



Writing a Press Release

According to Jack Miller, science writer for The Toronto Star, a press release is like a singles' bar, you have 10 seconds to make a good first impression. Miller said that he reads the first sentence of a press release and then decides whether or not to go further. If he is not interested by that point, the release goes in the recycling bin.

There are five factors that need to be present in your press release: 1) it should be about something new; 2) the subject matter should be of public interest; 3) the subject matter should be of interest to the media itself, 4) the subject matter should contain some element of conflict, emotion or other material to provide a 'hook' and; 5) for television only, there should be visual appeal.

Work with your local newspapers, radio and television stations to develop a good relationship. Whenever possible, go directly to a reporter in the news organization. Start with a telephone call or e-mail and never show up unannounced. Offer to help in any way that you can, provide background information, but it is not a good idea to try and channel a reporter's efforts.

Most reporters consider all information given to them, either in writing or during an interview, to be 'on the record', which means for attribution. If this is not the case, for whatever reason, the reporter must be informed beforehand and must agree to the conditions. This is normally only of concern during an interview.

The view of the media on news conferences depends on the branch in which the reporter works. TV and radio reporters prefer them, while newspaper reporters hate them because these events do not allow them the freedom to prepare their own stories. If organizing a press conference, remember to consider the daily deadlines of your local media. Sometimes it is a good idea, particularly if you have a good working relationship with a reporter there, to give information on the press conference to your local newspaper the day before. This can be done with a telephone call and perhaps an e-mailed or faxed copy of the press release that will be distributed then. The information in that release could have an embargo on it (a date and time before which it should not be printed), and most newspapers will respect that embargo. By giving the information to the newspapers early, along with information on a contact person, you allow them to prepare and publish stories to their liking. With this kind of advance publication, you can increase the likelihood of the TV and radio media turning up at your news conference.

Most important, always remember to play to your strengths, and work within those relationships that you have developed with members of your local media.

That Press Release

One comment that came out of 1990's activities was a request for help in preparing such a press release. Most of those working in the media suggest that a press release contain the facts, without being overly aggressive. First, I will try to cover the basics of preparing a press release and a sample is included.

Press releases should be written in pyramid style: this means that all the necessary information should be given in the first paragraph and as early as possible. The first paragraph should contain the 'Five Ws': who, what, where, when, why and how (sometimes how much is also added, particularly when talking about the megaprojects sponsored by the federal government or a large corporation). Successive paragraphs should flesh out the points stated in the opening, but this information is intended only for those interested in continuing.

The press release itself should be short (no more than one sheet of paper), list contact people (complete with telephone numbers and e-mails), and be as informative as possible. Be inventive, rather than run-of-the-mill, when trying to peak the curiosity of the media. These people may see hundreds of press releases in a week, so try and make yours stand out, if only in its attention to the facts and in trying not to write the reporter's story for him/her.

Sample Press Release

National Chemistry Week

October 16 – 23, 2010

Chemistry is creative, chemistry is fun, and chemistry is happening in your community this fall. Come out and 'Discover Canadian Chemistry' during National Chemistry Week, held this year from October 16 - 22.

This is a national outreach program, coordinated by the Chemical Institute of Canada (CIC). Members are organizing events in your community. Join us in discovering Canadian chemistry.

Science begins in the school and so CIC members are visiting the following schools (list the schools and the dates). The following organizations will be sponsoring open houses (list the companies/universities, dates and times).

If you have any questions, contact (fill in the name, address, and e-mail or telephone number of a local contact).

Advertising

Paid advertising is a very effective and very expensive way to get your message across. If your Local Section can afford it, there are few methods of communication that have a greater impact.

However, most Local Sections and other interested groups just don't have the financial resources to buy air time or ad space. If this is the case, there are usually community activity columns in most newspapers, radio and television stations. You do stand the chance of getting lost-in-the-crowd, but it doesn't cost much more than a stamp. Use activity billboards wherever you can find them: schools, recreational facilities, university buildings, shopping malls, etc. Don't be afraid to try your local electronic bulletin board either or listservers

If you are interested in finding out some more about advertising rates, which can vary significantly from region to region and media to media, go to the library and get the publication *Canadian Advertising Rates and Data*. It lists all media across Canada, complete with telephone numbers, publishing frequency and advertising rates.

These days, an effective yet inexpensive way to advertise your event can be found on websites such as Kijiji or Craig's List, or even through a simple e-mail. While often overlooked, these sites offer free promotional opportunities and are able to reach an immeasurable amount of people. Simple, with the requirement of only an e-mail address, these types of ads can provide as little or as much information on your event as seen fit.

Finally, although going to television stations may seem intimidating, most communities today have local stations such as Rogers that are always in search of news. By identifying and contacting the local station nearest you, you can open the door to having a televised advertisement that will reach the entire community. Some stations such as CTV also have community listings on specific days of the week. Make sure your event gets announced. These opportunities are often missed due to the misconception that air time is difficult and expensive to obtain, but is well worth a try that will usually lead to positive results.