

Press Releases: Communicating with the World

by Steven Saus

Press releases are the main way in which your organization (be it a campaign, Democratic Club, church, etc) will communicate with the press. Luckily, there is a standard format. Once you have learned that format, writing press releases is merely filling in the blanks.

What do you want to publicize? Publicize anything important to your group, its members, supporters, or the public. You can send a press release when you elect officers, start a major program, hold a community gathering or function, or even have a fundraiser. The more publicity you get - especially when it's of things you've chosen to publicize - the better your group is.

Do make sure that you are sending a timely press release - a press release from an event a month ago is not going to do anyone any good.

PREPARING THE PRESS RELEASE

You'll start with a "hook" - something that makes your press release newsworthy. Try to make your headline and first paragraph interesting. Look at other headlines in the newspaper to get an idea of these sorts of things. Compare:

"The Montgomery County Democrats are having their regular meeting next Thursday. There will be a speaker, Joe Billy Jim Bob. He will talk about revitalizing Dayton"

"Joe Billy Jim Bob, an expert on revitalizing cities, will speak about Dayton's obstacles and how to overcome them next Thursday. The Montgomery County Democrats arranged to have Mr. Bob speak at their regular meeting."

If your headline and first paragraph weren't interesting, why would they read the rest?

You'll get more of the idea by looking at our sample press releases, but here's a checklist of things:

- Keep it to one page, and include the basics: Who? What? When? Where? Why?
- Make certain that you include accurate times of when the "action" will take place, not just when your event begins
- Make sure your directions to your location are clear
- Make certain to include a contact person and their phone number where they can be reached TODAY. Most newsrooms will not call twice for a feature story.
- Make sure your contact person is going to be available and is willing to appear on camera or on radio and have themselves quoted in a newspaper.
- Always write it from a journalist's perspective. Never use "I" or "we" unless it's in a quote.
- Use a quote. Think of what a reporter would ask and what your responses would be. Write the quote the way you normally talk.
- Keep your news release short ... just the basics. But be sure to explain the significance or

uniqueness of your event.

Include as the last section of your press release a paragraph with the heading "About (your organization's name)." It should contain the basic information about your organization (e.g., its mission, major programs, when it was founded, etc.). Close with a centered "-30-" or "###" on a line by itself. After that, you may add a line like the following: "If you'd like more information about this topic, or to schedule an interview with Joe Billy Jim Bob, please call Dr. Furter at 555/555-1212 or e-mail Frank at drfurter@transylvania.tv"

SENDING YOUR PRESS RELEASE AND FOLLOWTHROUGH

Be sure to send it to the right place: call ahead to find the right person and department, Get their name right, know their telephone extension and e-mail address, and the section of the paper they work for as an editor or reporter.

If you are sending by e-mail, do not send *any* attachments. Many media workers use Macs, which may not be able to open your wonderfully formatted Word document. Send your press release in plaintext. If you wish to send digital pictures, call first and see what formats they can accept.

Send your release to a specific individual - the assignment editor for TV, or the metro editor for a newspaper - by fax and e-mail. If it's convenient, also deliver a hard copy by mail. Try to send your release at least two weeks prior to the event. If you're not able to get that kind of lead time, make sure to put a note in **BOLD** at the top of your release that it is "Time-Sensitive: RUSH TO News Editor".

Follow through is vital. About thirty minutes to an hour after you fax a release, call to ensure that it's been received. If you're sending it to TV, though, make sure you don't fax or call within two hours before a newscast.

Remember: newsrooms are very busy places, so when you speak to a news desk, expect them to be rushed and unable to give your call thier full attention. Don't take it personally. Just be patient, pleasant and persistent. If you call at a bad time, ask when would be a good time to call back. If you have a cell phone, give the assignment editor that number, so they could reach you if they need to do so.

FOLLOWUP

Every now and then, it is nice to send a thank-you letter to the editor who places your press releases in the paper. Send a brief note of thanks, and relate any positive feedback you've gotten from the exposure, such as increased inquiries, new members, good attendance at certain events, or donations. The size of your organization and its members, supporters, and fundraisers, will grow and progress in proportion to your ability to "get the word out."

There are some special notes for different types of media.

NEWSPAPER

Send your information early - at least 2 weeks prior to the event.

Know the paper: you can help yourself by knowing how the paper is sectioned and organized. Is your event entertainment related? It might fit in the Life section. Is it a very local activity might fit in the Neighbors section, or a large county event that would make more sense in Local?

For print, it's always a good idea to phone the editor again the morning of the event. Tell them you're checking to make sure they know about the story. If they don't, you tell them about it and offer to fax them the information. If they already know about it, ask what you can do to make it easier for them to cover your event, or if there's any questions you can answer.

If you don't succeed try, try again. Don't get discouraged if your event doesn't make the paper the first time or even the second time. Daily news happenings can always change the space allowed for other news. Next time, your event might make it.

Think visually and make sure to highlight photo opportunities. They may want to take a picture, so make sure you have a visual opportunity for them.

Newspapers cannot use still pictures from your family album, Home video, Slides

RADIO

Because radio has to help listeners visualize events, they pay close attention to the following four questions. The more questions you can answer "Yes", the better your chances of getting on the radio: Is it **TIMELY**? Is it **LOCAL**? Does it affect a **LARGE NUMBER** of people? Does it have **EMOTIONAL** impact?

Remember that radio exclusively relies on sound. They use interviews, music and sound effects to help the listeners visualize the event. They primarily use digital recordings or CDs, and cannot use audio from home audio/video recorders or reel-to-reel tape. Few stations can handle audiocassettes, and none can handle audio recorded over a phone, unless it's a phone interview.

TV

It's absolutely vital you direct your release appropriately here: For a story, news tip or event, contact the assignment desk, but for a public service announcement or help on a community project, contact the public service director.

Make sure your event has a visual element. Make sure your visual element is present - at a fundraiser for a candidate, make sure the candidate's there! Add in a contact list of qualified people from your organization who can talk "on camera" about the event.

Optimum TV times to send releases are 7am - 10am weekday mornings. 10am is usually the best bet for your confirmation-of-receipt call, and then use the opportunity to "pitch" your story. Ask

who the assignment editor is for the day of your event. If it is someone different than the person you directed your release to, then the next day, send the same release to *that* individual.

If you wish to hold a press conference, give plenty of notice! While newsrooms cover "spur of the moment" press conferences all the time, it is very difficult on the station. They would like 24 hours notice so we can plan resources if they choose to cover the press conference. If you want tv cameras to attend, don't hold a press conference when news is on the air: the cameras are busy doing live stories at that time! The best times for press conferences are: 9am - 11am, 1pm - 3pm, and 7pm - 9pm. The worst times for press conferences are 11am- 2:30pm and 4pm-6:30pm.

Television shoots their own video, They cannot use your home video, slides, Super 8 film, cassette tapes, or still pictures.

Conclusion/Examples:

Don't be afraid to send a press release – even if you *know* another group has sent one about the same event, send your own! If a media outlet gets press releases from multiple groups about the same event, they're more likely to decide that it's worth covering.

There are two examples that follow. They're both the same text (and somewhat true – details have been changed for the sake of the organization), but the second one has callout balloons detailing the parts of the press release.

References

- "How to Publicize your Scouts" by Weindel, Vangrov, and Rollins, Feb 2004 handout
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FOR RELEASE APRIL 23, 2005

CONTACT: Fake Name
Cubmaster
Pack 222
(937)555-1212

LOCAL SCOUTS PLAN RIVER CLEAN-UP FOR EARTH DAY

(APRIL 22, 2005--DAYTON, OHIO ---) Local Cub Scout pack #222 from Dayton is planning to honor Earth Day picking up trash from the banks of the Great Miami River. The pack of 12 scouts will spend 2 hours this Saturday morning, Earth Day, on the banks of the Great Miami River by Deeds Point across from downtown Dayton clearing out litter and debris. Their goal is to make the area around Deeds Point a cleaner and safer area for boaters and for people who enjoy the park.

Pack #222 has 12 boys ranging in age from 7 to 12. As part of their World Conservation badge requirements, the boys selected the Earth Day River Clean-up project as a service they want to provide to the community. They felt Earth Day was the perfect day to do this type of project that helps the environment. Pack #222 will start their clean-up efforts at 9: 00 am and continue until around 11:00 am.

"April's theme for our pack is Our Waterways, so when they heard about the river cleanup, it was a natural match," said Fake Name, Cubmaster of Pack #222. He added, "Our Scouts want the environment to be clean for all to enjoy."

Pack #222 is part of the Miami Valley Council of the Boy Scouts of America, and is sponsored by St. Vincent the Odd Catholic Parish. Founded in 1930, the Cub Scouts of America are celebrating thier 75th birthday this year. The purpose of the Cub Scouts is to provide an educational program for youth to build character, train in the responsibilities of participating citizenship and to develop personal fitness. Pack #222 meets the 1st Thursday of every month at 6pm at St. Vincent the Odd Church at 7384 West Dayton Rd.

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If you'd like more information about this topic, or to schedule an interview, please contact Cubmaster Fake Name at 555-1212 or by e-mail at myfakeemail@surge.ods.org

FOR RELEASE APRIL 23, 2005

Release Date

CONTACT: Fake Name
Cubmaster
Pack 222
(937)555-1212

Contact Information

Date/City

Headline

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Who/What

Why

When/Where

Pack #222, consisting of scouts ranging in age from 7 to 12. As part of their World Conservation badge requirements, they selected the Earth Day River Clean-up project as a service they want to provide to the community. They felt Earth Day was the perfect day to do this because it helps the environment. Pack #222 will start their clean-up efforts at 9: 00 am and end around 11:00 am.

Background

"April's theme for our pack is Our Waterways, so when they heard about the river cleanup, it was a natural match," said Fake Name, Cubmaster of Pack #222. "It is important to have a clean environment to be clean for all to enjoy."

Quote

Pack #222 is part of the Miami Valley Council of the Boy Scouts of America, and is sponsored by St. Vincent the Odd Catholic Parish. Founded in 1930, the Cub Scouts of America are celebrating their 75th birthday this year. The purpose of the Cub Scouts is to provide an educational program for youth to build character, train in the responsibilities of participating in community service and to develop personal fitness. Pack #222 meets the 1st Thursday of every month at St. Vincent the Odd Church at 7384 West Dayton Rd.

Boilerplate

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End of article. This can also be represented by ###

If you'd like more information about this topic, or to schedule an interview, please contact Cubmaster Fake Name at 555-1212 or by e-mail at myfakeemail@surge.ods.org

Additional contact information/plug