

Gracefully Written Press Releases Require Self-Editing and a Commitment to the Basics

By *Duncan Martell*

Creating a pitch-worthy press release may sound like an oxymoron to reporters, but it can be done.

There's little doubt you've seen your fair share of vague, poorly written and poorly proofed press releases. The headlines are five lines long. Sentences go on forever. Quotes are stacked. Errant (or missing) commas and misused semicolons abound.

Using sound news judgment, thinking like a journalist and writing in largely simple, declarative sentences, PR practitioners can create press releases that are newsworthy, attract media attention and will be shared across social media channels.

Here's a guide to writing better press releases that will result in your releases being shared, picked up, written through into a news story and generating coverage.

The most glaring problems with many press releases are:

1. They're written in "corporatese" and, more often than not, are replete with hyperbolic, breathless buzzwords such as "disruptive," "groundbreaking" and "game-changing."
2. They're devoid of context, with a solipsistic emphasis on the brand or client.

I can say it no simpler: don't do these things.

As we were told at some point in school, show don't tell. Rather than use examples of the puffery mentioned above to describe a brand's latest product, show the reader and

explain what about the product merits a description of "disruptive" or "groundbreaking." Give examples, customer use cases and evidence to back up such claims. Writing, "Widget X lets customers do widget-y things 35% faster than any other widget" is better than, "Widget X is truly revolutionary."

There are more things in the world than just your brand, yet from reading many press releases, the reader could conclude that's not the case. While, for instance, you likely won't want to mention direct competitors in the press release, providing some context, history and a broader sense of why the news in this news release actually is important news is key. Nothing exists in a vacuum, unless you're in outer space.

Also, third-party validation, such as relevant market research firms, and a solid customer reference or example, are keys to providing independent confirmation and context that support the claims you're making in the press release. Reporters and editors respond much better to validated claims. Having these items in your press release strengthens it that much more.

Not all announcements are created equal.

One of the best ways to create strong press releases is to rely on one of the fundamental tenets of journalism: the Five W's. Start by

answering them after you've gathered as many details about the news as you can.

- **Who.** Who is making the announcement?
- **What.** What is being announced?
- **Where.** Where is this happening? Is this being announced at a trade show, for example?
- **When.** Usually, press releases go out the same day as the announcement is made, so writing, "Fabulous Widgeteer today announced..." usually will suffice.
- **Why.** Why is this happening or did this happen? This is where we write about context, the industry landscape and where we must vigorously address the critical question of why should the reader care?

This last bullet point is key. It's the most fundamental question we should ask ourselves: Why should a reader care about this? While we're at it, let's also be honest. Not all announcements are created equal. Some are more inherently interesting than others. At the same time, keep asking yourself the "why" question until you can find, no matter how small, the one thing that answers the "why" question.

In crafting a press release that's newsworthy and shareable, the goal is to write crisply and cleanly.

Once you've gathered all the facts (through a creative brief, interviews of the relevant parties at the brand and research), it's time to start writing. In addition to the points already made, buy a copy of the AP Stylebook (full title *The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law*). While it may seem quaint in our always-on, always-connected digital world and unnecessary in the Twitterverse, AP style remains the gold standard in news

writing and press releases. And reporters notice—not just those older than 45 or old enough to remember typewriters and FAX machines.

Is your client headquartered in a city that stands alone in datelines? Do I write 7 or seven? Are executive titles capitalized? The answers to these questions and many more are in the AP Stylebook. Newspapers and wire services such as AP, Bloomberg, Reuters, *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* use either the AP Stylebook or their own (which are based on the AP Stylebook, anyway).

Also, buy a good dictionary and thesaurus. It may seem old school, but having hard copies of these books come in handy because you can see the related words that are proximal to the ones you're looking up. It's also easier to skip around than repeatedly tapping words into a search box.

If you're tempted to use a word whose definition you aren't 100% certain of, look it up. As one example, plenty of people use the word "decimated" to mean completely destroyed, when, actually, it means to reduce by a factor of 10. Similarly, with a thesaurus handy, when the urge strikes to use a "lazy" word such as revolutionary, you can swat it away. In place of revolutionary, for example, you could perhaps write "unprecedented."

In crafting a press release that's newsworthy and shareable, the goal is to write crisply and cleanly. If your sentences are longer than 30 words, it's time to start looking for some periods. Edit the sentences down or break them in two with either a period or a semicolon. To avoid buzzwords, try doing an Internet search for "worst business buzzwords" and excise your copy of any offenders. Reach for that thesaurus and find another word.

To help snare better media interest, keep headlines to a maximum of two lines. Subheads should be four lines or fewer. And keep

the first paragraph of your press release to three sentences (each of which is not more than 30 words). Large, imposing blocks of text on a display can be off-putting or even intimidating, even reporters, who often write lots and lots of words every day. Imagine which looks less challenging to read in your mind's eye: Boulder-sized clumps of sentences or crisp paragraphs populated by medium-length arrangements of words.

There is, of course, no shortage of resources online for writing press releases. Many are more than adequate. To craft a press release that's a cut above requires an eye for detail, an exacting self-editing function a commitment to the basics and a good deal of practice.

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