

Writing Effective Press Releases

Press releases are a great way to get publicity for your group, but to be effective, they need to be written well and to get the attention of journalists. Here are a few pointers to get you started:

Is your story news?

Before you start, think about the things that catch your attention in the media. We are usually interested in things that seem new, surprising or that help resolve our difficulties. Before drafting your press release, consider these questions:

1. What is "new" about my story?
2. Is there anything unusual or surprising about it?
3. Will this be interesting to anyone unaware of our group?
4. Will people actually care?

The last one may seem tough, but it is really important: it might be about an issue that is very close to your heart, but will anyone else be attracted to your news? If the answer is "no", wait until you've got a better story.

If you feel unsure if your story is newsworthy, take some time to study the publications or programmes you want coverage in. This will help you to get a feel for the kind of news they are most interested in.



Headlines count!

Journalists get many emails every day, so label emails containing press releases with the phrase "press release" or "story idea". You also need a stand out great subject line to guarantee their attention.

Remember that most journalists will spend just a few seconds determining whether something looks newsworthy. They need to understand what your story is about immediately or they will just move on, so keep the subject line short and to the point. Do not be tempted to come up with what you think is a snappy headline – it may be too vague for the journalists.

Get your point in the first line of your press release

Getting your email opened is an important first step, but you need to make sure your first sentence grabs their attention too! This is why you need the "top line" (i.e. the most important bit) of your news story at the start of your release. Make sure your first line sums up the story (in no more than around 15-20 words) and reads just like the opening of any other news story.

Journalists try to get as many of the "Five W's" (who, what, where, why and when) in the opening line of news stories. If you can give them this in your release you are more likely to get their interest. To see how this works, simply, look at your daily newspaper.

Another way to approach writing the first line is to think about how your story would be covered on a TV or radio programme. Most items have only 5-6 seconds introduction. For example "And coming up next ... why a local charity is staging a birthday gala at County Hall". Ask yourself how a presenter would introduce your story should help you create an engaging top line.



Keep it succinct

An ideal length for a press release is one A4 side or around 300 to 400 words which is the length of a short news article. You should aim for three or four short paragraphs and include a few quotes. If it is longer, it is likely that it contains needless information that doesn't add value to your news.

Avoid including background information about your group/organisation in the opening paragraph. You can include this plus any other additional information in a "notes to editors" section at the end. If you include this section, it is acceptable to run over to a second A4 page.

Using sub-headings and bullet points can help to make information easy to read, especially if you want to feature figures or statistics.

Use quotes effectively

Including quotes from people in or who use your group can be helpful for journalists and may be used, word for word, however it is important to include quotes that give readers insight, not information. A regular mistake is to use quotes to give information, for example, "In 2014 we had over 100 clients who used at least one of our three support groups." A better quote would be "I used the twice monthly support group and it really turned my life around".

Try to use quotes that give an understanding or opinion of the work you are doing. They need to sound like a real person said them. It's important to avoid jargon or technical language.



Other hints & tips

To maximise the likelihood of getting your news into the press make sure you adapt your idea, and your press release, for the different publications or programmes you send it to. A bit of research into the style of different publications beforehand will help you present something appropriate each time.

When you send a press release, include a short outline of your news story which is no longer than a paragraph, as well as a suggestion as to where you think it might fit in the publication you're trying to get it in to e.g. "Community Focus pages", "Charity News", "News in brief" etc. Paste your press release directly into the email underneath this - a busy journalist may not bother to open an email attachment.

Photographs can be useful if they are relevant and interesting, however, be very careful not to send big files that will choke up journalists inboxes – that is a sure way to make sure a journalist will just delete the whole email.

Remember that it may take you a few goes and a bit of pursuing to get your story into the news. Stay determined and keep improving your press release skills and you will achieve success!

See our Press Release template to help you get going!

