

A Guide To Preparing Cost-Effective

PRESS RELEASES

Robert H. Loeffler, JD, CBC

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The Haworth Press
New York • London • Norwood (Australia)

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The Haworth Press, Inc., 10 Alice Street, Binghamton, NY 13904-1580

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Loeffler, Robert H.

A guide to preparing cost-effective press releases / Robert H. Loeffler.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56024-882-3 (acid-free paper)

1. Press releases. 2. Public relations. I. Title.

HD59.L64 1992

659.2—dc20

91-36042
CIP

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SOME ADVANCE REVIEWS

“Must reading for anyone beginning in the public relations business and a helpful review for mid-level or senior professionals. It is well-organized and easy to read. Its particular strength is the use of check lists and sequential lists of steps in the process of developing a press release. It should be on the shelf of everyone who has a basic public relations library.”

Catherine B. Ahles, APR

Vice President for College Relations
Macomb Community College

“A comprehensive book written in basic, understandable language. Its nicely detailed do’s and don’ts are listed in the order in which you should do them when writing and producing news releases. This book goes beyond just writing news releases, covering steps in getting the releases printed, distributed, and their effectiveness evaluated. The sample log book sheet, distribution sheets, and sample press releases should help readers plan an organized approach to their promotion programs.”

Susan Seaton Smith, EdD

Assistant Professor, Journalism Department
Middle Tennessee State University



“Provides a hands-on approach to doing press releases from start to finish. It opens with helpful do’s and don’ts and it runs the course of the Who, What, Where, Why and When. Loeffler’s book is highly appropriate for every level of practitioner, from the novice to the seasoned, and to the media educator. Its rich simplicity and easy access make it a quick and viable reference for any library.”

Risë Jane Samra, PhD

Associate Professor, Communication
Barry University

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Robert H. Loeffler, JD, CBC, is the manager of media relations for a leading advanced controls and automation systems manufacturer. He has a quarter century of writing and editing experience gained in military public information, nonprofit publicity, and corporate communications. A certified business communicator, Dr. Loeffler is a member of the Public Relations Society of America, the Society of Professional Journalists, and the Business/Professional Advertising Association. He is currently Adjunct Professor of Business Administration at Notre Dame College of Ohio and Adjunct Instructor of Business Administration at Baldwin-Wallace College.

Foreword

One of the seniors in our communication arts program served an internship on a magazine with a wide readership in Northern Ohio. For two days every week she worked in a department that published a calendar of coming events with a guide to area restaurants. Her job was to correct omissions, contradictions, and inaccuracies in news releases. The editor admitted that thirty to forty percent of the news releases that came to his desk needed help. Contacting the authors and rewriting the material meant a sizable expenditure of time. It should be noted that these were not complicated items, but announcements covering the basics of who, what, when, and where.

Why do situations like this occur? Is it because the press release is so fundamental that its importance is underestimated? Do people assume everyone knows how to write one? Who does the writing when there is no public relations office in the organization? Often in small companies or non-profit agencies the task is given to a secretary or a volunteer whose training is limited to reading previous releases from the files.

As Mr. Loeffler indicates, the average public relations or communications text devotes little space to the press release. A few workbooks are available to provide exercises in style but they are rarely found on library shelves. Obviously there is a need for a good handbook on the subject and Mr. Loeffler has answered that need.

A Guide to Preparing Cost-Effective Press Releases contains much more than descriptions and examples of formats. It presents the release as part of a process that can be studied and controlled for maximum efficiency and effectiveness. It provides valuable do's and don'ts and step-by-step instructions for production that can be used as checklists. Even directions for proofreading are included. Beginners can easily use the book to learn. Professionals might keep it on hand for a quick review.

The content reflects Mr. Loeffler's many years as a journalist, editor and corporate communications professional. The organization and directness of the text reveal the author as a teacher. In this avocation he guided journalism students at Ursuline College in researching and reporting news stories in an accurate and readable style. More importantly, he taught them to love writing.

*Mary P. Daley, PhD
Department of Communication Arts/
Public Relations
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Cleveland, Ohio*

Preface

Press releases are a major form of communication for business, public and private institutions, and government, yet there is not a great deal of instructional information dealing strictly with press release development. Texts on communications may offer a brief sampling, but very little in-depth material exists on this particular form of communication. Throughout my career as a communicator, I have observed that writers are basically forced to pick up knowledge from wherever they can as they begin to write releases. Consequently, it can be a long and arduous process before they feel competent in preparing them.

Like other forms of writing, press release writing has a precise format and its own methods. The purpose of this guide is to help the writer along the path to press release expertise by becoming familiar with these methods. By no means is this guide a rule book or a “style” book in the strict sense of the word. Rather it is designed to give the reader suggestions and recommendations for effective press release writing. The guide reviews the basics of press release writing and provides various examples, as well as offers tips both on general layout and execution of press releases.

Press releases are compared to advertising because, to a great degree, press releases can extend an advertising program’s efforts and even go where advertising can’t—to those publications beyond the stretch of the advertising dollar.

In an age of great emphasis on high performance, cost effectiveness, measurable success, and fast results, press releases are a tailor-made promotional tool likely to be one of the key means of communication for some time to come.

Robert H. Loeffler
University Heights, Ohio

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Chapter 1

Press Releases Are a Good Investment for Any Promotion Program

Press releases are one of the best investments you can make when promoting products or services. The purpose of a press release is to generate an editorial mention. Unlike advertising, there is no charge for these mentions, therefore they are often referred to as “free publicity.”

Besides the free mention, press release production and distribution costs are a fraction of those common to advertising in most instances. There are different ways to approach these costs. There is the actual cost method. A 250-word release can often be written, produced and distributed for as little as \$500.

Another approach is the cost per contact method. The actual cost is divided by the number of readers reached. The cost per contact is often tenths of a cent, and possibly less, depending on the combined circulation of the publications running the release. Very broad coverage with extremely low cost per contact can rival achievements of advertising extravaganzas often seen in conjunction with major sporting events. Of course, with press releases, the up-front expense for the extravaganza is eliminated. The number of release contacts may be less, but is nevertheless impressive.

Another method is to divide the cost by the number of responses. Magazines often send reader responses to the originator of the release. They do the same for advertising. Consequently, a company or organization that is advertising can compare the leads generated by both methods. When costs are compared, press releases are generally found to be much less expensive.

Despite the attractive economics of press releases, they should not be used to the exclusion of advertising. Press releases have limi-

tations. For example, they are often rewritten by someone else before publication. There is no guarantee they will appear, and there is no control over when they will appear if they are selected.

Advertisers, on the other hand, have control over what their advertising says and when it appears. The best approach is a press release/advertising mix. In such a combination, advertising is run in key publications and press releases can be sent to these as well as secondary publications. In this manner, advertising is used efficiently and those publications not given advertising are at least addressed with the release.

The following listing compares the benefits and limitations of press releases and advertising:

Press Release Pros

- can be quickly prepared
- relatively low cost
- meet a need in providing wanted information
- provide broad coverage economically
- can be developed into more "free ink" as feature articles

Advertising Pros

- appearance assured
- full control
- can be fully planned
- media selection
- can be run more than once

Press Release Cons

- no publication assurance
- can be edited and rewritten without permission
- not sure when it will appear
- most releases are not printed
- most often run only once

Advertising Cons

- costly to prepare
- costly to run
- require extensive time to create in many instances
- more media than budget can handle
- does not usually result in free coverage

Press releases are ideal when:

- There are more publications where advertising can be run than there are ad dollars.
- You are not sure if a publication is the right one to advertise in, and want some means to gauge readership response to your products and services.

- You have items of interest to your customers but do not feel it is worth expending advertising dollars.
- You have little or no advertising budget and are left with no alternative but press releases to gain or maintain visibility.
- You want to obtain as much visibility as possible, even if you do have a sizeable advertising budget. The press release, in this instance, acts like a booster for promotion performance, expanding coverage at a fraction of the cost of advertising.

Press release effectiveness depends in large measure on four key things:

1. proper release format containing the vital information.
2. sending the release to interested publications and media.
3. systematic production so that each release is not a major project.
4. a program that can be executed and easily managed.

This guide is prepared to assist you in developing press release effectiveness. By following its suggestions and gaining experience in this kind of promotional effort, you will increase your capability to enhance visibility and market awareness for your products and services. And, you will do it most cost-efficiently.

