

The Medium is the Message

The modern news release, not 'press' release unless you intend to send it only to print news media, is constantly evolving as information technology continues to evolve. In particular, the advent of the Blackberry and similar technology has a great impact on where the news release is headed as a form of communication.

News media surveyed by this author consistently want news releases that are short (300 words or less) and interactive, with direct URLs to enable the easy, non-password protected download of high-resolution images, audio clips and video. The rapid progress of digital broadcast media has created inexpensive opportunities to capture and park broadcast quality audio clips, and in some cases, video clips, at these designated URLs as well. Cumbersome backgrounders, PDFs and other support information such as biographies and white papers, including the dreaded waiver for publicly traded organizations, can also be parked at these URLs.

Corporate websites should have media rooms (the ideal location is the top left of the page to match journalistic graphic interface), that not only contain news releases but also high-resolution images, broadcast quality audio and video clips, and many of these background documents. Ideally, text should also be available in both word and PDF formats, so media are served as quickly as possible in the format they prefer. However, many 'branch-plant' organizations often adopt third-party URLs to avoid delays and other issues with home office webmasters.

With Blackberry and similar technology being widely adopted by the news media, there is only so much scroll-down capability so the news release should definitely fit in that window and be roughly, between 200 and 300 words, or less.

The combination of hybrid (print and broadcast) newsrooms due to media mergers and the electronic inundation of news locally, nationally and globally, make brevity of news releases more important than ever before. For years, I've tried to refine a style that is between print and broadcast so it is amenable to both media.

There is far more news and far less news gatherers than even a decade ago. To ensure a news release is not lost in the shuffle, it is highly recommended that it be sent both directly by e-mail as well as through a paid wire service such as CCMatthews, PR Direct or Canada Newswire. Moving it on a paid wire will also help it get immediate presence on the Internet.

News release content is also paramount. There is little time for clichés these days. Words such as ‘state-of-the-art’ and ‘world-class’ tend to get a release deleted quickly. There is no room anymore for hyperbole and puffery and false claims may be closely scrutinized by the federal government! Highlighting and bolding is ‘so 1990s’, and quotes should be included only if they continue the story. Although providing quoted names often helps in the media monitoring search engine process, it is imperative that the person quoted or a designated back up be readily available for rapid response interviews.

Of course, a news release is for “immediate” distribution, so why apply the pre-Internet concept of “for immediate release?”

The prominence of search engines in getting the story to all corners of the Internet has made it also necessary to spend extra time matching keywords in the release (the higher up in the copy the better) to Internet meta-tags, so when the paid wire gets the news release into cyberspace, the search engines will snag it.

As well, pay special attention to the subject line in the e-mail. It must fit the window and capture the essence of the story. Other e-mail tips: cut and paste your text into the e-mail and never send attachments unless asked to do so; many newsroom spam filters will kill it instantly if you do. Always blind carbon copy the media in your e-mail, so they don’t get a whole page of e-mail addresses. This drives some of them to distraction, and many spam filters will reject e-mails that are sent to more than 25 addresses blind carbon copied.

When following up with news media, e-mail is often the preferred method these days. A few rounds should get you a high response rate. The telephone is considered more and more an evil interruption by many journalists and should be reserved for emergencies or the rare personal touch when welcomed.

The Editor-in-Chief of The Canadian Press, Scott White, considers highly aggressive PR who call multiple editors with the same pitch “time bandits.” Enough said. One final tip for your news release writing: adhere to The *Canadian Press Style Guide* and its companion books, *NewsTalk* (Broadcast News) and *Caps and Spelling*. Any questions on proper usage, CP editor Patti Tasko (ptasko@cp.org) and her team are most helpful.