

**HOW TO WRITE
THE PERFECT PRESS RELEASE**

Real-life advice from editors
on getting your story in the media

PETER BARTRAM

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Forward

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CHAPTER I

START HERE

This is a book for people who want to get their company, their organisation, their leading personalities or their message into the media more often – and to do it in a way that generates coverage which helps them achieve their objectives.

There are many people for whom this activity is either a full-time obsession or a part-time distraction. They include the communications and public relations managers of companies large and small, the PR teams of government departments, local councils and a swathe of public bodies, consultants in professional PR firms, honorary officers in thousands of worthwhile voluntary organisations, elected politicians at all levels from MPs to councillors, not to mention a motley collection of professionals and celebrities – actors, lawyers, accountants, socialites. Even authors. In short, anyone with a product to sell, a service to provide, a message to proclaim – or a career to prop up.

We'll forget the last category, but in this book, we'll look at how to sell that product, provide that service or proclaim that message using the most basic PR tool of all – the press release.

Of course, the world of public relations and media coverage doesn't end with the press release. But it often starts with it. In skilled hands, a press release – or, as you might prefer to call it, a news release – can be a potent and effective way of generating media coverage. Every day, press releases are the source material for thousands of column centimetres in Britain's 11,000 newspapers

and magazines. They also provide the raw material for hours of the spoken word on radio or television.

But there's a problem. A big one. Editors and broadcasters – in fact, pretty much all journalists – have an uneasy love-hate relationship with press releases. As we shall discover in the next chapter, around two in five journalists are willing to admit they have found a “really good” story from a press release at some time in their career. Some cheerfully own up to more than one really good story.

But to find that really good story, your average journalist has had to trawl through 215 press releases a week. Some get vastly more. In the course of researching this book I spoke to journalists who receive more than 500 releases a week and one editor who had to deal with 1,500. The vast bulk of those releases, say the journalists, are either irrelevant to their interests or contain no discernible story. So, to put it bluntly (and perhaps unkindly), from a journalist's point of view, hunting for a really good story among press releases is like searching for an orchid on a rubbish tip. As we shall see, most journalists are only able to find any kind of story in a very small percentage of the releases they receive.

In fact, the raw numbers of press releases which cascade into editors' inboxes puts into perspective just how difficult it is to get their attention – and why everything in the release you send has to be absolutely right. You may have lavished hours of work collecting information and drafting your release, but if it doesn't hit an editor's hot spot it won't even get read. You can tell the key that editors use to delete releases on their PCs – it's the worn-out one.

But your press release doesn't have to suffer that fate. This book starts from the premise that most PR people – whether they're full-time professionals or part-time amateurs – could make their

press releases work harder for them by understanding more about what journalists want.

Just what do they want? How can a PR practitioner get a reputation for producing the kind of releases journalists actually take the trouble to read? In fact, is it possible to rehabilitate the much-maligned press release into a tool that PR people can use to serve their organisation's (or their client's) publicity objectives more effectively – and journalists accept more willingly?

If it is, there will be prizes all round. Prizes for PR people who will be able to focus their efforts more precisely to achieve better results for their organisations or clients. Prizes for journalists who will be more inclined to take a closer look at the releases which arrive by the hundreds in their e-mail inboxes, rather than reaching wearily yet again for that delete key.

During the course of researching this book, I collected the views of 89 editors and other journalists who, between them, receive more than 19,100 press releases a week. Or, to put it another way, 993,200 a year. The 89 include journalists who write for national newspapers and those who edit trade and technical journals. There are some from glossy bookstall magazines, some from local newspapers or regional magazines, others from the business and professional press. Most are staff journalists, a few are freelancers who contribute to many publications.

You'll be reading some of their opinions on what they like and don't like about press releases, starting in the next chapter. Their views have helped to shape the advice which follows in the rest of the book. (It's only fair to point out that even among journalists there are differences of detail about what constitutes good and bad practice in the writing and distribution of releases. In this book, I've tried to steer a middle course and present a consensus view

which is, obviously, coloured by my own 30 years' experience in journalism.)

The strongest message that comes through from the journalists is that they want press releases to provide them with useful story ideas, which is not usually the case at the moment. But there is no reason why it shouldn't be if release writers start by addressing the six most common faults in releases (which we'll get to in chapter two), focus more on the readers they're trying to reach and tailor the information they provide to the journalists who receive it. For some press release writers that may mean just taking a more critical look at what they're doing and sharpening up their act. For others (and for beginners) it may mean going back to the basics of how to construct a release that will make an editor sit up and take notice. We'll look at a logical 14-step approach to writing the "perfect" press release in chapter eight.

The time and money spent writing and distributing press releases can deliver more helpful column inches if you master the basics. If you've already passed that base, you can improve your hit rate by applying some of the special tricks of the trade which make it much more likely that editors will want to use your release. (We'll look at some of those in chapters nine and 10.) You can almost certainly get better results with your press releases whether you're involved professionally in the world of public relations, write press releases for your company as a sideline to your regular work, or run a voluntary organisation that wants to grab its share of the headlines.

But I know from having spoken to hundreds of press release writers over the years that many are frustrated that their work doesn't get used more often. I've spoken to people who can't understand why their stories aren't picked up while a competitor

seems to get acres of coverage. In just a few of these cases, the press release writers have unrealistic expectations. It's unlikely your press release is going to make the front page of a national newspaper, although plenty do make it into inside page stories. (And in the days when I was writing press releases, one made the front page lead in the Financial Times. I'll tell you more about that on page 110.)

The point is that by taking the advice from journalists that's scattered through these pages about what they want, you can improve the results you get from your press releases. That will improve the coverage your organisation gets in the media – and it won't do any harm to your reputation either.

By the time you reach the end of this book, I hope you will feel you've not only sharpened up your basic press release writing skills – or learnt them for the first time if you're new at the job – but that you've also discovered plenty of ideas you'd never previously considered that will help your organisation gain more press coverage.

That headline is only a good, well-written press release away.