

WHAT IS A PRESS RELEASE?

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A press release, news release, media release, press statement or video release is a written or recorded communication directed at members of the news media for the purpose of announcing something ostensibly newsworthy .

Typically, they are mailed, faxed , or e-mailed to assignment editors at newspapers ,magazines , radio stations, television stations, and/or television networks .

Tom Kelleher states in his book, *Public Relations Online: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media*, that "given that your news-driven publics include bona fide journalists as well as others who read and report news online, the term news release seems to work better online than press release".

Fraser Seitel also refers to press releases as being, "the granddaddy of public relations writing vehicles."^[1]

Websites have changed the way press releases are submitted. Commercial, fee-based press release distribution services, such as news wire services, or free website services co-exist, making news distribution more affordable and a level playing field for smaller businesses.

Such websites hold a repository of press releases and claim to make a company's news more prominent on the web and searchable via major search engines.

The use of press releases is common in the field of public relations (PR).

Typically, the aim is to attract favorable media attention to the PR professional's client and/or provide publicity for products or events marketed by those clients.

A press release provides reporters with an information subsidy containing the basics needed to develop a news story.

Press releases can announce a range of news items, such as scheduled events, personal promotions, awards, new products and services, sales and other financial data, accomplishments, etc.

They are often used in generating a feature story or are sent for the purpose of announcing news conferences , upcoming events or a change in corporation.

A press statement is information supplied to reporters.

This is an official announcement or account of a news story that is specially prepared and issued to newspapers and other news media for them to make known to the public.

Origins

The first modern press releases^[2] were created by Ivy Lee.^[3]

Lee's agency was working with the Pennsylvania Railroad at the time of the 1906 Atlantic City train wreck.

Ivy Lee and the company collaborated to issue the first press release directly to journalists, before other versions of the story, or suppositions, could be spread among them and reported.

He used a press release, in addition to inviting journalists and photographers to the scene as a means of fostering open communication with the media.^[4]

Public relations pioneer Edward Bernays later refined the creation and use of press releases.

Elements

Technically, anything deliberately sent to a reporter or media source is considered a press release: it is information released by the act of being sent to the media. However, public relations professionals often follow a standard format that they believe is efficient and increases their odds of getting the publicity they desire. The format is supposed to help journalists separate press releases from other PR communication methods, such as pitch letters or media advisories. Generally, a PR body consists of 4 to 5 paragraphs with word limit ranging to 400 to 500.

Some of these common structural elements include:

Headline — used to grab the attention of journalists and briefly summarize the news.

Dateline — contains the release date and usually the originating city of the press release. If the date listed is after the date that the information was actually sent to the media, then the sender is requesting a news embargo, which journalists are under no obligation to honor.

Introduction — first paragraph in a press release, that generally gives basic answers to the questions of who, what, when, where and why.

Body — further explanation, statistics, background, or other details relevant to the news.

Boilerplate — generally a short "about" section, providing independent background on the issuing company, organization, or individual.

Close — in North America, traditionally the symbol "-30-" appears after the boilerplate or body and before the media contact information, indicating to media that the release has ended. A more modern equivalent has been the "###" symbol. In other countries, other means of indicating the end of the release may be used, such as the text "ends".

Media contact information — name, phone number, email address, mailing address, or other contact information for the PR or other media relations contact person.

As the Internet has assumed growing prominence in the news cycle, press release writing styles have necessarily evolved.^[5] Editors of online newsletters, for instance, often lack the staff to convert traditional press release prose into more readable, print-ready copy. Today's press releases are therefore often written as finished articles which deliver more than just bare facts. A stylish, journalistic

format along with perhaps a provocative story line and quotes from principals can help ensure wider distribution among Internet-only publications looking for suitable material.

Distribution models

In the traditional distribution model, the business, political campaign, or other entity releasing information to the media hires a publicity agency to write and distribute written information to the newswires and other networks of journalists.[6]

In this model, the business is ultimately responsible for both the creation of the content and the decision to distribute it, which makes press releases self-published .

However, within the industry, a self-published press release is a do-it-yourself release that bypasses the pricey newswire distribution networks. In this approach, which is popular with many very large businesses and is nearly universal among small organizations seeking only local media attention, the business' own marketing personnel write the press release and send it directly to their choice of newspapers or other media outfits.

Although previously done on a small scale by individually mailing or faxing announcements to a small number of local media, this approach now tends to rely on e-mail and web distribution.

Some hybrid models also exist, which pay for distribution through established networks, but otherwise follow the do-it-yourself model.[6]

Video news releases

Some public relations firms send out video news releases (VNRs) which are pre-taped video programs that can be aired intact by TV stations.

Often, the VNRs are aired without the stations' identifying or attributing them as such.

TV news viewers can often detect the use of VNRs within television newscasts; for example, many movie-star "interviews" are actually VNRs, taped on a set which is located at the movie studio and decorated with the movie's logo.

Another frequent example of VNRs masquerading as news footage is videotapes of particular medical "breakthroughs," that are really produced and distributed by pharmaceutical companies for the purpose of selling new medicines.

Video news releases can be in the form of full blown productions costing tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands.

They can also be in the TV news format, or even produced for the web.

Recently, many broadcast news outlets have discouraged the use of VNRs. Many stations, citing an already poor public perception, want to increase their credibility. Public relations companies are having a tougher time getting their pre-edited video aired.

VNRs can be turned into podcasts then posted onto newswires.

Further to this, a story can be kept running longer by engaging "community websites", which are monitored and commented on by many journalists and features writers.

Embargoed press release

Sometimes a press release is distributed early and embargoed — that is, news organizations are requested not to report the story until a specified time.

For instance, news organizations usually receive a copy of presidential speeches several hours in advance. Product or media reviewers are commonly given a sample or preview of a product ahead of its release date.

Unless the journalist has voluntarily agreed to honor the embargo in advance, usually via a legally binding non-disclosure agreement, the journalist is under no obligation to honor it.

However, even in the absence of any obligation, news organizations generally do not break the embargo for sources that they wish to cultivate. If they do, then the agency or client that sent the release may blacklist them.

A blacklisted news organization will not receive any more embargoed releases, or possibly any releases at all.

However, it is very hard to enforce embargoes on journalists, as there is constant pressure by editors to scoop other news outlets.

It is unlikely that a PR agency will blacklist a form of media, as other clients may want to be featured in this publication. This problem is sometimes overcome by controlling the timing of a release via email rather than relying on the journalist to do so.

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