

How to write a press release and top tips for working with the media

The media is a great, **free** tool to reach an extended audience, and help communicate what community energy is, and why it is important. By engaging with the press you can communicate the work you're doing to local people, potential share offer investors, and influencers like politicians.

What makes a news story?

You can find good news stories within your organisation. The list below identifies key news story elements.

- Man bites dog - something **different**
- **Controversy** - not always bad, can be a differing view
- **Relevant**- to that audience
- **Topical** - what people are talking about already or linked to it
- **Real people** - evoke an emotional response, adding colour to a story
- **Being first** – the first group to achieve something is news, or a local trial of a national scheme, however being the second doesn't normally cut it
- **Statistics** - people like hard facts and comparisons
- Breaks the '**so what**' barrier – you may be interested, but will enough other people?

There are five factors to consider when deciding if a story is newsworthy. Normally, a story should perform well in at least two areas:

1. Timing - News is something new. Make sure you get your press release out to the media in good time - too late and it will not be covered.

2. Proximity - Stories that happen near to us have more relevance. Use your knowledge of local issues and culture to make sure your story is relevant locally.

3. Significance - The number of people affected by the story is important. An issue affecting thousands is more newsworthy than one that affects a handful.

4. Prominence - Famous people get more coverage. If you break both your legs it won't make the news, but if Prince William breaks his toe it's big news. Try to involve a local prominent person such as the mayor or your MP.

5. Human interest – Are the people involved in your project willing to share why? What drives them, why do they want to make change? Journalists need to put a human face to the facts and figures – the emotive angle.

It's all about timing

Journalists are on tight timescales. Many publications have had their staff levels slashed, but are now producing online and social content, in addition to traditional print publications, with fewer team members than ever. So the **more you can do for them**, the more likely it is that they will cover your story.

Most local papers are weekly publications supported by an online presence. If you want to get into the paper that's published on a Thursday, then it's probably a good idea to have your release with them by the close of play on Tuesday if possible and avoid their print deadlines.

If you are looking for **TV coverage** you need to offer them **something visual** ideally between **10am – 12 noon** so they can come out and film, get back to the studio to edit and get the piece out for evening news, *but for national programmes* be ready to do lives in the early evening or breakfast to support their biggest slots of air-time. Remember some shows will do pre-record segments. Think about what you can offer and be clear about what they will see and who they can talk to. Regional news programmes are much shorter at the weekend; you're more likely to get coverage on a weekday.

Radio also tend to come out to do pre-records in the **morning**, but may want people to interview live early in the morning for breakfast or during drive time shows. If they get good quotes/interviews early, they can run them throughout the day.

Remember journalists get hundreds of emails every day. Most press releases they receive are in fact just poorly constructed sales pitches or advertorials. So **your story is a gem**. You just need to be sure they know that. Send it weeks in advance and it will be lost or forgotten, send it last minute on the day and they have already planned their diary, and the diary of the photographer/film crew etc. Aim to send your release and information **approx. 3/4 days in advance** of the date you want your story in print. This gives you time to call and follow up once you've sent your email. Don't be afraid to pick up the phone and talk.

What to send them

You need to write a press release and possibly a media call notice. If you've got an event or visual opportunity that you want a film crew, photographer or journalist to attend. Send them an invite detailing what it is, when it is, the postcode and one paragraph summarising the story. Ask them to put it in their planning diary and let them know you will also send a full press release shortly in advance of the event.

Writing your press release

The press release golden rules:

1. Grab attention with a good headline.

A strong headline (and, for that matter, email subject line when you send out the pitch) will pull in journalists seeking good stories. Your headline should be as engaging as it is accurate.

2. Get right to the point in the first paragraph.

Reporters are busy people, assume they will only read the first paragraph and then scan the rest. Get the message of your press release out quickly. Every important point should be addressed in the

first few sentences. In the first paragraph you need to answer WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHY, WHEN. The subsequent paragraphs are supporting information and quotes. Twitter is a good challenge! Sum up your story in 140 characters.

3. Include numbers.

It's easy to fill up a page with creative copy. Leave that to the professional writer. Include numbers – facts and figures. Quantify your argument and it will become much more compelling.

4. Make it grammatically flawless.

Proofread your press release before sending it out. Even better ask someone else to look over it. Mistakes can dissuade a reporter from taking you seriously.

5. Include quotes.

A good quote will give a human element to the press release, as well as being a source of information in its own right.

6. Keep it concise.

Short and sweet, and avoid jargon. Limit yourself to one to two pages. This will force you to condense your most salient information into a more readable document.

7. Provide access to more information.

Use a Notes to Editors section: this includes contact details, phone numbers, email addresses and a 'boiler plate' – pre agreed notes about the organisation, plus links to the website to find out more.

8. Pictures.

Always let them know what they can get images of, if you can supply them, or when they can come and get the images/do the filming/interviews.

Other top tips:

- Do not send press releases as attachments. Keep the copy in the body of your email.
- Personalise your email that includes the release – explain why you think the story is of interest to their readers/viewers.
- Send images, but remember to label them with a left to right if people are included, and be clear if they need to attribute the picture to a photographer or organisation. Don't use images unless you have the consent of those in the image for use in the press.
- Put contact details in several places.
- Bold info that's useful like time, date, postcode. And always include a post code and contact number.
- Have your case studies/experts ready and willing to speak to journalists.

- Call around the journalists after you've sent the release to see if they are interested/need more info. Most of them will say they didn't get the press release. They did, but deleted it with 100s of others, but you've taken the time to call so it's in their mind now. Never start the call with 'I sent you a press release' – go positive – 'I've got a story that affects your readers' or 'I think you'd be interested in this story because'.
- Say thank you – if they cover it a quick 'thanks for reporting our work' email is polite, plus if you can give them some follow up information then they might do another story.
- Send pictures ASAP and resend the release with them if a journo didn't show for a photo call. They may have been sent elsewhere, only had one photographer working, broken down etc.
- Think about timings and their deadlines – call and check print deadlines if needs be. And consider what time you embargo releases for if you want morning papers to run the story – that will be different than what you would give for an evening paper.