

The art & heart of communicating

Issued by [Grapevine Communications](#)

14 Feb 2003

[Home Goods Retailer, February 2003] The press release is the cornerstone of a communications strategy. It is also one of the most abused and misused tools in the PR toolbox.

A good release provides an editor with a newsworthy story which is suitable for his/her publication and targeted at his/her audience and gives your company credible exposure. A bad one is nothing more than tired puffery - an attempt to get free advertising that gives PR a bad name; even worse, it doesn't do your company's reputation any good.

Based on my own experience, both as a communications professional and as a journalist, here are a few hints on writing a good press release:

1. The golden rule of press releases should be: Don't give the editor what he/she doesn't want. Make what you write relevant and interesting by linking the release to current trends in society, business and economics.
2. Start at the beginning: research the media. Every newspaper, magazine, radio programme or website has a specific editorial personality and a clearly defined audience. Tailor every press release for each media outlet. There is nothing worse than batch releases sent to every contact in your address book. These just irritate editors and jeopardise your chances of being published ever again. Find out what each publication requires in terms of tone, length, graphics, deadlines. Remember that journalists are bombarded with press releases daily.
3. Ask for a list of upcoming features from publications. These are useful for news releases relevant to your industry. For example, The Star Business Report might run features on retailing, the furniture industry, credit, the office environment.
4. Make sure your punctuation, spelling and grammar are scrupulous. Invest in a good style-guide and use it! Ask someone to copy-check for you. Use simple, clear language and avoid adjectives and jargon like the plague. Make sure every fact is correct.
5. Presentation is important: most editors like releases in double-spacing with generous margins. Remember the date at the top and your contact details at the bottom.
6. Your headline should be clear and to-the-point.
7. Make sure your facts are checked and re-checked.
8. Ralph Cohen suggests the NIBSS formula for selecting material for inclusion in a press release. This stands for:

N = New information - this is the hard news

I = Interesting facts - can be hard news, but more interesting

B = Background - putting the story in perspective, details about company

S = Selling points - used especially for product releases to alert potential buyers to unique selling points

S = Superfluities - material that can be cut by the editor with no loss of meaning

These should form an inverted pyramid, with news at the top and superfluities at the bottom.

9. Your first paragraph must answer the 5 W's and the H: Who, What, Why, When, Where and How.

10. You can always find a story. Develop a news-nose for finding material that can be built into a story. Possibilities include financial results, mergers and acquisitions, promotions and appointments; special projects, sponsorships, conferences, 'expert opinions', anniversaries, new products, new divisions, safety records, new equipment, new outlets. There is always something you can cover, especially as you have privileged, inside information that press journalists do not have access to.

11. Staff members are also important: remember long-service and other awards, obituaries, profiles, visits to other countries, new uniforms. These are especially useful for 'soft' stories in local papers and for picture-and-caption for the "Appointments" column in the business and career press.

In conclusion, here is a list from Ralph Cohen's "unacceptable irritations" in press releases, as compiled by a group of journalists:

1. Recurring releases
2. More than one copy simultaneously
3. Lack of product knowledge
4. Undated releases
5. Failure to provide client's contact details
6. Single-space typing
7. Badly-written copy
8. Lack of accuracy
9. Copy not relevant to the publication.

Source: *This article first appeared in the February 2003 edition of Home Goods Retailer.*

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