by Samantha Schelling

Tips for writing a media release

Business communications have so many avenues today. Along with social media, eDMS (or ezines) and websites, sit the more traditional paths of newspapers and radio.

Whatever the avenue you choose, a well-written press release is an excellent way to communicate your news – both good and bad.

You might typically think of doing a press release to announce a fantastic new product or service, an upcoming event, or to stay top of mind with your audience by introducing a new staff member or as part of some thought leadership.

But press releases are also a highly effective way to announce something not so great, such as the bad news of a data or privacy breach. Even in such uncomfortable circumstances as these, it is far better to get on the front foot and quickly release the news yourself rather than trying to ignore it. This serves to remove the opportunity for "someone else" to have their say first and potentially skew the information, while also putting your business in a better light in the long run by being upfront at the beginning.

So, whether your news is positive or does fall into the negative crisis-management zone, writing it properly is essential.

You may also be wondering if it's a "press release" or a "media release" you're thinking about. The terms are essentially interchangeable: "press release" relates directly to "the print press", while "media release" conjures going more broadly to "the media". Today, either term is applicable.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Rule number one is that a press release has to be newsworthy. Wishy-washy, fluff pieces that don't have a "draw" just won't be picked up by news outlets. If you're unfortunately writing about a data or privacy breach or other bad news, then the "newsworthy" box is no doubt already ticked for you. Do bear in mind though, that what one outlet sees as "newsworthy", others will not. This depends on their target audience and also comes down to the subjective view of the editor or other "information gatekeeper".

WRITING GUIDELINES

These guidelines will help you craft, or at least start, a good press release:

1. The introduction, or lead paragraph, is the most important. It needs to have a "hook" for the journalist, and should ideally contain the "five w's" of who, what, when, where and why, along with "how". However, don't make the sentence so long that it's hard to read without a breath. Start with most important facts first, and if you need to, then break it up into different sentences. (An old journo rule of thumb is to create your impact in 15 words.)

2. A press release is not an essay, so it needs to be written in inverted-pyramid style with the most important news at the top. If a journalist is going to cut the piece (which they most probably will), then they'll cut from the bottom. If your most important news is at the top, then your story will still be conveyed.

3. Make sure you keep writing short sentences in short paragraphs and keep your information to the point.

4. Do not write big fancy words. They just aren't used in publications. If you do use complex words where simple ones would suffice, they'll be changed. The more a journo has to change what's in your press release the greater the risk your key messaging will be lost. Journos also become rather ticked off with having to change pompously written releases.

If you write what they're looking for, they're more likely to run it as it is. For example, instead of: "The manager of the operation has announced they will commence the programme at the beginning of next week", try "The operations manager said they will start the program next week". Simple, and to the point.

5. Nearly every article quotes someone, so pick someone appropriate in your organisation. Ideally, introduce the person by stating their name and job title, then write their quotes. That way, when people are reading the words, they know who's said them. It is always preferable to quote a person rather than "a spokesperson", which can leave an impression of no one wanting to take responsibility.

6. When quoting people, just use "said"; don't be tempted to go fancy with "commented", "added" or "stated". Someone "said" it, so stick with that.

7. Do not write emotionally. Keep it factual and your words simple. Having said that, the person you quote can, of course, express emotion. Just don't go overboard.

FINISHING UP

After you've written it, get someone else to proof read it. It's impossible to proof your own writing. However don't agonise over it; make sure the spelling, punctuation and grammar are correct, then get it out. In the case of bad news, you're wanting to be timely, efficient and upfront.

It's a good idea to try to keep the release to one page.

Give your release a headline, but don't spend hours on it. By all means write a catchy headline for some positive news. In the case of a data or privacy breach or other bad news, just be simple.

At the top, add "Media Release" (or "Press Release") and the date.

At the end, add "For further information, contact...." with whomever is the appropriate person in case the journo wants some further comment. Ideally, this should include an after-hours number. A mobile for both BH and AH is fine.

In the email subject line, write "News update: ...." so the recipient is clear what it is. Journalists receive an in-box full of press releases every day, so good, clear subject lines and headlines catch their eye and let them quickly see what your email is about.

If it's too hard

While the above sounds simple enough, a business may have neither the time, nor the resources to write a press release. Or, they may simply want to outsource it to a professional and get on with managing their own business.

If this is you, we can help.

Contact **Samantha** on **0431 015 904** or visit **www.thewordco.com.au**

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