



AeroPerspectives' INFLUENCERS
2017 – Issue 1

Best Practices: **14 Press Release Dos and Donts**



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Wonder why your press releases don't get picked up more often?

When I was an editor, anywhere from 20 to 50 press releases showed up in my email daily. Most were long on format, short on facts ... and boring. I had a 20/20 rule: if the press release couldn't catch my attention in 20 seconds or 20 words, it probably would be deleted. If I couldn't find it interesting, my readers, who were my first responsibility, probably wouldn't either. My responsibility was to entice readers to read interesting stories, not give your company publicity.

So how to get an editor who is usually rushed to use your press release? Put yourself in the editor's head; consider his or her needs and constraints. Here are ways to increase your chances.

1. Subject line

Never use the words "Press Release," "News from XXX," or "XXX News." If there are 10 press releases in my email and one says "Flying upside down on purpose," guess which one will be opened? Tickle the editor's curiosity with the subject line.

2. Headline

If your subject line is strong you can use it for your headline as well. But the headline must be strong.

3. Lead

So many corporate press releases start out "XXX, Inc, a leading ..." followed by tons of blah-blah words. The first few words should be the crux of the story. Some press releases don't get to the newsworthy story until the second or third paragraph. Lazy writers use the same corporate format on all leads. To be usable, the press release would have to be rewritten, time most editors do not have.

"Pleased to announce" (or "excited," "delighted" and similar effusiveness) would be a death knell of almost any press release I see. Although it is nice you're pleased, that is not the story. The story is what you are pleased about. All writers should put the words "pleased to announce" on a piece of paper, burn it and frame the ashes.

4. Pyramid

Journalism schools teach you to write in an upside-down pyramid. The most important facts in the opening paragraph, the least important at the end. If an editor needs 200 words for a space and the press release runs 300, the bottom will be the information most likely to be cut.

5. Be concise

Never use three words if two will do.

Avoid jargon.

Define acronyms.

The ideal length of a press release is roughly 300 to 400 words, which is three or four short paragraphs. Use sub-headings and bullet points to make content easy to digest. Any background information can be included in a boilerplate section at the end of your release.

6. Avoid the fancy words

Use plain language that clearly conveys your information. Avoid cluttering your press release with irrelevant adjectives and adverbs.

7. Include the hard numbers

Incorporate the hard numbers that support the significance of your press release. Quantify your claim to be more compelling. Put a figure on your argument to back it up.

8. Make your grammar flawless

Proofread your press release carefully, and let others review as well. A single mistake can dissuade an editor from taking you seriously.

9. Include quotes

Use quotes from key stakeholders and subject experts in the company (and not just the CEO) to provide insight and give a human element to your press release. (But not, “We are pleased ...” – *please*.) Editors can use quotes to build context around your announcement, and help paint a picture of how your news affects the given industry or customer base.

10. List contacts at the top

Ensure to include a point of contact person’s name, telephone number and email address at the top of your release. Provide direct contact information for editors to follow up with your story. (Editors detest generic Info@XYZcorp.com email addresses.)

11. Stick to one page

The shorter your press release, the better. Two pages is acceptable (if absolutely necessary), but one page is best. Editors are looking for the most significant information of a story summarised into a readable document.

12. Provide access to more information

It is crucial to provide relevant links, such as your company’s website, for editors to discover more information about your undertakings and accomplishments. (And keep the website updated – there are few things more damaging to your credibility than a stale site.)

13. Photos in high resolution

Interesting photos of your product in use will make a big difference in getting your press release used. But not grip-and-grin “police lineup” photos of forced-smile executives.

14. Text format, not PDF

Editors want information in a format that is easy to copy, cut and paste. Microsoft Word is suitable but Adobe Acrobat, which is more difficult to extract text cleanly, is not.