

HOW TO WRITE THE PERFECT PRESS RELEASE

by Peter Bartram

The humble press release is one of the most basic marketing tools, but how many of them actually make it into print?

Very few.

While I was researching my new book on press release writing, I collected information from 89 editors and other journalists around the country. I already knew that many editors are irritated by the flood of releases which hit their desks – or, in this cyberspace age, more usually their PC screens. After all, I'm an editor myself.

But I didn't realise just how irritated. For a start, the statistics of the releases flooding into newspaper and magazine offices are astounding.

The 89 editors I surveyed received around 19,100 press releases a week between them. Or, to put it another way, 993,200 a year. That's an average of 215 each a week.

But, of course, an average hides wide variations. And the business and professional press, of its nature, tends to receive many more releases than some other categories of newspapers and magazines.

This ought to concern professional marketers because it is often these kinds of publications at which they're aiming their releases. Perhaps some don't realise just how many releases some of the leading titles in the business and professional market place receive.

For example, Joanna Higgins, editor of the Institute of Directors' highly successful Director magazine, gets more than 750 a week. "Seventy per cent don't even bear opening," Jo told me.

At Accountancy Age, editor Damian Wild and his team receive around 500 a week. His advice to PR people before sending a release: "You should ask yourself the question: 'would I read a paper that carried this announcement if I wasn't being paid to do so'."

Editor Ross Butler, at leading private equity fortnightly Real Deals, receives around 700 and Nick Allen, editor of Logistics Europe, 500. Even regional business titles don't escape the deluge. John Harvey, editor of South East Business, has to deal with a staggering 1,500 a week.

With such numbers flooding their e-mail inboxes, it's not surprising that many editors find themselves reaching for the delete key.

So does this mean press release writers should give up? The answer is no. That's because, of the 89 editors I contacted, 38 said they had found a "really good" story at least once in a press release. (It's only fair to say that 23 denied they'd ever mined the press release pile for anything that good, while the remainder were non-committal.)

What is the secret of making it into print? The first is to avoid a number of faults which editors say instantly turn them off releases. By far the most common of these is sending a release which is irrelevant to the publication's interests. It was mentioned as a major problem by 72 of the 89.

And it's getting worse – fuelled by the fact that e-mail and the internet makes it easier to distribute releases than ever before. In fact, it's become

effectively a no-cost activity because PR teams don't even need to pay for printing and mailing costs.

This leads to a mindset which thinks it's a good idea to send a release to everybody and his dog "just in case they're interested". In fact, that is a dangerous strategy for two reasons.

First, editors get to recognise releases which come from sources that are never of any value. If there's ever a time when there is a story they might want to use, it will simply get overlooked.

Secondly, the cumulative effect of thousands of organisations sending out press releases indiscriminately is having a corrosive effect on the whole concept of the release as a legitimate marketing tool. It's undermining the purpose of what ought to be a way of supplying relevant information to media that could have a genuine interest using it.

Simply sending releases to everybody places extra costs on newspapers and magazines. I spoke to one editor who employs one member of staff simply to plough through well over a 1,000 releases a week looking for gold nuggets among the dross. The mass distribution approach also makes editors more cynical about all releases.

It's clear from my researches that those firms which adopt a laser-gun – rather than a scatter-gun – approach to sending their releases build a reputation among editors as sources of reliable information.

At the end of the day, marketers ought to look on press releases as not merely a way of generating column inches, but of helping to achieve their firm's business objectives. This would encourage them to think far more

strategically about what they're doing, about what information they wanted to release to the press – and how to do it.

- *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