How to Write a Great Press Release: A Sample Press Release Template from PublicityInsider.com

(While the examples he uses are not public education related, the excellent descriptions can easily be transferred to any topic.)

What is a press release?

A press release is pseudo-news story, written in third person that seeks to demonstrate to an editor or reporter the newsworthiness of a particular person, event, service or product. They are often sent alone, by e-mail, fax or snail mail. They can also be part of a full press kit, or may be accompanied by a pitch letter.

What is the proper press release format?

Here's a sample press release template you can use to format your press release correctly:

Note: The three #'s mark the end of the press release.
What should I put in my press release?

Let's stick with a vitamin web site specializing in weight-loss products. Through the process described in the report, you've nailed down a nice, newsworthy topic – teenagers and how they deal with issues of weight. But that's a broad topic, not a story.

In the report, we provided a number of ideas for potential stories. Let's pick the first one and craft a press release.

The story: What do kids think about a "thin is in" society?

As you sift through your message boards looking for quotes, you see a trend appearing. There are lots of messages criticizing Hollywood actresses and pop singers for being too thin. Many girls are saying that seeing these women make them feel bad about their own bodies. A number of the boys are pointing out that they don't find ultra-thin women appealing.

Now you've got your angle -- your hook that will grab a reporter's attention:

Teenagers think that a "thin is in" society pretty much stinks.

Now let's get writing.

Press Release Headline

Before you write a word, remember this:

The reporter is not interested in helping you advance your agenda. He's looking for a story that will be interesting to his readers and pleasing to his editor. He wants to know only the info that will help him craft a good story about the topic he’s pursuing.

Take your ego out of it. Look at your story with a cold, objective eye.

OK, let's get to our press release headline.

State your most exciting news, finding or announcement in as few words as possible. Emulate the headlines you see in the newspaper every day.

Bad Press Release Headline:

NEW WEBSITE THAT OFFERS HERBAL WEIGHT LOSS PROGRAMS LETS TEENS SPEAK OUT ABOUT WEIGHT ISSUES

Good Press Release Headline:

TEENS: ULTRA-THIN MOVIE, POP STARS SET BAD EXAMPLE
Don't worry, you'll get to plug your website soon enough. In the meantime, you've just thrown a meaty hook at the reporter.

The Press Release Subhead

Subheads are remarkably useful tools, yet usually overlooked by press release writers. Basically, the press release subhead gives you the opportunity to flesh out your angle and further hook the reporter, without stepping on the drama of the press release headline.

Here's a headline/subhead combo I might use for this press release:

TEENS: ULTRA-THIN MOVIE, POP STARS SET BAD EXAMPLE

Website Forumgoers Weigh In: Teens Don't Find Ultra-Thin Celebs Attractive;

Girls Say Negative Self-Images Reinforced by Hollywood's Super-Skinny

The Press Release Lead

It's Journalism 101 -- the lead paragraph includes the who, what, when, where and how of the story. If the reporter were only to read the lead of a good press release, he'd have everything he needed to get started.

There's no room for BS, hype or sell. Just the facts.

Bad Press Release Lead

Recently on theplace4vitamins.com, an online store dedicated to selling the best herbal products, teenagers had the chance to say what they thought about weight loss and whether a society that pressures young people to be thin is a good thing or a bad thing.

Good Press Release Lead

America's teenagers are angry at Hollywood for glamorizing ultra-thin bodies, and many girls say they feel too self-conscious about their bodies as a result of watching TV, movies and music videos. The findings are gleaned from more than six months of ongoing discussion and debate at the website theplace4vitamins.com. According to theplace4vitamins.com President John Smith, anger and resentment toward the Hollywood ultra-thin runs deep, particularly among teenage girls.

The Rest of the Press Release

The balance of the press release serves to back up whatever claims were made in the lead and headline. In this case, you'd pull some quotes from the message boards (an aside here: if you really were to pull quotes in this fashion, you should only use the poster's name or identifying information with his or her permission. Otherwise, simply say "a 14 year old boy said..." or "a 16
"year old Midwestern girl added..." Also, if this technique appeals to you, be certain that a disclaimer appears on your message boards notifying posters that all posts become your property and copyright). Use enough supporting material to make your case, and to demonstrate that, whatever angle you're promoting, it wasn't something you slapped together carelessly.

Next, a quote will help put in some perspective:

"I was surprised by the level of anger expressed in these messages," Smith said. "Teenagers are far more clued into this issue than most people would imagine."

Or, you might ask an expert for a quote:

"This demonstrates once again the need to teach young girls and boys about how to develop a positive self-image," said Jane Doe, author of "I Like My Body Just As It Is". "theplace4vitamins.com has done a true service by bringing these attitudes to the public's attention."

Finally, spend a sentence or two describing your company and what you do:

theplace4vitamins.com was founded in 1997 to provide consumers with a wide choice of vitamins, supplements and herbal products. The site offers a range of articles, research materials and message forums for the health conscious consumer.

This paragraph is known as the "boilerplate" -- an old newspaper term meaning a block of standard text that's used over and over again (e.g. the explanation of symbols on the stock price page). In this case, it's text that you might use at the bottom of all your releases.

Place your boilerplate right above the # # #s.

One more trick: below the ###'s, add a line that says something like:

If you'd like more information about this topic, or to schedule an interview with John Smith, please call Pat Brown at 555/555-2222 or e-mail Pat at pr@theplace4vitamins.com

Some Key Things to Remember

Stay away from hype-bloated phrases like "breakthrough", "unique", "state-of-the-art", etc.

Always write it from a journalist's perspective. Never use "I" or "we" unless it's in a quote.

Read lots of good newspaper writing, such as the New York Times or the Washington Post to get a feel for the style.

Shorter is better. If you can say it in two pages, great. If you can say it in one page, better.
TYPES OF “Local Association” PRESS RELEASES

In order to “personalize” your press kits, you must provide editors in your local market with a local story angle. There are several types of news releases you can write:

The Personnel Release

Written to inform the public of a new position someone has taken in an organization or business. This type of release can provide name recognition to the organization and credibility to the person being focused upon. The following are some guidelines for the personnel release:

- The person’s name and his/her new position should be included in the lead sentence.
- A brief sentence describing responsibilities should also be included in the lead.
- The body should contain a brief explanation of what the person has previously done in the organization if he/she is not new to the group.
- The body should also contain brief specifics on the person’s past experience and education.
- The end of the release should also contain the least important facts.
- Always try to include a hi-resolution photo of the person being profiled in the personnel release and be sure to identify that person on the photo.

The Legislative Opinion Release

The legislative opinion release is written to express just what it says—an opinion or reaction to legislation that has occurred or is being considered. It can also be used to introduce new ideas and facts concerning legislation your local would like to see implemented or defeated. The legislative opinion release should include:

- The name of the spokesperson for your local.
- The concurring or dissenting opinion, concisely written.
- The reasons behind taking that particular position.
- That action, if any, will be taken by your local to either push through or defeat the legislation.

The Special Events Release

The special events release is effective only if it is timely. The release must be in the editor’s hand a good two weeks before the day of the event. It must include all essential dates and facts that will enlighten the editor to the specific activities taking place and why this is newsworthy. Even after the release has been mailed to the media, a press advisory should be sent two days prior to the event to ensure that they remember the event and to encourage them to attend. The special events release should include:
• The date, the name of the people or organization participating, the location of the event and the purpose of the event. This should be included in the lead sentence.
• Information about the activities that will be taking place, any fees for participants, and the time the event will occur.
• Quotes from any directors or leaders in the organization sponsoring the event.

New Programs Release

Announce the introduction of a new development to the public. The material should explain what has been developed, why it was developed and how it will benefit the people for whom it was developed. The new program release should include:

• Local’s name and the program they have developed in the title and in the lead sentence.
• How this development is beneficial or what it will provide.
• Why this new development is meeting a need and for whom.
• Some quotes from the person who developed the new program or from a spokesperson for your local.
• When possible, quotes from someone who has used or taken part in the new program. This helps lend credibility to the new development.

General Or Human Interest Release

This should produce empathy in the reader. The field of education lends itself naturally to these types of releases. However, the writer has to search for the common denominator in the masses. Almost everyone wants to read about a heroic event, a noteworthy achievement or maybe even a tragedy that allows him or her to express emotions they are feeling. The human interest release tells a story with which people can share their emotions.

Press Release Follow-Up

Press release follow-up determines the fate of your press materials and is responsible for about 90 percent of story placements. It is never enough to just send your release out and hope that someone will use it. You must follow-up via phone or email to see if they have received the material, check interest level and confirm usage of the material.

Because editors are inundated with press releases, they have no guilty feelings about trashing half of them unopened.

Contacting media can often be monotonous, but they can sometimes be quite challenging. Editors and producers have an array of personalities, some pleasant and some not. The not so pleasant ones are where the challenges come in. The key? Stay calm and collected no matter what the outcome.