



Well Chosen Words
Creative Marketing Communication Strategies

PR Primer

The Role of News Releases in Your Total Promotional Program

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The Role of News Releases in Your Total Promotional Program

BY JANE R. MUELLER

Implementing a public relations plan is like herding cats: you can set them on the trail, but you can't be sure they'll stay on it. You can offer stories to the news media, but you can't control the content or the timing of the coverage you receive. Even so, public relations can be used effectively as part of a total, integrated communications program. Whatever other activities you use to promote your services, public relations can amplify the effect.

Weaknesses and Strengths

Public relations has a downside as a promotional tool. Unlike paid advertising, your message is rarely used verbatim and is subject to editorial discretion. An experienced reporter may try to present a balanced view by filling out a story with another authority who might not agree with your statements. It requires management involvement to respond to any challenges that may arise.

There are also some substantial advantages to a well-managed public relations program. It is inexpensive. It can support many company goals, such as promotion of services to prospective customers and communication to suppliers and investors. Furthermore, the coverage you get carries with it an

implied third party endorsement. A well-managed PR program builds solid relationships with editors and reporters, who may consult you as the authority in other stories relating to your industry.

Story Angles

At least 85% of the news releases sent to reporters end up in the waste basket. In order to avoid that pitfall, it is important to understand the people who make decisions about what stories will run and why. Each idea that crosses an editor's desk needs to have a strong story angle, something that will be of service or of interest to the editor's audience of readers, listeners or viewers. Examples of story angles are:

News announcement: information or an event of potential interest to the media's audience, such as a new service expansion, a change of location, an award, a personnel change, or sponsorship of a seminar

Feature: exploration of a subject that informs or interests the media's audience but is not necessarily connected to breaking news; a good filler story that retains its timeliness

Opinion: authoritative advocacy of a point of view that gives the media an opportunity to present multiple perspectives of an issue and builds a leadership image for your company or organization

Identifying Opportunities

You can use news releases effectively when one or more of the following circumstances apply:

- Your service offering has intrinsic news value as part of a trend
- Your service offering requires some education of the public
- You have a significant success story to tell
- Opinion leadership is part of your marketing communications goals
- Potential customers are skeptical of advertising

Understanding the Media

A reporter with a sense of humor once explained, "Most of us are on deadline and under the gun from the editor every day to come up with a great story. We all want to impress our editors, and we want to win a Pulitzer. If you come to us with an interesting story that gets the editor off our backs, we'll listen. If you come with a prize-winning angle, we're putty in your hands."

Before You Begin to Write

The story angle you will probably employ more frequently than the others is the news angle. Following are 12 questions you should ask yourself and have clearly in mind before even sitting down at the

keyboard to begin composing a news release:

1. What exactly *is* the news?
2. What is significant about this development from a reporter's or editor's point of view?
3. How does this impact your organization?
4. What new benefit will your potential clients or customers enjoy as a result?
5. Are you hiring additional employees or moving into new facilities to support this development?
6. Does this represent a change or expansion of mission for you?
7. To what do you attribute the success of this venture?
8. Would it be appropriate to comment on revenue this will generate? If so, what do you want to say about it?
9. What other supporting points or details should be part of the announcement?
10. Who should be the person to quote regarding this development and what messages should be included in the quotation? (Note: News releases should state facts only. If you want to state opinions, they need to be expressed as quotations attributed to a specific person.)
11. What is your positioning for

- this release, i.e., who is the target audience that you yourself want to reach and what main, overall idea do you want to convey with this announcement?
12. What is the appropriate timing for making this announcement?

Writing the Release

Once you have answered these questions, you are ready to compose the news release. Here are three guidelines to make your news release compelling:

Sample News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

News Release

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS TO PUBLISH CANDIDATE INFORMATION BOOKLET Group Solicits Participation of Local Candidates

FREMONT, CALIF., August 10, 2002—The League of Women Voters today announced plans to publish a candidate information booklet, which will contain information provided by candidates for local offices on the November Fremont ballot. The booklet will go into the mail in mid-October to enable voters time to study it before Election Day.

“Today, many voters are overwhelmed by the lengthy list of candidates on consolidated ballots,” explains League president Alex Starr. “Getting information about the offices at the top of the ticket is fairly easy, but learning about all the non-partisan local candidates is a challenge.”

“Often, local candidates cannot afford the thousands of dollars required to get their messages to the voters,” adds project manager Anne Brunton. “This booklet provides a cost-effective, non-partisan means for each candidate to get his or her message to voters in approximately 30,000 households.”

All participating candidates will share the costs of the mailer equally. The more candidates who participate, the lower the cost per individual campaign. Candidates will be notified of the opportunity by mail, and those interested in participating will be asked to return the postcard included in the mailing prior to September 3, 2002.

About the League of Women Voters

The League of Women Voters is a non-partisan political organization with two major functions, voter service and action on issues. It does not support or oppose candidates for office. Ever since its inception at the end of suffragist movement, the organization has been actively promoting the active and informed participation of citizens in their government. Membership is open to both men and women of voting age.

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Use the "inverted pyramid" to present information. Cover the fundamental information in the first paragraph. Be aware that editors often need to edit for length. Place less essential information at the end of the story so that your news won't suffer if the article is trimmed.

Use active voice. Sentences sound crisper and livelier when the subject of the sentence does the acting rather than being acted upon. "The company has earned an award for innovation" for example, is livelier than "An award for innovation was given to the company."

Use positive statements. Positive statements generally express an idea more clearly and pack more punch than negative ones. For instance, "Park only in designated spaces" is stronger than, "Don't part anywhere that isn't marked as a parking space."

Finish with a "boilerplate" description of your organization, a short paragraph that you can append to all releases that describes your organization and its value.

At either the beginning or end of the release, provide contact information for the person the reporter should contact for answers to any further questions.

Measuring a Successful News Release

Because news releases are not advertising messages, they should not be relied upon to directly

produce sales. The fundamental measurements of success for a news release are:

It is used by the media.

It advances your communication goals.

Communication goals are advanced when the published information is accurate, when it enhances the positioning of the company, when it reaches your target audience, when it addresses your central issue, and when it supports your company's marketing or business strategy.

Getting Started

Create a list of news media that your own target audience is likely to read and respect. One way to find this information is to choose a few people who are part of that audience and ask them where they get information.

The next step is to create releases using different story angles and feeding the media newsworthy material on a regular basis. Not all releases are appropriate for every media outlet on your list. Daily newspapers may be more interested in breaking news with a local angle. Trade journals may be more interested in well-written articles that require only light editing. Targeting is essential.

As you establish increasing rapport with the editors and reporters on the media list, you can refine and expand the list. The ideal

scenario is one in which you get coverage that meets your goals and you establish a relationship of mutual respect with media contacts who rely upon you as an authoritative industry resource.