

Press releases and media lists

Press releases

If you're organising an event you may want to send out a press release (often called a news release). Journalists get dozens of press releases every day, and they spend no more than a couple of seconds assessing whether to act on your press release – or throw it in the bin.

Who are you targeting?

First, ask yourself if you are targeting national, regional or local media, and whether you want coverage in newspapers, radio and TV – or all of these. If your press release is targeted mainly at local media, write in an appropriate style, and include local details.

If you are hoping for radio coverage, include details of any interesting sounds at the end of the press release. eg. *Note to editors*: at 11am the protesters will take turns to read poems about peace.

If you are hoping for television coverage, include details of any visual aspects to at the end of the press release. eg. *Note to editors*: at noon the protesters will fly black kites in commemoration of those who have died in the conflict.

If you are targeting the BMJ and the local paper, you would be better to write two different press releases, tailored to each.

Types of press releases

Usually, you will send out a press release in advance of an event you are planning to notify journalists about it. In this case, you may not expect to see your news release in print, but journalists will hopefully turn up on the day.

Sometimes this type of release is mentioned in advance if it is thought to be especially newsworthy. For example local radio stations will often mention a forthcoming demonstration and may invite people into the studio to discuss it in advance. This is what you are aiming for, as you can attract more people to the event and discuss the issues. Remember to mention the time and place of the event when you are on air!

Issuing statements

You can send out a statement about a topical event, particularly if there is a strong local angle. The statement should be attributed to a person who is happy to be interviewed at a later stage.

Releasing a letter

If you send a letter to your local MP or to the Prime Minister, consider sending a copy to the local media. You will need to include a brief introduction explaining *who* send the letter and *why*.

The five Ws

Press releases should tell the journalist everything he/she needs to know. The tried and tested formula is Who will do What, Where, When and Why.

Heading

The press release heading should be clear and catchy, but not overly clever or obtuse. It should summarise or distil the main points of the press release so that the journalist can tell at a glance what it's about.

eg. Hospital staff go green

Style

ALL press releases should be written in a simple, clear and accessible style.

Don't use acronyms. Avoid writing: 'Medact and IPPNW members write to PCT'.

It always helps to explain any term the journalist may not be familiar with.

eg. Members of Medact - a charity of health professionals who highlight how war, the environment and poverty can damage health – will protest about the government's plan to...

Avoid gobbledegook. eg. 'the health practitioners will provide support that will enable local people to access their entitlement to appropriate healthcare'.

Instead, write 'the health professionals are campaigning for local people to get the healthcare they are entitled to'.

Press releases should be factual, with opinions being expressed in the quotes.

eg. Rather than: 'The doctors will highlight the despicable and outrageous way their patients have been treated', say 'The doctors will protest about the way in which their patients have been treated'.

Quotes

Always include a quote. (Quotes are more likely to be used if they are from 'prominent' people. ie. heads of organisations, well-known local personalities).

The quote can be used to express a strong opinion. eg. 'This decision is cruel and unjust and will endanger the health of the most vulnerable people in our society'.

Facts

Include all relevant facts and essential information in the body of the press release. More detailed information, including sources of further information such as websites and a paragraph about your organisation can be added at the end under *Notes to editor*.

Be precise – always check your facts before sending off the press release.

Include exact figures where you can. eg. 40%, rather than 'about half'.

Length

Press releases can be quite short, roughly one side of A4. Most journalists would not read press releases that were more than about 500 words long.

Timing

Make sure you find out the deadlines of your target media. There's no point sending out a press release to a weekly magazine a few days before publication, or targeting the features editor of a newspaper the day before the paper is published. It's usually best to issue press releases 10-14 days prior to the event you are planning.

How often should you send out press releases?

Only send out a press release when you genuinely have something newsworthy to say, or if you have organised a newsworthy event. Getting lots of irrelevant press releases will only irritate the journalist, and very soon he/she will simply press the delete button when they see your name.

Post or email?

Nowadays most press releases arrive via email. But here are a few things to bear in mind:

- Paste the release into the body of the email, avoid sending it as an attachment. Attachments don't always open, and anyway, an attachment is one more step away from the journalist, who may not bother to open it.
- Write the equivalent of one side of A 4
- Include contact details for one or preferably two people, including mobiles. The journalist must be able to contact you at any time.
- Write a short, snappy message in the 'window' eg. 'Doctors go green'. This should reflect the press release heading.

Embargoes

Embargoes are often used to try to control the timing of media coverage of a new report. The main advantage of an embargo is that it gives journalists the time to prepare a report about a complex topic.

There are different views on the usefulness of embargoes, and some journalists on national newspapers say they that press releases without embargoes rarely see the light of day. However there is little point in using an embargo for no reason. If you do use an embargo, stick to it. And don't let one journalist publish before the embargo. You will enrage the others!

However there are new considerations brought about by the new 24-hour news agenda, especially with sites like Google News that allow readers to watch the big stories as they break. This suits the daily newspapers very well, however it is less useful to Sunday newspapers which have a reputation for breaking embargoes.

Press releases targeted at the main weekly health journals are often embargoed for Thursdays.

If you do decide to use an embargo, print the information clearly at the top of your press release. eg. EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 on X date.

To summarise:

- Think about who you are targeting
- Answer the five Ws
- Get your message across in the first sentence
- Use a clear, catchy heading
- Write in a simple, accessible style
- Include one or more quotes
- Include all relevant facts
- Don't miss deadlines
- Include contact details (including mobiles)

Follow-up

Don't call journalists unless you need to. Many get annoyed by calls from people enquiring if they have received press releases. If you want to find out if the press release has arrived, it's better to send out another email, providing more information about the event, or offering someone to interview, and reminding the journalist of the key aspects of your press release.

Media lists

Begin by making a list of all your local media. Most local papers will probably have a news editor, a features editor and one or two reporters. Read their reports carefully and target anyone you think may be receptive. It may sound obvious, but send your press release to the news editor (by name if you know the name) and to any reporters who may be interested. The news editor will allocate jobs, but reporters can also go to the news editor and suggest covering a story.

Make regular checks that the people you are sending your press release to are a) still there, and b) still want to receive them. No harm in sending an occasional email to say, 'are you still interested in receiving press releases from the local Medact group?'

Call your local radio station (or look at their website) and check that you are sending your press releases to the people you are targeting. In the case of local

radio, these could be producers, editors or journalists. You may end up sending several to different people in the hope that one of them picks up the story.

Features

If you think your story might make a feature rather than a news story, then contact the features editor. In this case it would be better to compose an email rather than sending a press release. Describe why you think the story would make a good feature, suggest a 'peg' if there is one (an anniversary or other special date), and suggest possible interviewees.

Freelance journalists

Contact the NUJ to find out which freelance journalists live in your area.

See: www.nuj.org.uk/ . Many newspapers and magazine articles are written by freelancers. You can call the paper to ask for the person's email address if they aren't on the staff. There are several organisations of freelance journalists who specialise in health stories.

See the Guild of Health Writers at www.healthwriters.com/ or the Medical Journalists Association at www.mja-uk.org/

Agencies

Contact the Press Association to find out if there are any 'stringers' in your area. The Press Association is a network of journalists throughout the UK who feed stories into the agency, which are then disseminated around the country.

See: www.pressassociation.co.uk/

Media Trust runs a free service called Community Newswire which helps charities and small NGOs with their press releases and feeds them directly to the Press Association which in turn sends them to thousands of journalists every day.

See: www.mediatrust.org/community-newswire

Picture editors

Don't forget to send press releases to Picture Editors if you are organising an event which could make a good photograph. Picture Editors can send photographers to events, whether or not the newsdesk is covering it. You may end up with a nice photo and caption in the paper, but only if you remember to contact the picture desk. Try to find out how to contact freelance photographers in your area. If they come along to your event and get a good picture, they will try to sell it to the newspapers.

Alison Whyte
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