where someone needs constant access to a program that displays system status messages or stock brokers who need to watch specific trades while performing other tasks.

Try a second monitor sometime. You'll probably never go back to just one. Ω



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