

CHAPTER 3

WRITING A GOOD NEWS RELEASE

Writing a good release is in many ways the opposite of writing a bad one. Combine the *don'ts* from the last chapter with the *dos* from this one and you'll be well on the way to creating a compelling release the media will use.

Irresistible Hooks

Good press releases are a doorway to a world of free publicity. The value of newspaper, magazine, television, and radio exposure is tremendous; a good campaign of press releases can land you media attention you could never afford--if you were paying for the space and air.

This media coverage creates immediate demand for your goods and services. It also produces valuable (and impartial) reporting about your company/product/service that is invaluable in the continuing effort to sell your goods and services. The fact that large magazines and newspapers evaluated your product or service can (and should) be milked to gain the trust of customers and to close sales.

For all these favors, you must provide something in return--news. This point deserves emphasis: *The most important ingredient of a good press release is genuine, usable news.*

What is and isn't news?

- ◆ A new product that is little different than the competition is not newsworthy. A new product that is half the price (and as good) as the competition is--as is the product costing the same but delivering twice as many features as the competition.
- ◆ A new company offering similar services to everyone else is a bore; a company with brand-new services attracts attention.
- ◆ A new Mexican restaurant in the heart of Houston is not newsworthy, a Mexican restaurant in Point Barrow, Alaska is.
- ◆ A new hotel in London won't create an international stir--but if Prince William takes residence there, watch out.
- ◆ Big deal, your casino got a facelift. If because of that facelift a European playboy visits and beats the house out of \$6 million, you've got a story.
- ◆ Economic times are tough, families need two incomes just to survive--yawn, everyone has heard this line. Publish a book explaining why families would be richer if one spouse quit work, and you've got news.

The unusual quality that makes a story interesting is your *hook* or *angle*. This is the characteristic that makes you say, "I didn't know that," or "Unbelievable," or "Joe's going to love hearing this." The stronger the hook, the more publicity you'll receive.

To find a newsworthy angle, consider whether your product or service could exploit one of these attention-getting ingredients:

- ◆ Human interest. We all enjoy reading about interesting people. Creative

people, controversial people, people who struggled fiercely to beat adversity...they all make fascinating stories.

- ◆ Celebrities. Glimpses and insights into the lives of the rich and famous attracts attention.
- ◆ Controversy. If your product/service is controversial, you'll amass heaps of ink. Be aware that not all publicity from a controversial position will be favorable. Also, be aware that even if a reporter doesn't take your side, there may be many readers who disagree with the reporter who will be happy to know about your company.
- ◆ Contradiction. Swimming against the mainstream or exposing a myth creates news (of course, you need strong arguments to buttress your case).
- ◆ Humor. Got an angle that produces a sure-fire laugh? Use it. News that entertains is welcomed.
- ◆ Technological improvements. Americans love the newest, fastest, loudest, biggest, strongest... A product described by an indisputable string of "est" adjectives, or one that significantly expands the technologic envelope is newsworthy.
- ◆ Seasonality. The media needs information tying into upcoming seasons or holidays. What can you highlight to create seasonal or holiday news?
- ◆ Novelty. That which is truly unique creates interest. The interest will fade as quickly as it flourished, but exploit the angle while you can.
- ◆ Current events. Monitor the news and find angles connecting your product/service to hot topics. News releases with details about earthquake insurance (from insurance companies) or earthquake preparedness (from companies selling survival or first-aid supplies) were snapped up after the California quake.

Brainstorm to identify as many different hooks as possible; then write releases for each hook (don't dilute your message combining multiple hooks into one release).

During the process, shed your advertising skin and think like journalists. How would they report and write the story? What would they want to know?

A news release with a strong news hook won't always promote all the details you want known about your organization/product/service. Live with that shortcoming. Don't ruin a good story by insisting that every commercial detail be highlighted on the news release. If necessary, enclose a brochure containing the commercial details ruining the tone and purpose of the release.

Brevity

"Tell me in the first sentence (preferably in the title) what is most important about your release," says Jim Poth, a former editor of *Sunset Magazine*, "and tell me what this is all about in a page or less."

Poth notes he can always call for more details. In fact, since large magazines and newspapers rarely use releases without rewriting them, he will *need* to call for more details--once he's hooked. The purpose of the

release is not to tell all. It is to snag an editor's interest.

Tell all and the effort may backfire. "Long releases often hit the trash without being read," says Poth. "If you aren't organized enough to make a clear, concise pitch, I don't want to deal with you."

The Five Ws

Brevity is crucial, but Terry Tazioli, an editor for *The Seattle Times*, warns, "Leaving out crucial information is a real turnoff."

Check that the Five Ws (who, what, when, where, why) and the One H (how) are all answered. This doesn't require much room--you should tick most of them off in the lead sentence:

"Aspen, Colorado (December 1, 1994)_ The XYZ Company's newly completed lodge, The Scotchman, will be fully operational over the holidays and, in the effort to make skiing affordable to families, will be renting its rooms for half the price of any other hotel in Aspen."

Part of the *who* information of your release is who to contact for details. Typically the contact person is listed prominently on the upper left or upper right side of the page just below the letterhead. Give the name, title, phone number, and e-mail address. If the main contact is often unavailable, give alternate contacts; a journalist who has trouble gathering information may scrap your story idea in favor of the next good idea that hits his desk. The spotlight of the media is fickle; catch it while it shines. .

The *why* of your release often needs some background to help the recipient understand its significance. "Don't assume an editor knows why something is important," says Dennis Stuhau, Managing Editor of *Canoe & Kayak*. "Tell what is important and why it is important."

The Inverted Pyramid

Journalists (particularly newspaper journalists) learn to write stories by the "inverted pyramid." Inverted, because the base of the story--the foundation on which the rest of the information rests--comes first. The next most important information comes second and so on down the line until the story fizzles out altogether with the least important information coming last.

No truly crucial information is buried deep in the story, nor is the reader held in suspense waiting for a weighty conclusion.

The invert pyramid is not a creative or artistic style of writing, but the busy readers of newspapers desiring just the gist of a story will find the important details summarized in the first few paragraphs. And editors trying to fit stories to particular spaces, can chop these stories in different places without destroying the soul of the article.

Copy this style of writing when preparing a news release. This requires

you to capture the heart of the issue in the first few sentences. Your recipients will appreciate that. And you can easily lop off less important parts of the release if you run into a space problems keeping the release short.

If written properly your news release will read like an actual news story rather than advertising copy. As a result, many small and medium-sized publications receiving your release will run it with only minor modifications. Large papers and major magazines will probably investigate and rewrite the story. But a release prepared using the principles of journalism gives a clear picture of the story; this greatly enhances the chance of hooking an editor.

Quotes

Good quotes make for good journalism. First, quotes give credibility to what would otherwise be an unsubstantiated (and perhaps questionable) claim. Quotes also allow for the interjection of colorful, punchy comments without disrupting the style and tone of the release. Finally, quotes break up dense paragraphs into shorter, reader-friendly blocks.

Unfortunately most quotes used in news releases are worthless. Often quotes are used inappropriately to make an announcement:

John Doe, president of XYZ Inc., said today, "I am proud to announce the introduction of the Lexicon Plus, an innovative on-line dictionary that..."

Is the fact that the president made the announcement news? Some pruning is in order:

January, 1994_The XYZ Inc. announced the release of its new on-line dictionary, Lexicon Plus.

More frequently, useless quotes are concocted to substantiate a claim:

"The skiing here is superb; our snow coverage is better than at any other Eastern resort," said John Doe, president of Sugarbeet Ski Resort.

"Twinkie Parade has something for everyone, the entire family will want to participate in it year after year," says parade promoter, Jane Stagg.

It doesn't take a journalism degree to detect the problem. Why should readers believe anyone who has a vested interest in the organization or event? Why should they trust claims that are flagrantly self serving? They shouldn't, and they don't.

Quoting the claims of an expert (or even a customer) who is unaffiliated with the organization, however, can turn a dead quote into a meaningful one.

"Currently, the skiing at Sugarbeet Mountain is superb," reported the *Baltimore Sun's* ski writer, Joe Schmoe. "Sugarbeet has the best snow coverage of any Eastern resort."

"Even my husband had fun," says Jill Jones, an onlooker who thought her cynical spouse would scoff at the Twinkie Parade. "He might even agree to come next year."

Good quotes require more work than putting words into the mouth of the company president, but they are not that difficult to produce. Commonly a person who believes in your product/service will give you considerable latitude in writing a quote--they'll just want to hear what it is you would like them to say. So be ready with your ideal quote and ask, "Would you feel OK if we quoted you as having said the following..." If your contact thinks you're misrepresenting their position, they'll tweak the words to their liking. And if they're fine with what you've said, you get exactly what you want.

Also, remember to think ahead. Collect quotes from satisfied customers (especially celebrities and people whose credentials will impress doubters). File these quotes for later use. Likewise, file quotes gleaned from past media coverage--these will be valuable later. When introducing a new product, for example, mention favorable media coverage from the past:

This new product from the XYZ Corporation, a company *The Los Angeles Times* described as, "on the vanguard of the photo-electric world," lets you...

Localize, Localize, Localize

A strong angle and a local hook combine to make a story hard to resist. For suburban papers and community weeklies, local news is main fare. If you can't create a logical connection between your company and the cities serviced by community papers, your release will bomb. So if the publisher of, say, *The Monroe Monitor* perceives your release is of statewide or nationwide interest, he will probably decide it's inappropriate for his paper.

Alternatives: 1) save postage dollars and don't mail releases appealing to the broader market to suburban and weekly papers 2) localize the information.

After the California earthquake, savvy insurance companies operating in states with major fault lines could have used California's catastrophe to illustrate what can (and will) happen elsewhere. Their releases could give the lowdown on what homeowners must know about earthquake insurance and how to get properly insured for the quake that could strike *Anytown* tomorrow (with the merging capabilities of a word processor, they could customize the release to many communities).

Such insurance companies could also include a sidebar with their release, encouraging readers to comparison shop for both competency and

rates. They could include their agency's name, address, and phone number, and ask the editor/publisher to add a local agency to the sidebar as well. By being willing to share the spotlight, they've given the editor an obvious way to localize the story. And by suggesting that readers comparison shop, they've demonstrated journalistic integrity. That gives their story more credibility.

Sharing the limelight may seem less than ideal, but getting half or a third of the action is better than being ignored.

Daily papers, especially large metropolitan ones, are not as demanding of a local hook, but a good local story will still take precedence over a non-local one of equal quality.

For large dailies, localizing the content of a release on a statewide basis can greatly increase the amount of ink the release receives. When Steve Carlson, co-owner of Upper Access Books, sent out releases about a new book to major daily papers, he included an author bio with all the Ohio releases emphasizing that the author was living in Ohio. "In a state as big as Ohio, I never would have guessed how well the local-author angle played."

Almost every Ohio paper picked up the story.

Carlson localized the release for another book with this opening line:

"Families can care for their own dead in (name of state) without the help of a funeral director. In so doing survivors will not only save thousands of dollars, they'll say goodbye to a loved one in a more meaningful way."

Carlson says the extra day it took to customize this news release to the papers in 50 states resulted in "ten times the pickup rate we would have received otherwise."

Final Editing

Always let fresh eyes evaluate your near-final copy. Without quality editing, technical or tactical errors may undermine the time, materials, and postage you're investing. Firms that refuse to put the effort into really polishing their product with proper editing are not only failing to put their best foot forward, they're shooting themselves in the foot.

Remember, the people receiving your releases care about the written language and many will form a negative impression, or doubt the accuracy of the information if the very foundation of the release--the written language--contains errors.

Colleagues with strong language and writing skills can help identify absent or misused words, ambiguities, grammatical errors, improper punctuation, and missing information. Better yet, hire a professional--one with a journalism background--to edit the writing *and* evaluate whether the release will excite or bore an editor. It's a wise investment--the few dollars spent will greatly increase the number of publications that find your release newsworthy. And it's easy to facilitate--with e-mail and fax machines, a

wordsmith in Walla Walla or Winnemucca can edit your releases as quickly as an editor down the street.