

SIX REASONS YOUR PRESS RELEASE GETS BINNED

Peter Bartram advises PRs on how to make it into print

E-mailing out press releases to newspapers and magazines may sound like a great way to get “free” publicity.

The trouble is that thousands of other companies have had the same idea.

I recently asked 89 editors and other journalists what happens to the releases which swamp their e-mail inboxes. The answer was simple: the delete key goes into over-drive.

First, the numbers. The 89 receive around 19,100 releases a week. That’s nearly a million a year, a weekly average of 215 for each editor.

Leading business magazines are heavily targeted. Many get more than 500 a week. I spoke to one editor who employs an assistant just to wade through the 1,500 he gets each week.

The editors told me there are six main reasons why most releases get binned, often without being read.

1 Irrelevant to their interests

Every day, editors receive releases which have no conceivable relevance to the subjects they cover. It’s clear the PR people sending them have made no attempt to target.

They probably haven’t even looked at the publications. They adopt a scatter-gun approach of sending releases to every e-mail address they can find.

In the good old days when releases arrived by snail mail, at least PRs had to pay for the postage and take the trouble of stuffing the releases into envelopes. Now those cost and work constraints have disappeared.

Because those PRs who do take care to target carefully are rare, editors tend to look much more closely at what they send.

2 No story or weak story

A release ought to contain some intrinsically interesting information that an editor would want to pass on to readers.

PRs who do understand the kind of material a publication uses score because they look for relevant ideas, then tailor their release in a way which makes an editor sit up and take notice.

Editors apply the so-what? test to press releases - so what would happen if we didn't run this story? If the answer is "not much", the release goes in the bin,

If a PR believes a release wouldn't pass the test, it shouldn't be send – or the story should be strengthened so that it will pass muster.

3 Self-promotion of puffery

Too many people who send out press releases don't seem to understand the difference between news and advertising.

Editors hate having to wade through pages of boastful hype extolling an organisation and all its works. Even releases which do contain the germ of a story sometimes get killed off because they're wrapped up in exuberant puffery.

I wasn't surprised that some editors told me they pass press releases straight to their advertising departments as sales leads.

4 Poor English

A significant proportion of releases contain spelling, grammar or punctuation errors. Most editors told me errors are a certain turn-off but a few forgiving souls said they didn't mind correcting the English.

Even so, howlers such as wrong use (or non-use) of the possessive apostrophe and failure to make the verb agree with the subject – two of the most common mistakes – undermine a release's (correct use of possessive apostrophe) credibility.

5 Confusing jargon

Some press releases seem to have been written by computer. They start with the latest management-speak ("pushing the envelope" is a current favourite), add a layer of baffling jargon ("coppock curve", but it varies by subject matter) and sprinkle in plenty of impenetrable acronyms ("CDMA 2000 1x EV-DO"). The finished result reads like a secret code.

The most skilled PRs know that stories are best told in simple English which can be read and understood quickly. Editors haven't got time to decode jargon or play guessing games with unknown acronyms.

6 Too long

Many press releases combine the twin faults of being too long – but not providing enough information.

That's because the information they do provide tends to be irrelevant background about the company, while key facts about the story – the value of the contract, the date of the product launch, the job title of the newly appointed individual – are left out.

Skilled PRs judge the “weight” of a story before they write their press release. Most stories can be told in a page. Some may need two. A story has to be pretty close in importance to the Second Coming to warrant three.

A final word of good news. Of the 89 editors and journalists, 38 told me they had got a “really good” story from a press release at some time.

- *How to Write the Perfect Press Release* by Peter Bartram is published by New Venture Publishing. You can read the first chapter online at www.writeapressrelease.co.uk