

MEDIA RELEASES

The object of a media release is to get your story reported. There are three ways in which it may be used in the press:

- Part of your story is used, with or without a photo.
- Your story is printed as you wrote it, with or without a photo.
- A journalist follows up the story and expands on it. This story would probably be accompanied by a photo.

Certainly last option is the best. If your release is sufficiently interesting and if your material is presented properly, a news editor may be tempted to follow it up.

The story should be contained in the headline.

By all means look for an "angle" to sell your story, but remember the central question: "What is this story about?" Second question: "What is the feature that will most attract Joe Public (who is only interested in how it will affect him personally)?" That's probably your best angle.

The first paragraph should repeat and expand on the information in the headline. It should be short, snappy and preferably fascinating. No more than 25 words. Active tense should always be used for news.

Then tell your story. Keep it simple. Keep it interesting. The media likes "quotable quotes".

Long, complicated sentences are a no-no. They'll only have to be rewritten, and if the paper is looking for a "space filler", no-one will bother. So write in "copy". One idea to a sentence.

Avoid lists, unless you're using them for effect.

Many newspaper still write in the present perfect, past perfect and future perfect (have, had, would have), which is a nuisance and very awkward at times, but if you can manage it, your release will need less rewriting. TV and radio do not follow this archaic style, but not to worry. Your release will be rewritten in any case for radio and TV.

At the start of a story, attribute at the end of the sentence. eg. "The Government is going to the dogs," the newly-elected president of the Citizen's Group, Mr James Smith, said today. This style is reversed for radio and TV. Attribution begins the sentence or story.

Keep paragraphs short.

Keep releases short, too. Remember that hundreds of these things land on a News Editor's desk every day. The one s/he will grab when there's a shortage of copy or a story falls through at the last minute is the one that can be used "as is". If it's more than two pages, it's almost certainly too long.

By all means include background information with your release. Even if it isn't used this time, the added knowledge it gives the reporter might lead to another story.

Rule of thumb: If it's a news story, it should tell you WHAT happened; WHERE it took place; WHY it occurred; HOW; WHEN; and to WHOM. As simply as possible. It's a good checklist, even for highly experienced reporters, so it's an excellent one for preparing media releases.

For press and TV, if at all possible, a photo should be included.

At the end of every release should be the name of a contact person capable of answering further questions, preferably a second person in case the first is unavailable, and the phone, extension and mobile number on which to reach them. After a release is made, one of these people should be available for comment at any time. If they can't reach you when they want to, they may abandon the story.

Radio or TV may want to follow up with an interview. Make sure you have someone ready and briefed. That person should be suitable for the job. A world expert who is boring and incomprehensible would be better passed over for a charismatic junior.

If your release is about an individual, the media may wish to interview that person. You should approach him/her in advance and arrange possible times. You will get ten Brownie Points from the media for having this information when they ring. If you do the liaison, you'll get another five.

Call them Media Releases or News Releases, not Press Releases. Radio and TV are less likely to get snitchy, and it will remind you that you're also writing for the electronic media.

Who To Send Them To

- **Written releases should be sent to the News Editor.**
- **Requests for coverage of an event or meeting should be made to the Chief Reporter, or the specialist reporter whose "round" it is, and preferably this should arrive well in advance.**

Layout

Media releases should be laid out as follows:

- Typed, double spaced, one side of the paper only.
- Wide margins left and right for sub-editing. At least 3cm left and 2cm right.
- The date should be at the top, and clear.
- The "For further information" contacts should be at the bottom.
- If there's more than one page, type "more follows" at the bottom of the page.
- Type "ends" at the end.
- Staple pages together if you're posting a release. Have you ever seen a News Editor's desk? Page two may never be seen again if it's dislodged.

News Conferences

News conferences should be held for VIPs, major announcements, complex issues that couldn't be explained in a news release.

Invitations to a news conference or meeting should be addressed to the Chief Reporter for press and TV and the News Editor for radio. They should be headed "Media Invitation".

They should include:

- What it's about - very briefly. One sentence.
- Who's speaking.
- When and where.
- Contact persons/numbers for further information.

Timing

Morning papers start at about midday the day before, afternoon papers at about 7am the same day. This is when editorial meetings are held. TV news starts at about 8am for the 6pm bulletin in most centres. Don't forget that TV also has breakfast news. Radio news is constant.

Make sure your news release arrives in plenty of time for the editorial meeting at which you want it considered.

If it's not world-shattering news, try releasing it on a Sunday morning. Sunday night TV news and Monday morning papers are often struggling for news. Christmas holidays and early January make up the "silly season" for news and you can get almost anything into the media if you package it well.

News conferences are best held mid-morning (for evening papers) or early afternoon (for morning papers). If you hold them late in the afternoon you won't give TV news enough time for editing and if there's plenty of news they may put it in the "too hard" basket.

"Embargoing" is useful. It gives the media time to research and expand a story and still break it on the dot. The media is scrupulous about embargoes. Type it across the top eg. "Embargoed until 4pm, Thursday, 4 August." Underline, bold or highlight.

For more media advice, check out our website: www.brianedwardsmedia.co.nz

© Judy Callingham 2006