



Write News Releases for the Media, not your Client

by Bill Bradley
Principal, Bottom Line Communications

Most PR professionals consider themselves to be skilled writers in the honored tradition of journalism. But occasionally we get careless (or lazy), or allow an overbearing client to get us to compromise our normally high standards of proper news writing.

Remember who your audience is: the media, not your client. Journalists just want the facts, not a sales pitch; yet many news releases continue to read more like the client's marketing collateral than the expected "5Ws and the H." Trade jargon overpowers understandable English, sweeping adjectives and claims essentially promise to end world hunger, and every company is suddenly an "industry leader with world-class technology." No wonder journalists put so little faith in what they read in news releases. (For guidance on stopping high-tech trash talking and gratuitous PR hyperbole, go to www.buzzkiller.net.)

Whatever the excuse (and because even Tiger Woods misses a short putt sometimes), it's always good to review the fundamentals of good news release writing. And yes, I prefer to say "news" release – not "press" release -- because that gets you thinking straight right away. The document you're preparing is supposed to convey legitimate news, not a vanity piece for your client or some contrived story for "the press." The first step, therefore, is to recognize that you're about to create something newsworthy, something important. In the media's mind, it should change how they look at your client in some positive manner. If you don't feel this way at the beginning of the process, then don't waste your time (or the media's) in going any further.

Of course you're going ahead, so what follows is a primer on the essentials of news releases writing: the headline, deck-head, lead paragraph, proof statements, quotes, length, boilerplate and some general guidelines on formatting and conformance to AP style.

- **Headline** – This where the battle for media attention is won or lost. Again, too many PR pros write what the client wants to see, instead of thinking what head will resonate with journalists. The media is interested in announcements that promise market- or industry-wide impact, not just issues of concern to the subject company. So aim high when you write that headline. Still, be sure your company name always is at the beginning of the headline (at least they’ll read that far!) and keep the headline to no more than two lines.
- **Deck-head** – This is also called a sub-head and runs under the headline to amplify the head or add critical information that needs to really stand out from the body of the release. This is precious real estate, and typically is where you first mention a new product by name or provide other specific information that just couldn’t fit in the high-level headline.
- **Lead paragraph** – here’s where you spell out the “5Ws and the H” of your announcement: who, what, when, where, why and how. Make sure it delivers on the statements made in the headline and deck-head. Also, get aggressive with the lead. It should create a sense of anticipation that the announcement addresses an issue larger than the goals of one company. A company identifier is also required, but try to avoid the eyeball-rolling “industry leading global supplier...” descriptor. Microsoft, IBM, Cisco, HP and others can make that statement; a \$20M software vendor cannot, so don’t insult the journalist’s intelligence by saying it. Find another phrase that is credible and more interesting.
- **Proof statements** – don’t expect the media to accept your claims on face value. Cite authoritative, verifiable statistics or other evidence that validates the relevance, appeal and importance of what you have to say. Besides, reporters are basically lazy and will appreciate having some heavy lifting done for them.
- **Quotes** – there’s usually no way to avoid a self-serving executive quote. Just make it informational and expressed in conversational language, as opposed to a surgically crafted sound byte. Read the quote aloud to be sure. Avoid having more than one executive quoted so journalists don’t have to decide who to speak with. Go the extra mile to include quotes from third parties (e.g., customers, analysts), as that can be persuasive with journalists.
- **Length** – brief and succinct 400-500 word news releases are becoming an endangered species; elaborate boilerplates (see below) being a prime culprit. But you can still try. The more complex the announcement the easier it should be to state the main news briefly in a “lead release,” and then cover the details in a backgrounder or separate news release. Journalists generally prefer two shorter releases, logically coupled, than one lengthy, ponderous document.

- Boilerplate –company boilerplates can be mini-releases. Stick to the essential information and limit it to 3-4 sentences. Include what business the company is in, include stock symbol if it's publicly traded, where it's headquartered (too often omitted), geographic scope of operations, key partnerships (cite only name-brand companies), and some representation of company size (revenue, number of employees, market share, etc.). It's permissible to name products or services, but only state the basic functionality without copious detail.
- Format, AP Style – this is the fine print, admittedly, but adhering to good formatting and Associated Press Stylebook shows the release was prepared by a PR professional. Format recommendations: use space-and-a-half leading and 11- or 12 pt. font size. Skip a line space between paragraphs versus indenting. End each page on a complete paragraph and indicate “-more-” on the last line (old newspaper custom still followed today). Use a header and page number on successive pages, and indicate the end of the release with “-30-” or “###” or other symbol. Include a trademark ownership statement.

In terms of basic AP style, dateline cities are all caps, the state is abbreviated (unless it's Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas or Utah). Do not use two-letter ZIP code abbreviations; those are just for the U.S. Postal Service! The AP Styleguide lists the proper state abbreviations along with the domestic and international cities so closely associated with their respective states or countries that the city can stand alone in datelines. Months also are abbreviated, with the exception of March, April, May, June and July. Include the year as part of the date. The entire dateline should be in boldface, and set-off from the lead sentence by an em-dash. Capitalization of titles also is regularly abused. Basically, if the title stands alone or follows a person's name, the AP says it is not capitalized.

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