

## PLEASE (DON'T) RELEASE ME...

By Peter Bartram

The press release is the most basic weapon in the PR pro's armoury.

And it's falling to pieces through over-use.

That is the inescapable conclusion I've reached after collecting views from 89 editors and senior journalists while researching my new book, *How to Write the Perfect Press Release*.

Between them, the 89 receive around 19,100 press releases a week. Or, to put it another way, nearly one million a year. That's more releases than any editor should have to read.

It's no wonder they feel under siege from the attack. Few of the releases ever make ink in their publications simply because most are hopelessly misdirected.

Joanna Higgins, editor of the Institute of Director's monthly Director magazine, receives around 750 releases a week. "Seventy per cent don't even bear opening," she says.

At leading consumer title Maxim Fashion, just one release a week out of the 1,000 received, might make a story in its own right.

In the world of regional newspapers, Steve Hughes, editor of the Bolton Evening News, says "hardly any" make a story. "We pass quite a few to our advertising department as sales leads, as much of the information provided is not news at all," he adds.

So what's going on here?

The key problem, identified by 72 of the 89 editors, is that most of the releases are irrelevant to their needs.

“Clearly most PR people have not bothered to pick up a copy of the magazine and engaged brain before sending off a release,” wails the deputy editor of a well-known consumer magazine (who prefers to keep her head down).

“Our mag, like most these days, has a web presence. Is it so much bother for PRs to acquaint themselves with our demographic, appeal, tone of voice and various sections before wasting their money and my time sending releases that go straight in the bin?”

These days it’s likely to be a cyberbin. For when it comes to distributing unwanted material, e-mail has become the devil’s little helper.

“It’s too easy to send press releases, therefore everyone sends them to everyone,” notes Andy Sawers, editor of Financial Director, who gets at least 250 a week.

The trouble with this electronic avalanche is that there’s so much rubbish, editors can’t be bothered to search for the nuggets. Or, if they do, they have to spend a disproportionate amount of time and expense.

I spoke to one editor who employs an editorial assistant simply to sift through the 1,500 releases which arrive in the inbox each week. He resents the expense.

So what’s to be done?

The first imperative is for PR people to develop a new concept of what’s meant by targeting. Whenever I talk to PR people about this problem, they

always put their hand on their heart and, like the dodgy witness, claim: “not me, guv”.

It has to be somebody – and, the evidence suggests, a substantial proportion of both inhouse and PR agencies are guilty as charged. An example: I edit an IT magazine. This morning I received a release about African fashion.

The important point here is that PRs who develop a reputation for targeting are going to find editors treating all of their output – even the marginal stuff – more seriously.

The second key issue – mentioned by 70 of the editors - is to make sure that all press releases contain a real news story. Many are just an excuse for an orgy of self-congratulation.

The hard fact is that if there’s no story, it’s not worth sending a release. I suspect that many releases sent out – particularly by agencies – are to keep up the numbers and to show clients there’s activity on their account.

But activity to what purpose? If the point of sending a release is to generate some media coverage, why send a release that’s not even going to be read? Why not concentrate energies on something that will generate coverage?

The hard fact for PRs is that it’s not even enough to send a story that’s relevant. To get into print, it needs to pass an editor’s “so what?” test. Which means the story needs enough new information for the editor to feel readers would be missing something if it wasn’t in the paper.

So does this mean that press releases are a complete waste of time?

The answer is emphatically no, if only because of the 89 editors, 38 admitted they had, at some time, found a “really good” story in a release. Not just run-of-the-mill things either.

One found an emotional human interest story about the reunion of a long-lost brother and sister (buried in a release about the need for more adoptive parents).

A second used the information in a release to uncover a ring of wireless computer hackers for a national newspaper. And a third followed up a release about hair transplant operations to run a competition for bald readers to win a new head of hair.

- *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](http://www.writeapressrelease.co.uk)