

## The Humble News Release (1)

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With the growth of radio and television, the advent of many Internet-based news vehicles, and the suggestion that “press” implies that the information is intended for print media, the preferred term for what we formerly called the “press release” is now *news release*.

This communications tool is often maligned by both journalists and communications practitioners for different reasons. The journalist profession often sees the news release as a shameless effort to obtain free news coverage for an organization or its products. The communications professional who has to write it sees it as a labour-intensive, time-consuming project that either goes into the editor’s garbage container or results in a telephone call by or a visit from a journalist.

*Why won’t they just use it as I wrote it? The communications professional often asks. And why are they still being written and provided to news media in the electronic age?*

Simply stated, news releases are provided to and used by the news media because they are useful, despite the disparaging remarks made about them. A conservative estimate is that up to half the news reports published originate as news releases. Thom Clark of Chicago’s Community Media Workshop sees news releases as *business cards for your story*. As a communications vehicle, they have survived the age of blogs, webcasts and an array of Internet-based communications tools.

The news release is a simple document that is principally intended for the news media. Despite complaints and criticisms, journalists depend on news releases because the simple reality of modern mass communications in that news room staffs have been dramatically reduced, bureaus have been closed and the reporters and editors who have survived these cuts spend less time gathering news than preparing it for publication or broadcast. In addition, the news release alerts journalists to an event, announcement or a development that they may not otherwise discover.

The news release is, as well, part of the official public record of your organization, providing the news media and the public with authoritative information about your business, ministry, organization or association, and its activities and relations with the general public.

Your news release first has to survive the editor’s quick assessment of its value. Depending on the size of the community it serves, a newsroom can receive

hundreds of news releases a day. Editors simply do not have the time to read each one completely, so in the process many are discarded. The best way for yours to be passed to a reporter for further research is to make its value obvious.

### Step 1: Use a styleguide.

Communications professionals who prepare news releases and other products for news media consumption engage in “applied journalism,” so they must ensure that their products follow the basic conventions of journalism. The first step is to select a styleguide that is generally accepted by the news media of your community. These manuals are technical handbooks for the applied journalist as well as the professional reporter, and are produced and sold commercially by the Canadian Press, Broadcast News and the Globe and Mail. The Canadian Government has also developed and published the book, “The Canadian Style.”

If you are writing for the American market, purchase a copy of the Associated Press styleguide. If you are working in a region outside North America, purchase the styleguide is used by the media of that area.

Different newsmedia have styleguides for their particular markets and communities, and radio and television have their own broadcast styleguides.

To remain current with the changing standards of journalism within your market, obtain the most recent versions of these books.

### Step 2: Is your information worth sharing?

Will the content of your news release be interesting or worthwhile to anyone other than you and your colleagues? Is it relevant to your community or any of your target audiences? Does it provide important information or a service?

In 2005, Spring came early in Nova Scotia and the black bears emerged from their hibernation and began looking for food. However, their traditional sources of food, berries and migrating salmon weren’t available yet, leading to several unwelcome encounters between the hungry bears and rural Nova Scotians. In at least one case, a black bear literally peeled the metal layer off a back door and entered a house to steal a blueberry pie that was cooling in a window.

The wildlife division of the province’s Department of Natural Resources quickly prepared a news release to advise people how to handle a chance encounter with a black bear, that was immediately

printed and broadcast throughout the province – an example of a news release containing relevant and important information.

### **Step 3: Write well.**

Poor writing is the principal reason news releases are rejected.

The language of a news release must be clear, interesting and well-written, correctly using the conventions of language and vocabulary that makes the reader want to know the information you are providing. It should be crisp, vibrant and imaginative. The news release should convey information with simple description using short paragraphs and short sentences, without jargon, acronyms and slang.

The content of the release should provide information objectively, without an obvious effort to “sell” the reader about the product, event or announcement. This means that adjectives and adverbs, the modifying words that are used in the superlative in so many news releases, should be kept to an absolute minimum in yours. Convey the information in a way that the reader is drawn to the intended goal or conclusion.

### **Step 4: Make it easy for the editor.**

Write a well-crafted, accurate and vivid headline and a lead (first) paragraph that summarizes the information interestingly and informatively. This may be as far as the editor has time to read.

While everyone understands that elected officials like to see their names attached to “good news,” a news release that begins with, “Minister of (whatever), the Honourable (whoever) announced today that ...” will normally go directly to the editor’s recycling bin.

Use quotes with care. If you include gratuitous quotes simply to have name placement for one of your principals it will probably be deleted before the article or report is finalized.

Keep your news releases to about 500 words, and when possible, less. This is merely a guideline, and there will be occasions when you have to provide more detail than you can describe in two pages. If necessary, take the additional space, or consider preparing a *factsheet* or a *backgrounder*. Provide your information in the minimum number of words, without hyperbole, editorial commentary and overly descriptive language.

Provide the text by email, if possible, or make it scannable, so it can be easily digitized. In either case, most editors prefer text in *12-point courier font*.

### **Step 5: Don’t forget the broadcast media.**

Don’t forget the broadcast media. News releases don’t normally consider the broadcast media, so at the end of your print news release, type “FOR BROADCAST” and provide a version of your text that is specifically prepared for radio and television. While I will address the applied journalism

requirements of radio and television in a later issue of **Communications Notebook**, it is worthwhile to look at some of the basic requirements for radio.

- First of all, remember that radio is an “audio medium,” a news vehicle that depends only on sound to convey its messages. So you should write the way you speak, the way you would describe the subject to a friend.

- Radio news is “compressed,” its value for the communications professional is its immediacy and repetition, so make every word count. Keep the finished report to about 45 seconds, and only when absolutely necessary, to no more than 60 seconds.

- Use short sentences, short paragraphs and simple words without over-simplifying your description of the subject.

- Double-space the “broadcast” portion of your news release to make it easier for the on-air personality to read the report, and to make “pencil corrections” to the copy.

### **Step 6: Be a source of credible information that is professionally presented.**

Establishing your reputation as a provider of important information that is well-written and presented in a manner and format that is easy to use will lead the editor to favourably consider your news releases for publication and broadcast. Develop a news release *pro forma* that has a miniature version of your logo with your address, and identifies the document as a news release. At the end of the news release, include your name, title, office and mobile phone numbers and email address so a journalist can easily contact you.

### **Step 7: Be available.**

With very few exceptions, if your news release is accepted as a news source, you can expect that journalists will call for additional details. This will permit them to prepare a report that is local in its orientation, relevant to its own particular readership, and complete in its context and content.

Take the time to provide the details which the journalist needs and encourage him/her to call for any additional information. This is the first step in effective media relations.

As your reputation develops, the editor will associate your corporate identity with professionally prepared and presented information that is relevant, interesting and effective.

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