

PR HANDBOOK

HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE NEWS RELEASE



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WHAT IS PR AND WHY DO YOU NEED IT?

PR stands for Public Relations and is literally developing relationships with your public - usually through a third party like the press or radio. It's about getting your business noticed - creating a buzz.

PR is better if it is planned and works best over time to build up awareness, goodwill, reputation, perception and understanding.

The best thing is PR is low cost, smaller companies are more likely to use a PR consultant on an ad hoc basis e.g. for specific events. But smaller companies can undertake their own public relations campaigns through well written news/media releases and articles targeted at the right media.

Through positive media coverage and editorial endorsements, which is more believable, you can influence public opinion in your favour. Most of what you read, hear or see in the business or features sections (as opposed to hard news) is initiated by companies.

So creating favourable coverage for your company or creating stories about new products increases credibility and it will give you a competitive advantage. .

However, remember that everything published (apart from advertorial – paid for editorial) is subject to either editing, interpretation or investigation by a journalist or editor. So it is not for direct selling, free advertising or about a false image, it is about creating a favourable impression, indirect sales, improving relationships, image and reputations.

So at its worst PR could be called 'spin', 'hype' or 'puff' but at its best the media is very powerful and an extremely potent business tool.

Remember - A smallish advert in a local paper or business magazine can cost £500 - £1500. The same amount of space in words and pictures will go in for nothing and tells a stronger, more credible story. It is estimated PR has three times the value of an advert.

PLANNING

Marketing Speak	The Simple Version
Define communications objectives	WHAT do want to achieve
Target Audiences	WHO are you communicating with
Key Messages	WHAT do you want to say
Communication methods/media	HOW you are going to say it
The Schedule	WHEN you are going to do it
Evaluation methods	SUCCESS how it will be measured

As an example the Shrewsbury WiRE.....

WHAT ...We want to raise awareness of the group and its values in order to attract and retain members, inform about our speakers, meetings and events.

WHO ...Women in business, employed/self employed, living/working in Shropshire.

SAYING ...Shrewsbury WiRE is not just another networking group, we connect like minded business women in Shropshire and provide an environment where long term relationships develop and women flourish through mutual support and participation in stimulating networking meetings.

HOW ... Using local press and radio, Facebook, Twitter, WiRE website, blogs, local or community magazines, directory listings. Using good images

WHEN ...Communicate annually and every month you have a speaker that you want to promote

SUCCESS .. Measured from how many news releases published, mentions on radio, word of mouth, attendance at meetings, conversion of visitors, retention of members.

RESEARCHING YOUR AUDIENCE

Communication can be used for all sorts of things ... to inform about an event, to report on something that has happened, to introduce new ideas, to tell a story about a person, to entertain or amuse, to persuade or change perceptions.

Your audience isn't just new customers there could also be a wider 'public' who can influence others or assist you directly or indirectly.

- New customers
- Existing customers
- Past customers
- Suppliers
- Staff or potential staff
- Investors and professional advisors
- Influencers – such as chamber or other networking groups
- Collaborators – other companies or organisations you can work with
- The Media - in the first instance communicating with a **journalist, editor or publisher** so you have to get the attention and meet the needs of this primary audience as well

When thinking about your customers it may help to give these people a 'personality' – and complete customer avatar - age, sex, income, values and then you can match the profile to the media. Download free from my website.

One of the advantages of news/media releases is that they can be easily adapted for different audiences. Once you have written the main copy of your release, it can be adapted for the local press or the specialised trade press with minimum effort, maintaining a narrow focus and an angle that is interesting to its intended audience.

Once you write a release you are happy with, probably 50 - 75% of it can be re-used for other releases or articles.

TARGETING THE RIGHT MEDIA

	Local	Regional
News	Shropshire Star Shrewsbury Chronicle Newport Advertiser Telford Journal Bridgnorth Journal South Shropshire Journal Shropshire Live (digital)	Express & Star Birmingham Mail (now Birmingham Live)
Monthly Business Journals	Shropshire Business	Midlands Business News Midlands Business Insider Birmingham Business Birmingham Business Post
Lifestyle	Shropshire Magazine (part of Star) What's What Shire Magazine My Shrewsbury SY One Scene Local Hype Magazine Oswestry Life/It's Beautiful In & Around (Telford area) Shrewsbury Now Nova (Newport)	Style Birmingham DeLuxe (also features business) Live 24-7 Birmingham Living Staffordshire Life Staffordshire Living (including Shropshire)
Radio/TV	BBC Radio Shropshire	Free Radio Signal 107/Telford FM Midlands Today (TV)

News is topical and immediate mainly about people, can be controversial, shocking or dramatic.

Features are more analytical and informative but still need to be interesting, they can take a position and explore an issue.

The best way to find out what your customer watches, reads or listens too is to ask them direct (no one minds a bit of ad hoc research). What do they value or recommend. What web sites do they visit?

Keep your eyes and ears open – you could look out for what is in their office or reception if visiting. Where do your customers advertise or place articles? What about your competitors?

Visit a large newsagent and see what's about, there are new publications all the time, contact details are usually at the front.

Google engineering/health/ etc. publications and you will get on line and traditional publishers as well as forums you could contribute to.

If you are a member of a chamber or other networking organisation or a trade association don't forget to submit news and events to these publications.

For those serving wider or specialist markets you will probably be employing a PR agent anyway – there are several directories of the media which need to be purchased either annually or subscribe to on line as publications and contacts constantly change.

Be realistic about your target market, even in this area it's very very hard to get any coverage in papers like the Shropshire Star, Birmingham Post or on regional TV – unless it's a bad news story. Rest assured if you have a fantastic story it will get picked up by others and even go national! But these do tend to be the quirky or human interest stories.

GETTING THE JOURNALIST'S ATTENTION

Once you have established where best to target your release make sure it is in the right type and style and fits the usual profile in terms of style and language to optimise your chance of coverage. Although there are lots of basic principles, writing for the technical press is different then for local media.

Probably 90% of news/media releases get thrown in the bin. Shropshire Star gets 250 releases a week, 200 by email and 80% don't get published.

Do your research! Read the publication, look at what makes the news section and what goes into features, what length, style, pictures are used - why has that story has been featured? Listen to local radio to see how programmes are aimed at different audiences.

If you're targeting a women's magazine you need to think of a story that's of interest to females of the age that read that magazine. If you're targeting a late afternoon radio show it should appeal to people driving home. There's no point in writing something in a sensational, 'tabloid' style if you're trying to get into a local business magazine!

Each release may only be scanned for five seconds sadly most journalists are not particularly interested in your company, history or products. You will need to be creative and think outside the box. Use a catchy headlines and hooks/angles more of these later.

Remember that you are NOT writing an advert – too much 'puff' and it will go straight into the bin. **Your article must contain information of interest to your target audience.**

Send news releases by email, allow a week if it's for an event or send in the day of the supplement for the following week, e.g. on a Monday for the following Monday's business pages in the Star.

Journalists are very busy people plus there have been many cuts to staff so most local journalists never leave the office. So don't be disappointed if you don't get a mention.

As a general rule, you don't need to follow up your news/media releases with a phone call. The only time you should routinely call the newsroom is if you wish to offer a story as an exclusive, or if the story has changed significantly since sending the original release.

Journalists may want more information so try to be prepared, they may want additional quotes or radio journalists may want an interview.

Frequency is good, but don't send similar releases every week, aim for one a month or every other month, varying the story and angle each time.

TOP 12 TIPS FOR WRITING A GREAT NEWS RELEASE

- 1. Keep it short** - try to limit your release to one sheet of A4, it is far more likely to be read. Two pages max if you have to including contact details and additional information.
- 2. Use one and half line spacing** – and a clear, modern (not quirky) font, point size at least 11, it's easier to read on paper and screen
- 3. Aim for an impersonal written style** - avoid adjectives and emotive language. Use facts, be objective, don't embellish with fancy language, irrelevant information and waffle. Write it in the third party. Try to include the word 'you' to draw people in.
- 4. Write for your audience** - present the facts in a way that is interesting but in simple, easily understood language, spelling out who you are and what you do. You can go into more technical detail for trade publications but otherwise avoid jargon, acronyms, abbreviations and complicated language. Use Christian names not Mr.
- 5. Your headline is vital** - this is what first catches an editor's attention. Write or rewrite it last as it should be a précis of the whole story. Five times as many people read the headline as the body copy. Put headline on second page also if posting.
- 6. Catch the attention immediately** - unlike traditional writing the first few sentences should tell your audience what the key information is and why they should be interested in reading more, essentially summarising the rest of the release.
- 7. Draft and re-draft** - once you have written the whole release, redraft your first paragraph to ensure that it is as effective as possible. It is essential that your first sentence grabs the attention – invest time in writing and re-writing the opening sentence and headline.
- 8. Make it look professional** – break up long copy, use short paragraphs with one point or message. Use sub headlines and bullet points to keep reader interested. Don't use exclamation marks or write in capitals, use italics to emphasise but use sparingly.
- 9. Use facts and proof** – journalists do like statistics and fascinating facts, e.g. number of staff employed, size of x, number of people at an event, number of people that suffer from x. Use the internet to research facts and figures. If you have evidence to back up any claims – use this. Use customer quotes or testimonials.
- 10. Who gives a ****!** – make your release interesting, talk about what problems you solve, about prospective clients, benefits – not about you, what you do and product features. We are all guilty of self promotion – try to do it subtly! And think would people really be interested in this? Stop selling and start solving!
- 11. Check and double check** - for spelling mistakes and typo's if possible get someone else to read it through to see if it makes sense.
- 12. Background/Contact information** – should be at the end. A bit about the company, what it does or about you and your passion. How long you've been in business, key products, services and audiences, awards or nominations. Plus your phone number and email address.

TOP TEN POINTS FOR A GOOD STRUCTURE

- 1. Top** - put '**News Release**' with the date that you are sending it out on. Then put '**For Immediate Release**' unless you are embargoing a launch or announcement at some future date and you want to get it into a monthly or weekly publication – if so put the release date.
- 2. Headline** – put in bold underneath 'news release' the emphasis can be changed depending on publication for example 'World First for Telford Based Centre' (for Shropshire Star), 'World First for University of Wolverhampton' (for Express & Star) 'World First for Midlands' (for Birmingham Post).
- 3. First Paragraph** - this should be a summary of the entire release and be catchy enough to grab the attention, the average number of words read per story is 28 that includes the headline and first paragraph!
- 4. Second and Third Paragraphs** - should include further interesting and factual information, write for the reader not yourself. Write down all the key facts or points and rank them in order of interest, then expand them to make your body copy. Journalists will chop from the bottom. Use approx. 25 words per sentence, 40 – 50 per paragraph.
- 5. Quotes** - try to include quotes, from two people if possible. Although the main body of the release is factual and impersonal, a quote can introduce an element of subjectivity and persuasion using more everyday language.

You can make one or two of your key points in a quote. Use a 'friendly' customer or colleague, you can draft it but it must be approved by them. Put these in quotes e.g. Claire Smith, director of A-Z Holdings said: "Working with XXX was pleasure, they were professional from the very beginning and took time to understand our needs."
- 6. Relevant Dates/Times/ or Event or Phone No's/Web Address for further info** – you can put these in at the bottom, however, they may be seen as advertising so they may not be published, an interested person will probably go to the internet to find out more information about your company or event if the details are not included hence the need for some presence on the internet.
- 7. End** - at the end of the copy, and above the list of contacts, write the word '**Ends**' – indicating everything below this line is for the journalist's information, not for publication.
- 8. Contact Details** - include land line, mobile and email of yourself or anyone that journalists can speak to if they require further clarification Don't forget to make sure that you/your contacts are available –it is very bad manners if, for example, a radio journalist can't get hold of someone to give an interview.
- 9. Don't forget the picture caption** - If you are sending photos put the caption at the bottom of the release with names and titles of people (left to right) or in the covering email with the photo attached as a jpeg.
- 10. Note for Editors or Further Information** - if you have a lot of standard information or background information you want to include put this right at the bottom so the journalist can pick and choose what they put in.

KILLER HEADLINES

Make it bold and interesting - An important part of the press release (and indeed web sites, leaflets, sales letters etc). It needs to stand out from all the other news/media releases.

Adopt the style - a good tip is to write it in the style of the headlines of the publication you're targeting so check it out and see if there is a pattern. However a headline will often be changed by a journalist so the art is in getting a headline that grabs their attention.

Think of what you want to achieve - as consumers we're bombarded with 4 – 10,000 messages a day from badges on cars to posters, packaging, Facebook, websites etc. Most get filtered out so your message must stand out. You want people to read the headline, then the rest of the message then act on the message.

Short and simple- three pieces of information or concepts is the most people can absorb. One big idea is even better, try to keep it to 15 words max, shorter if possible.

Title Case - is better for headlines than all capitals. People think that capital letters will get more attention, but they can be harder to read.

ATTENTION GRABBING IDEAS

Curiosity - Spice up your headlines and entice them to read on. 'How to...' 'The Truth About'... 'Discover'... 'How Would'... 'Secrets Of'... 'At Last!'... 'Imagine'... 'Protect' ... 'Free' ... 'New'... 'Announcing'... 'The Last Word On'...

Money/Profit/Business Improvement – always of interest ... 'How X Did Y'... "... 'How Much'... 'Make More Money'.. 'The xxx Technique/Method for Reducing your Tax Bill'..

Questions – posing a question grabs attention as it requires a response and can stay in the unconscious mind for up to 48 hours! e.g. 'Do you want to Reduce Costs?'. 'Would you like a Movie Star's Lifestyle' .. 'Do You Make Mistakes at Work?' ...

Use Problems – if you can structure your headline to solve a problem you are onto a winner e.g. 'Beehive Products Reduce Hay Fever' 'How to Avoid Ruining Your Health'

Comfort/Saving Time/Reducing Stress – people want to improve their life - tools, gadgets, furniture, services, techniques 'The No Fail Way to..' 'Reduce'... 'Improve'..

Ambition and Career – products, prospects, information or a service that can help 'xxx can Help you Get Smarter'. 'Beat the Competition' .. 'Top Tips to Get to the Top'...

Use Numbers – '99 Ways to Improve your Golf Game' .. 'Miracle Cream Makes You Look 10 Years Younger'.. 'Four Steps to'

NB: In saying this some journalists will say dreaming up a snappy headline is a waste of time – this is definitely true for the Shropshire Star, as they will probably change it, but make it attention-grabbing and ensure the summary of the story is in the first paragraph!!!!

HOOKS AND ANGLES

The best way to get media coverage, is to gauge the types of stories that are hot—current events, national days, breaking news, latest scandals—and tie your business in with them.

Every journalist is looking for a different spin on the story of the day, look for a fresh angle or that local angle on a national story.

20 GREAT HOOKS

1. 1/5/10 years in business – demonstrating success and longevity
2. New product/service – how it helps, who it helps, benefits (not features)
3. Event/Launch/AGM – can do releases pre and post event (with pics)
4. New staff/board appointment/promotions or appointment to a chamber/professional/charitable committee
5. Winning/being short listed for an award, winning a competition – what does it mean for the business and staff
6. Achieving a standard/qualification/status - what does it mean for customers or staff?
7. Winning a contract, getting a new customer, breaking into a new market, exports
8. End of year results/best ever results or increases in profits/sales customer base
9. Relocating your office or business – how will this benefit staff/customers
10. Expansion in space or staff or new branch/division/shop – better service
11. Inventing something, new products or new processes – what problem is solved?
12. Advice/information/comment on current issue – how you can help
13. Local angle - e.g. Shropshire companies are urged to... Shropshire Business Women can take advantage of ...Families in Telford that want/need
14. Numbers – 100th customer, 1000th sale, 100th member
15. First – or biggest, largest, longest etc.
16. Unusual solutions or problems solved, unusual customers, far away customers
17. Launch of new web site or app, release of new book, free guide, research
18. National Awareness Days or Weeks – find a link to your business – check the internet
19. Human Interest stories – how you helped someone on a journey or achieve amazing things or your part in a charity event or
20. Great picture – a truly amazing picture with a 'picture caption' (basically your first two paras or your news release) is likely to get picked up by the media

A PICTURE SPEAKS A THOUSAND WORDS

Never underestimate the power of an image. A great photo can ensure your story gets covered, particularly in local newspapers. Editors want to make their publications look good so it's great news all round!

If you want the publication to take the picture or attend an event it is best to speak to the picture editor/desk in person and ask them to put it in the diary. You will need to describe what type of picture you want or ask their advice so you can prepare.

Follow this up with the press release or invitation to the event by email/post and also follow up again by phone the day before. There is no guarantee that they will attend it depends if there is a pile up on the motorway, a fire or if event is out of hours.

To overcome the lost opportunity, photographers can be booked for £60 approx per hour excluding travelling. Alternatively a good picture can be taken with a decent digital camera. An added advantage is that you own the picture and can send to rival publications and use for future marketing –in publications or on your website.

Take plenty of pictures so you can select a good one and take a selection of landscape (oblong long ways) and portrait (upright oblong), the latter being more popular on social media and in most printed media. Check the publication to see the type of pictures normally published.

In advance think about who could be in the picture, what props could be used and ensure they are available/made up for the day. Investing a few pounds makes all the difference e.g. a crystal ball, cut out numbers, balloons with messages, etc. (cheesy but effective).

Groups of three or five are best - larger groups are too crowded. Pictures of people at events standing or sitting around or handshake or line up shots are fairly boring and are less likely to be published. Try to get someone handing something over – a large key, holding the no 100, cutting a novelty cake – anything that adds interest.

Great pictures include costumes, products, pets, props (holding maps, publications, walking boots etc) and children – just look at the Shropshire Star. Charity events will often make the news before and after the event.

Get verbal or written permission for your subjects to appear in the picture – particularly for children – you can be held to ransom later if the picture is reproduced or goes 'national' (it's happened to me!). Get the correct spelling of names, titles and companies and in the right order!

Make sure you have good light, do outside if possible, pictures taken inside can be dark without professional lighting.

Another good tip is to provide a 'picture story' - essentially a picture with a short paragraph summing up event/opportunity, longer than a normal picture caption. This can work if your original story is not published- re-submit as a picture with caption.

Submit your picture as jpeg with your release via email and don't forget the caption at the end of the release or on the email. If you have other pictures mention these – for example 'additional pictures in a landscape/portrait format are available on request'.

SUMMARY

Public Relations can be a very powerful way of communicating with a wide range of audiences. If it is done well it can raise awareness of your company through positive media coverage and editorial endorsements which are more believable than sales brochures.

Public Relations can be a very cost effective way of spending your time and it should form a part of your wider marketing mix. Regular news releases are better than piles of literature in your cupboard.

A good communications plan will give you a competitive advantage over other companies.

GOLDEN RULES

Invest the Time – and the energy in planning and carrying out your plan it will pay dividends! It probably needs a couple of hours twice a week, allocate the time.

Be persistent – if you don't succeed with your first release, keep trying, change the angle, talk to the media and see what they want. Send regular releases to keep the awareness up, create that buzz.

Be creative – think outside the box, everyone wants to report something new or different.

Copy other people's ideas - If you can't be creative, look at what others write that has been published, particularly those outside your industry or location, after all imitation is the sincerest form of flattery!

Research your audience and media – keep your eyes and ears open, targeting and amending your releases for each audience or publication makes it more likely to be published than a mass mailing to a generic audience.

Drop the hype – don't write an advertisement, think about what would interest the reader or listener, develop your story, and make a note of interesting things to follow up.

Grab the attention – whether through your headline, your interesting first paragraph or by a great picture. Find the hook or angle to draw people in to read and act on your message.

Follow the rules – a professional press release has structure and key elements that make it easier for a journalist to extract information. The easier it is for the journalist the more successful it is for you.

Write, re-write, check and re-check – as you become more proficient writing for the media will become easier.

Develop your media relationships – talk to them, invite them to events, or just start an email dialogue with them, they are only human but don't harass or hound them –they are always busy!

Don't just report the news -make the news! – become an 'expert', offer free advice, give presentations, sponsor an award or competition, get your name out there.

Present your News – in your reception area or office, in sales presentations and via your web site – regular news makes your company look dynamic. Create that buzz!

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