



RichWords

**How to write
a press release
that journalists will
read and act upon**



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What's the story?

This guide will help you create press releases that journalists notice, and that they'll be more likely to use as the basis for their stories.

Follow the advice in this guide and your announcements will probably avoid waste paper bins and not fall victim to the dreaded "Delete" button. If your releases survive these hurdles, you'll have a better chance of getting the media coverage you want.



1. Stop press! Before you write...

Before you start writing your press release, there are a number of factors to consider and some planning to complete:

What's a press release?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a press release as “an official statement issued to journalists on a particular matter”.

Organisations write and distribute (or “push”) releases in the hope that freelance or in-house journalists will take notice, and use the story. The aim (for the organisation) is to get positive coverage in the print, broadcast, and online media.

However, journalists are wary of this desire to set or affect the news agenda. Their job is to question what an organisation has written, and to find “the real story”.

This means that your task, as the person responsible for writing the release, is to convince every journalist who receives it that you've already uncovered that story. Or, at least, to persuade them that your story “has legs” – that's it's worth their while to pursue it, ask more questions, and so on.

The problem is, most press releases (and therefore, most press release writers) fail to convince or persuade at all. And the main reason is a lack of newsworthiness.

What's newsworthy?

Unless you've found a story that's worthy of coverage (and written the release in the right way), journalists are unlikely to take an interest. Stories fail this test most often because companies confuse the next item on their list of promotional activities with true newsworthiness.



And these companies continue to write and distribute their releases in the same way, despite journalists repeatedly discarding or ignoring what they've been sent.

To improve your chances of getting into the news media, your release must say something that the journalists, and their publication's readers, find interesting and notable. Here are some examples of what the media might consider newsworthy:

- a. Major product or service launches and developments
- b. Acquisitions and mergers, and other financial news
- c. Internal re-structuring of departments/functions/personnel
- d. Executive appointments /retirements; other notable staff achievements
- e. Anything that your organisation would consider bad news
- f. Articles / interviews that fit in with a publication's special features and editions

Even if your press release covers one of these topics, it must still avoid any promotional guff if you hope to gain coverage.

As a final tip, you may be more likely to get coverage if your release is a "response" to news that's already in the public domain. Make sure your statement includes new data or comments relating to – or better still, contradicting – a current story. This should help to position your organisation as an expert in that arena, and to keep the story in the news spotlight.

Who should receive your press release?

Before you write your release, decide on your news angle and figure out which media will take an interest in that type of story.

For example, you may want to write about your company's year-on-year 7% growth in production capacity, which is 4% above the industry average. The fact that your organisation is ahead of the



trend is newsworthy, especially if you can offer some reasons for the growth, such as your use of technology.

These basic facts might encourage you to think that journalists covering the economy will be interested in your story, as well as those who write about technology. Any media outlets that dedicate themselves to covering your specific industry would also find your release of interest. There are plenty of other options too, depending on your angle, and the media you want to target.

How many versions should you write?

There's great value in drafting a basic release and then adding (or subtracting) elements to create multiple versions. You can tailor each version to make it more palatable to individual journalists or publications, or to a general group (e.g. the business editors of all broadsheet newspapers).

The style and substance of your story must match the tone and content preferences of each of the individuals or groups that you're writing to. For example, if you want coverage in the tabloids, write in a tabloid style about a subject that interests tabloid readers. If you're aiming for column inches in the "Financial Times", make the content and style of your release as close as possible to that particular newspaper.

To put this approach into action, you need to understand what types – and styles – of story appear in your target publications. Although it takes time to build up this awareness, it's worthwhile when your stories start being published more regularly.

How many versions? It really depends on how broad or specific you want your list of target publications and journalists to be. Only you know the answer to that.



2. Writing your press release (in 5 easy steps)

With your planning done, it's now time to write the release. Here's a 5-step guide:

i. **Build a pyramid**

The majority of news stories follow a pyramid structure: the most important things are at the top of the triangle and the least newsworthy elements sit along its wide base.

To capture the essence of the whole piece in the first few lines, your headline and next three or four sentences must answer six simple questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? (although not necessarily in that order).

Who is/are the main actor(s) in this story?

Decide who should be the focus of your story. It can be an individual or group of people, an organisation, government, or country.

What is happening/has happened/is going to happen?

Describe the news event as succinctly as you can.

When did it/will it happen?

Put your story into a temporal context – readers don't want old news. A day in arrears is OK if you read a daily paper; a month is fine for readers of monthly titles.

Where did it/will it happen?

Be as detailed as you need to be for your target publication(s). For example, a local paper may want the name of the street where an incident occurred, while a regional or national may only need the name of the town.



Why? How?

Add your brief analysis of the news to your introductory paragraph. You'll be able to expand on the why and how later in your piece, although the extent to which you do this depends upon the type of story and the target media.

ii. Be specific

While this is good advice for any piece of copywriting, it's particularly important when writing a press release. Any imprecise writing will arouse the curiosity (and, possibly, scorn) of most journalists.

While gaining the attention of media professionals is your aim, you want the strength of your story – not your omissions or a lack of clarity – to be driving their interest.

Taking the example used earlier, you want to write about your company's "year-on-year 7% growth in production capacity, which is 4% above the industry average". Do NOT write about "an amazing expansion of production capacity that's far outstripping the competition". See the difference?

While the first extract is specific and factual, the second is vague. Worse, the non-specific version strays into hyperbole. This promotional puff will probably encourage the journalist to disregard your release entirely, or else take you to task in a follow-up interview and/or damning news story.

iii. Check the facts

Of course, you can't quote percentages and other data if you haven't bothered to dig them out in the first place (or to verify them if they've been provided to you).

To continue our example, talk to your company's Head of Production (or other authority) before writing the release. Make sure you understand the numbers, and can explain the reasons for the



growth to a journalist. The chat you have with your in-house expert may also give you some valuable comments for the release.

In this example, it would also be wise to contact your industry trade association – or a respected independent analyst, or other third party – to verify the accuracy of the industry figures you’re using.

Essentially, you need to make sure that everything you write is correct. This includes getting the right spelling of names, using accurate job titles, ages, etc. and getting the appropriate people within – and sometimes outside of – your company to ‘sign off’ the release.

You may need approval from your boss and other senior figures within your organisation, plus your legal department, as well as anyone you mention or attribute a comment to within the story.

iv. Adopt the house style

While it’s important to tailor the content and style of your release to the media receiving it, you also need to remain loyal to your company’s style guide. (This assumes that your organisation has such a guide – if it doesn’t, create one).

Having a house style ensures a consistency of tone, spelling, and language across all of the written communications that your organisation produces. Such an approach helps to reinforce the positive perceptions that your audience has about your company, strengthening brand recognition and recall.

This consistency also encourages people to choose your company above the competition, and to spread the word about your activities, products, and services.



v. Make it look professional

Although it's rare to send hard copies of a press release these days, your electronic file still needs to look professional. The words "press release" should appear at the top of the page, above the headline, along with the date of issue.

Type using 1.5 line spacing, plus wide margins on each side. Try keeping your story to one page. If you have to use a second page, put the same headline from the first sheet at the top left of your run-over page (rather than centred, as it should be on that first page).

If you think your release merits a photograph, arrange for a professional with experience of getting coverage to take it. S/he will understand what constitutes a "good photo" in the eyes of the relevant media, and will set up the shot(s) accordingly.

At the end of the release, include the name of your company spokesperson/public relations officer, and give the appropriate email address and phone numbers. Add your organisation's address and contact details.

Some companies also like to include a "boiler plate" – a description of the organisation and its activities, a mission statement, and other elements. However, journalists often ignore this section of a release because it can easily overflow into corporate self-promotion. Beware.



About Richwords

Founded by professional copywriter Richard Harrison, Richwords supports marketing communication professionals and other business-people working across numerous sectors and geographical markets.

Our freelance copywriting and business writing training services help organisations to raise awareness externally and to reach their performance targets. Our work can also help companies to reinforce in-house expertise in all aspects of copywriting.

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