

APPENDIX B

How to Write a Press Release: Examples and Exercises

Writing Effective Press Releases

Press releases are written summaries of events, announcements, achievements, or positions that are sent to the press (including newspapers, magazines, television and radio news programs, and internet-based news sources) for the purpose of generating publicity. Press releases are one the best tools available for keeping the media informed about your campaign's activities and your other newsworthy events. The format of a press release helps journalists, radio hosts, television producers, and other media professionals know quickly and succinctly whether yours is a story they want to cover. Knowing how to write effective press releases and where and how to distribute them will help you get press coverage that can reach hundreds, thousands, and sometimes millions of constituents.

The best press releases read like well-written news items. They are not too long and are full of information that entices the reader to want to find out more.

Although the culture, schedules, and objectives of media outlets vary, you can greatly increase the likelihood that your press releases will generate news stories by following some very basic guidelines.

- Pay attention to the media outlet's preferred timing and method for receiving news items. A phone call or email to the editor or manager will usually get you this information. Although the manager at larger news organizations, television stations, or popular radio programs may be hard to reach, most of these organizations have websites that post information about how to submit press releases.
- Write your press release in a style and manner that includes all newsworthy details so that it can be printed without editing. The less work a journalist has to do, the more likely it is that your story will be published. Most publications will alter the language in the press release to some degree before publication, but often it is only a few word changes, or the addition of a direct quote.
- Keep the press release short—one or two pages maximum. If a news outlet chooses to write a longer article, chances are that the journalist will want to do her own research or follow-up. If a news outlet receives a press release that is too long, a busy editor may not take the time to read it.
- Write the release so that all of the most important and newsworthy information appears in the first paragraphs. If an editor needs to cut the length of an article, she will usually begin at the end. Also, to capture the attention of an editor, the most interesting details should be placed at the beginning of the release. If the

editor likes what she is reading, she will read on. If not, she might discard the release before she reaches the critical information.

- Use a conventional formatting style (see the “Basic Press Release Formatting Guidelines” box at the end of this section). Not all press releases need to look exactly the same. However, using a standard formula will make your press release easier for an editor to follow.
- Follow up by phone or email with the editor or manager (or other person or office assigned to review press releases) a day or so after the release is sent to make sure that it was received and to inquire whether additional information is needed.

For Further Discussion

1. **What events have you organized in the past that would have benefited from better press coverage?**
2. **Which local, national, or international media outlets would you want to cover your events, issues, and alerts?**
3. **Are there specific radio stations, television stations, magazines, and newspapers that you believe might be interested in your organization or campaign? If so, which ones and why?**
4. **Are there media outlets that you believe would not be interested in your stories? Why or why not?**

PRESS RELEASE CASE STUDY AND EXAMPLE 1

The Trojan Horse

Women Empowered (WE) had been pressing government officials to lift a burdensome tax on women’s sanitary and feminine protection products. Taxed at 10%, tampons and sanitary napkins are assigned the highest rate of sales tax, along with other luxury items such as perfume and imported cigars. Letters and personal appeals to government officials complaining about the injustice were ignored. Members of WE approached the press several times with persuasive arguments and statistics that demonstrated that the tax discriminated against women, but no journalist was interested in picking up the story.

Taking an entirely new approach, WE decided to donate a computer and internet service to a key government official. Once he was online and enjoying the benefits of the World Wide Web, he found he was suddenly the recipient of thousands of email letters from all over the world—complaining about the tax. WE distributed a press release about the donated computer and the barrage of

emails that the official was receiving, and the story was picked up by local and even some international press. WE made sure, in writing the release, that their political message was woven into the story.

Women Empowered

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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COMMISSIONER GENERAL'S DONATED COMPUTER COMES WITH TAXING EMAIL MESSAGES

City, November 18, 2003—When Commissioner General Sene Nderi learned that local women's rights NGO, Women Empowered (WE), was donating a computer and Internet service to his office, he was overjoyed. What he learned later is that the email address that he had given, as part of the donation, had been shared with dozens of women's organizations worldwide. Within days, Mr. Nderi was receiving thousands of emails all saying the same thing: "Repeal the tax on feminine protection items!"

The new computer was installed in the offices of the Revenue Authority on October 11 of this year. The computer was donated to the government by WE's co-founder and president, Wangari Ndereba. "WE wanted to be strategic about where to donate. WE wanted our donation to help women and to help our county become better governed," said Ndereba. "It wasn't enough to just provide a computer. Understanding how to improve conditions for women involves being connected to others—at home and worldwide. That is why WE provided funding for internet access as well."

The campaign for the computer gift began almost a year ago. Turning to its international support network of women's organizations, WE raised awareness globally about sex discrimination in the consumer tax system. While most consumer goods have a 5% sales tax, feminine protection items, such as tampons and sanitary napkins, are taxed at the higher "luxury tax" level of 10%. With money raised to help fight this inequity, WE purchased the computer and donated it to the Revenue Authority.

With the computer in place, and an email account established for Commissioner General Sene Nderi, WE's campaign began in earnest. Local and international supporters began sending Mr. Nderi email letters complaining about the unfair tax. WE asked its supporters to email copies of their letters to WE's offices. At last count, on November 11, WE had received 1,808 copies of the letters sent to the Revenue Authority about the feminine protection tax.

Ms. Ndereba said, "We are very happy with the results, so far, of this campaign. Women have no choice in their biology, so to consider sanitary protection a luxury is absurd. I think that Mr. Nderi and the others at the Revenue Authority are now getting the message loud and clear."

For others wishing to write a letter to Mr. Nderi or to learn more about WE, please contact WE's offices by phone at XXX-X-123456/8 or email at info@we.org.

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For Further Discussion

1. Why do you think WE had so much trouble getting news outlets to cover the story of sex discrimination in the tax code?
2. Do you have any ideas about other ways WE might have presented the information about the tax code to the media so that editors would want to cover the story?
3. WE opted not to put the commissioner general's email address in the press release. What might have been the consequences if they had? Do you agree with their decision? Why or why not?

PRESS RELEASE CASE STUDY AND EXAMPLE 2

Pressed into Service

Supporters of women's advancement thought that for the first time in their country's history there was the possibility that a woman would be appointed Minister of Justice. The name of a well-respected female jurist, Aishah Binte Encik, was being mentioned by government ministers. It was rumored that they were looking for a Justice Minister who could reverse the damaged reputation of the judiciary, sullied in recent years by the prosecution of four Chief Justices for embezzlement. Although not a political advocacy group, the Women's Research and Rights Centre (WRRRC) strongly favored the candidacy of Ms. Encik and wanted to help generate support for her appointment to the post. To help bring attention to Ms. Encik's qualifications and personal integrity, WRRRC decided to bestow on her a special award during a ceremony honoring high-achieving women. It was their aim to entice the press to attend and cover the event. After extensive negotiations, well-connected members of WRRRC's board were able to secure a commitment from singer-celebrity Harry Belafonte, who would be in the country's capital for UNICEF-related activities, to present the award to Ms. Encik.

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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HARRY BELAFONTE TO BESTOW PRESTIGIOUS AWARD ON LEADING FEMALE JURIST

*Women Professionals will gather at WRRC Gala
on April 14 to celebrate their successes*

City, April 8, 2005—Who's afraid of women succeeding? Not super-star Harry Belafonte who is attending next Saturday's Women's Research and Rights Centre's Women of Achievement Gala at the Capital Marriott. Among the honorees will be Fatima Puan, Charlotte Lee Tan, Hawa Sulaiman, and Samatha Ibrahim. A special Medal of Lifetime Achievement will be given to Aishah Binte Encik, whose integrity and legal prowess have served all her countrymen.

Each year the Women's Research and Rights Centre honors the best and brightest women in business, academia, medicine, science, and law. Mr. Belafonte, who is here as part of his Pan-Asia UNICEF Tour, said, "This country is heading into the 21st century as a leader in promoting the rights of women. It is a great privilege for me to meet some of your most accomplished women."

Mr. Belafonte will be presenting Aishah Binte Encik with her award. Ms Encik is well respected in the legal field for the depth and breadth of her legal knowledge. She served 18 years in the offices of the Attorney General where she held the post of Head Prosecutor. Her previous work at the World Bank made her an international figure, and won her many admirers beyond our borders.

The Gala will begin at 6 p.m., and members of the press are welcome. For information about purchasing tickets to the event, or to receive a press pass, please contact Cindy Cho at (XXX) X14765/50.

The Women's Research and Rights Centre (WRRC) was founded in 1988 by leading academicians studying the causes and cures for discrimination against women. WRRC's objectives are to identify barriers to women's advancement, and to press for legal, economic, and educational changes that will promote women's equality and improve the lives of all.

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For Further Discussion

1. What information in WRRC's press release made it likely that the media would be interested in the story?
2. Why would the quote from Harry Belafonte help get the story picked up by news outlets? Do you think what Mr. Belafonte said was important or helpful in getting the WRRC more publicity? Why or why not?
3. If you were writing the WRRC press release, is there anything you would change, add, or leave out? If yes, what?

YOUR TURN

Before beginning to write your press release, answer the following questions:

- 1. Which publications, organizations, and individuals will receive a copy of your press release?**
- 2. What facts in your press release will be most interesting to your intended audience? What is your “hook”? (Think of a fishing line, and the hook that a fish decides to bite.)**

For instance, in the WRRRC example above, although the real objective for the members of the organization was to draw attention to Aishah Binte Encik’s qualifications for the attorney general position, WRRRC felt that the media would be more interested in covering Harry Belafonte. Therefore, they were sure to put information about Harry Belafonte in the headline (title) of the press release, and in the first paragraph. The information about Ms. Encik was skillfully woven into the story later on.

Sometimes the hook can be the timing or location of an event. The hook is what makes the story newsworthy and what makes a journalist want to cover your story.

- 3. What facts are most important in your story?**

Remember that a press release should be kept brief, one to two pages. Only in rare instances should a press release go on to three pages. When a story is complex, or you need to include lists of names or other details to convey your story accurately or compellingly, three pages is acceptable. Beyond three pages you are likely to lose your busy reader/editor and the chance of getting your story published.

- 4. Which organization or individual is sending out the press release?**

This seems an easy question, but it can be complicated to answer when more than one organization or individual is sending out the release. It is important to keep your attention on the objective of the release—to generate publicity. The organization or individual listed at the top of the release should be the name that will generate the most interest by the media, or which will convey the most credibility to the media. It is usually more effective to have a press release originate from an organization that journalists have heard of and trust than from one that journalists feel they will need to research. Moreover, a journalist will likely perceive that yours is a more newsworthy story if one or more of the “characters” are already known to her reading audience.

- 5. When may an editor print your story?**

Most often press releases are written FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE, meaning that the information they contain is ready for immediate publication. In some instances, however, you may wish to send out releases before you are prepared for the story to go public. For instance, you may want to notify journalists

about a prize recipient, but do not want the winner to be named publicly until a certain date. In this situation, write on your press release: FOR RELEASE ON [DATE or DATE/TIME].

6. Whom should journalists contact for more information or to set up interviews?

Choose a contact person for the release who can tell your story in an informed and engaging way. Whomever you choose should be prepared to answer journalists' questions in detail, be quoted, and be able to arrange follow-up meetings and/or interviews. It is important that the contact information printed on the release (telephone numbers and email addresses) be an easy and fast way to reach the contact person. If a journalist is interested in covering a story but cannot reach the contact quickly to get more information, she might decide to cover another story instead.

7. What would be an inviting headline? Would a subtitle help your release?

It is important that the press release's headline capture the reader's interest. Often, all an editor needs to do is read the headline of a press release to know that she is not interested in the story. Sometimes, editors are mistaken about the relevance or newsworthiness of a story, but they never find out because they do not take the time to read every press release they receive. For instance, WE was unable to convince news outlets to write an exposé on the unfairness of the luxury tax on tampons. It was not a story that national papers or other media outlets were willing cover. Instead, WE attracted media attention to its computer donation, and in telling the story about its "gift"-within-a-gift to the commissioner general, was able to relay information about the unfair tax.

When a catchy headline sounds great but does not quite provide enough information, a subtitle can fill in the missing information. For instance, the WRRRC was careful to put Harry Belafonte's name first in the title of its release. The subtitle that follows explains that the story is about an upcoming event, and says who will be attending and for what purpose.

8. What quotes can you include that will help strengthen your story or make it more interesting?

Quotes are a useful place to editorialize without making the entire press release sound subjective. For instance, rather than reporting that your organization's new handbook on divorce law is fascinating to read as well as amazingly useful, quote a recently divorced person who has used it:

Jill Morena, whose divorce was finalized in June, said, "The handbook was really easy to read, and indispensable in guiding me through the legal steps of my divorce."

If you cannot find someone from the general public (authorities, celebrities, and professionals are often good choices), you can always quote someone from your own organization.

For Further Discussion

1. Choose a recent event or issue to cover in a press release.
2. As a group, discuss the eight “Your Turn” questions in relation to the press release topic. A volunteer should take notes on a flip chart or large sheet of paper so that everyone can refer back to them.

Basic Press Release Formatting Guidelines

- Write the name and address of the organization sending the release in the upper left-hand corner.
- Skip a line and write **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE** or **FOR RELEASE ON [DATE]**.
- Write the name of the contact person and her contact information on the right-hand side of the page beginning on the same line (or higher) as the words **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**.
- Center, underline, and write in all capital letters the title of press release.
- A subtitle, if used, should be separated from the title by a space, written in upper and lower case letters, and italicized.
- The first paragraph of the release should begin with the city of origin, and the date of the release of the information (not the date the release is mailed).
- The press release layout should have plenty of empty (white) space so that it is easy to read. A break between each paragraph is helpful.
- At the bottom and center of the first and second pages should be typed the word more with dashes on each side to look like this: —more—
- At the end of the release, three pound signs, centered, indicates that the communication is complete: ###. This technique is especially helpful when sending press releases by fax. It lets the recipient know when she has received the final page.