

Get the Word Out

© 2004 John Hall

On condition that copyright and this notice of assignment are included, this material may be freely copied and distributed.

Get the Word Out

Does the community know about your organization? Do you want to improve attendance at fundraisers and other activities?

The press release is one of the simplest, least expensive ways to achieve these goals.

Newspapers frequently use press releases as the basis of news and feature articles. Radio stations often present organizational notices, particularly from non-profit groups, as public service announcements. In either case, there is no cost beyond preparing and delivering your message to the chosen media.

However, you will be competing with many others for limited amounts of free print space or "air time."

Media outlets receive the press release output of government agencies, political figures, non-profit organizations, and other groups and individuals daily. Some contain news. Some are promotional pieces. All are judged for suitability to the market served by the recipient.

Some press releases are discarded out of hand, because they are illegible, unintelligible or both. Some are used just the way they are received. Most fall somewhere in between these extremes.

The first, and most important, thing to remember is that your press release must provide some basic information. Journalists call them the "Five-Ws": who, what, when, where and why. Sometimes, "how" is added, or replaces "why."

After you provide the Five-Ws, you may include additional details, if pertinent.

For example, "Group X" is planning a fund-raiser. Your press release might be as simple as the following:

*Group X (**who**) will hold a bake sale (**what**) in front of the Bank of America on Main Street in Somewhere, Calif. (**where**) from 9:00 a.m. to noon Dec. 4 (**when**) to raise funds towards the purchase of winter jackets for needy children (**why**).*

In just one paragraph – and, in this case, one sentence – you have provided all essential information concerning the bake sale. This could be sufficient in itself.

However, adding another sentence or two could let the public know more about the organization, perhaps to show that it is stable and reliable, or to attract prospective members.

Group X, a nonprofit service organization founded by parents of Somewhere Junior High School 15 years ago, has donated the proceeds of its annual bake sale to the Salvation Army's "Coats for Kids" program for the past 10 years. Membership in Group X is open to anyone with a caring heart.

In the above paragraph, not only have you presented the organization's "bona fides," but you have informed the public **how** the bake sale funds provide "winter jackets for needy children" *and* extended an invitation to potential new members as well.

Finally, each press release should provide a contact to respond to requests for more information about either the bake sale or the organization.

For more information, call Jane at 555-3415.

There is your press release. In just four sentences, you have notified the public of the fundraising event, given information about the organization and invited interested persons to become members.

In addition to providing basic information, you must pay attention to a few other items.

Keep the press release as short as possible, preferably less than one page. Although newspapers and, to an extent, radio and television stations provide news, their primary source of income is advertising. In newspapers, this translates to space on the page; in the broadcast media, it is air time. Brevity helps to ensure that submitted material gets mention by either.

Completeness of the basic information helps to ensure that the message is presented in a timely manner. All of the people who handle press releases have deadlines to meet, not only for press releases, but for other tasks as well. They seldom have time to track down missing information. If your information is incomplete, your press release may go no farther than the nearest wastebasket.

Clarity and legibility help deliver the message. Again, the people reviewing the press release do not have time to decipher scrawled handwriting, or extremely bad spelling or grammar. Whenever possible, type – or print from your computer – your press releases, *preferably double-spaced*.

Include the name and telephone number of a contact who can provide additional information or clarification. If there is a question about the basic information that cannot be verified, it is likely that the notice will not be printed or aired.

Limit the press release to one – and only one – topic. If two or more activities are occurring in a short period of time, write two or more press releases, one for each event. They may be mailed in the same envelope, but treat each event as a separate item.

Timing is important. Try to have the press release delivered a week-and-a-half to three weeks before the scheduled event. If publicized any earlier than three weeks in advance, the public most likely will have forgotten the event by the time it takes place. If the information is not received until just a few days before the event, it may not make it into the newspaper due to space limitations or printing schedules. If the press release contains a report of an event that has already occurred, deliver it as soon as possible – old news is ... well ... old news.

The preceding guidelines will not guarantee that the information contained in your press release will be printed or broadcast. However, by making it easier for the media to get the story to the public, you have improved the odds that it will be.

After you have written the press release, you must submit it to the appropriate media. This will require some thought as to what the target audience will be for the information you are providing.

To employ a "shotgun" approach, sending copies to every newspaper and radio station known, will prove to be a waste of time, materials and *money*. Failing to send copies to all *appropriate* outlets can result in not getting the information to audiences you would like to reach.

Send items of local interest to local media. Send items of wider interest to regional media.

For example, sending notification of a bake sale in the small town of Somewhere to *The Regional News* will be waste of resources. On the other hand, sending that same item to only the *Somewhere Weekly* probably will not get it to residents of the neighboring village of Wherethat. In this case, copies should probably be sent to the *Somewhere Weekly*, *Wherethat Inquirer* and the primary news media for other nearby towns.

Now, get writing. And, good luck.