

Promoting Your Headline News

A News Release is a Terrible Thing to Waste

Admittedly, writing a good news release doesn't make a public relations (PR) campaign, but doing a poor one can dramatically cripple your PR efforts. Working with your editor and your qualified staff will promote your business. Properly writing news releases and submitting them according to an editor's needs will help get you published and will enhance your business, large or small.

It is comforting to hear editors and reporters say that next to responding to their special requirements quickly and accurately, the most important tool(s) they receive continues to be good news releases. Unfortunately, the news release is maligned because many of those sent out by companies and agencies are of poor quality. Recently we surveyed 150 business, trade and newspaper editors across the country to see if the new releases were still of value and, if so, what the editors expect from them.

Medium of Choice

Given a choice between snail-mail, fax or e-mail, 90 percent of editors/reporters would take an e-mail every time. But don't dismiss other editors who are sticking with their paper files over electronic or those that prefer information on a diskette. It is very important to learn the needs of the editors you work with.

In speaking with the senior editors, they were quick to point out that they were having an extremely hard time finding good writers, so they could understand why most of the releases and backgrounders they receive from publicists (internal or agency) seemed to be wasted efforts. "Fortunately, for the news media," one editor commented, "journalism schools still seem to do a decent job of teaching people the basics of good writing. But solid writing techniques seem to have been dropped somewhere along the line in the PR educational program."

In-depth company, product application and technical information often can result in better coverage, especially if the editor or reporter doesn't have to call to obtain more information.

Certainly PR people have to understand geopolitics, environmental and governmental issues as well as global marketing, but at some point they also have to write to communicate with the outside world.

Focus on Objectives

It appears that too many people lose sight of exactly what a news release is supposed to accomplish—entice an editor or reporter to write about the release's subject or call to get more information. That means the release isn't a work of creative art. It isn't a fluff and puff piece. It isn't designed to stroke management's egos by having quote after quote on how great the company and product is. Instead, it's a simple PR tool that is designed to communicate information to your specific market(s). And if a busy editor/reporter is forced to wade through the release to find his kernel of news, it probably won't be done. The editors and reporters we surveyed said they receive an average of 500 releases a week. Three-fourths of these are weak, amateurish, thinly veiled sales presentations or so poorly written that they go directly into the wastebasket for recycling.

Qualified Person

The weakness sometimes comes about because senior management gives the job to an assistant or manager who has a flair

with words, a marketing/sales manager who does terrific sales letters or the last person in the room when tasks were doled out. None of these make an individual right for a job that should be as important as preparing copy for a four-color ad. After all, a well-organized, well-executed publicity program that is integrated into the firm's total public relations effort (op/ed pieces, user case studies, application and technical articles, speaking engagements, etc.) will produce handsome rewards. Well-executed publicity can make readers aware of the company, its

products, services and capabilities; pave the way for the sales force; help explore new and potential markets; build relations with present customers; and attract qualified personnel to the firm.

Know Publications

When you are looking for a way to interest a publication in your story, look at it from the editor's perspective, not that of your management, marketing or engineering teams. Ask yourself if anyone should care about the information. If there is

an interested group of people out there, determine the editorial requirements of the given publication or group of publications. Once this is done you can provide news releases that will be published because they have the style, content and necessary current angle to satisfy your audience's requirements.

Basic Guidelines

The following are some basic guidelines people have found helpful in preparing press materials.

- Write the release simply, clearly and factually, making certain you tell the full story as quickly as possible.
- Prepare background and biographical material that give facts when the story dictates, not company puff and fluff.

In-depth company, product application and technical information often can result in better coverage, especially if the editor or reporter doesn't have to call to obtain more information.

- Include photographs (photos, transparencies, slides or electronic files via e-mail or CD) that are real with sharp contrasts. Editors do not need retouched ad shots, handshake or "mood" photos. Make certain the cut-line explains the photo and ties into the release.
- Include in the release the name and telephone number(s) of the people who should be contacted for additional information. When an editor or reporter needs additional information,

they need it immediately—not in a day or two. Don't forget the e-mail address so the reporter can get the complete question to you for response, even if you are on the road.

- Write the release with a specific publication's readers in mind. Once you

A good news release is still the most important tool editors receive. Focused efforts and a qualified person will produce high-quality PR that editors and their readers will be able to utilize and understand.

have prepared your general release, write separate leads and body copy for vertical market publications.

Serving Readers

Once the release(s) is well-written, reviewed and approved, send it to the appropriate editors/reporters. Don't feel you have to hand-deliver a release to make certain the right person receives it; don't insist on reading the release over the phone; don't blanket the publication's staff in hopes that one or more will use it; and don't call to make certain it's okay to send the release or ask if they received it.

If you are going to e-mail the release, understand good netiquette. Don't set up a huge recipient list so that when people receive it they have to wade through all of the names before they get to the meat of the story. There are a number of good mail list programs available—get one and learn how to use it, or send each release separately.

Publicity requires skill and attention to win the approval first of the editor/reporter and then of his readers. Despite how simple the effort looks, news release activities should not be relegated to a receptionist, secretary or junior member of the firm who happens to write great poems or sonnets. This type of focused effort and activity can contribute to the perception of the company, its products and success. WQP

About the Author

Andy Marken is president of Marken Communications, Inc. in Santa Clara, Calif. He may be reached at andy@markencom.com.

For more information on this subject, write in 1016 on the reader service card.