



Passnotes

Best Practice in PR and Marketing



THE HENLEY GROUP INTERNATIONAL

The Evolution of the Press Release: Stay Relevant in a Digital Age

Social and digital media play an increasingly important role in PR and, being the new kids on the block, they attract much attention. Business to business organisations are following the lead of consumer brands and rushing to put social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Google+ to marketing use.

They are sharing images through Instagram and Pinterest, posting videos to YouTube and Vimeo, and blogging on Wordpress. But, in this increasingly online environment, is there a place for that traditional staple of PR activity, the press release? Is it still relevant? Can it be useful to the media? Does it deserve a place in today's PR toolbox?

WHERE IT ALL STARTED

The press release emerged over a hundred years ago as a way of getting business information onto the wider news agenda. Over time it established itself as a highly effective vehicle for disseminating business news, and the press release claimed a central role in PR campaign activity.

As newer communications technologies emerged so the means of delivering press releases changed. However, as recently as fifteen years ago most were still printed or typed, photocopied onto branded paper, and then mailed out to the press - accompanied by glossy five-by-seven inch photographs on separate caption sheets.

THE CHANGING NEWS ENVIRONMENT

As with so many other areas of our lives, the internet has changed the news media, perhaps for ever. Immediate, on-demand and mobile access to the news means that news organisations churn content in a bid to remain on top of breaking news and so attract readers and viewers. Stories therefore have an increasingly short shelf life.

The national news media has established a strong online presence and, indeed, many titles see their future being primarily online. So, while the national news media has always operated around the clock, a heavy online presence means it must now run stories as they emerge - rather than researching them in great detail and featuring them at fixed news points such as the morning or late edition of a newspaper, or the lunchtime or six o'clock TV news.

CHANGING TRADES

Changes in the trade, technical and business media are no less profound.

While many publications still take the format of monthly, printed magazines, most have also established an online presence with websites that carry news - often updated on a daily basis - while simultaneously offering digital versions of the monthly magazine for download.

They have embraced new media in a bid to make their websites as 'sticky' as possible and drive their influence online. They run blogs, feature video interviews, manage forums and comment sections on their websites, in a bid to create an online, interactive community of 'readers'.

Crucially, this community is also well catered for by those outside traditional publishing, such as bloggers and online commentators whose command of social media and new tools often leaves more established media wanting.

It's clear that the changing media landscape places fresh demands on how business news is disseminated. It really is a brave new world.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD STORY

Of course, the same organisations that need to engage with this new media landscape typically start with more down-to-earth concerns. How do we make readers aware of our new product? How do we keep customers up to date with our news? How do we build brand awareness through the media, and support sales? The press release continues to provide a great vehicle

To answer such questions, one must consider that while the media landscape may have changed, the stock in trade of the media has not. Journalists still want a good story, told well.

for this story and, as a tool, it is yet to be seriously challenged as the best medium for disseminating news. For example, much was made of Twitter's announcement of its planned IPO in a 140 character tweet, but this was also the subject of a number of press releases and related PR activity.

Typically, however, the issue with many press releases is that they do not provide a good story; so they do not generate coverage. Many are neither newsworthy, nor well written. It's an age-old problem, but most journalists still routinely bin press releases because of it.



TEN TIPS FOR A TOP PRESS RELEASE

At the risk of revisiting what is a well-trodden path, it might be useful to consider what exactly makes a good press release. The following tips are the result of many years of experience, and a seasoned understanding of what the media looks for in the releases it is sent.

1. Consider closely whether the announcement really is news; if it is timely, and if it is of interest
2. Focus on the Who, What, When, Where of the story – but most importantly, Why?
3. Consider that many journalists edit a release from the bottom up, so put the crux of the story first
4. Adopt the correct tone, avoiding ‘sales speak’ or marketing terms - it’s not a brochure
5. Banish jargon, buzzwords, acronyms and highly technical terms from the text entirely
6. Use correct grammar and punctuation and adopt and maintain the third person throughout
7. Keep the release short and to the point – use 500 words at most. It’s not a feature article
8. Provide interesting quotes that add something to the story. Consider that one is usually enough
9. Ensure the press release is supported by striking images with suitable captions
10. Include a boilerplate and list contact information, background details and any editors’ notes

This list could of course be continued, and other points might address the format and quality of images that should accompany a press release, or consider the level of background provided. Yet these core tips remain as valid today as they did 50 years ago.

However, the needs of today’s media only place new and additional demands on the press release, and it must now deliver news in a more flexible and tailored fashion.

While a good story is paramount, today’s press release needs to be cleverer, more engaging, and designed to meet the needs of an increasingly online environment. Cue the Press Release, ‘version 2.0’. Engineered to be smarter and more relevant for today’s media.

RE-ENGINEERING THE PRESS RELEASE

1. Use hyperlinks that add depth and provide context

Crucially, these should not simply point readers to the organisation’s own website. Instead, they must provide context for the story through links to relevant statistics, research or background on a particular issue. This makes a journalist’s life easier, and may nurture his or her longer-term interest in the story, and the issues it may address.

2. Ensure the release is freely available

It sounds obvious, but supplying press releases as locked PDFs, and in formats that don’t allow for easy copying and pasting of text, don’t lend themselves to use. Hiding them away in the poorly-indexed, irregularly updated news section of a website doesn’t help journalists find them.

3. Tie the press release to SEO strategy

As much of the story will end up online, a press release should include relevant keywords to support broader search engine optimisation efforts. Simply stuffing the release with keywords can impact on style and sentiment and is not recommended, however.

4. Repurpose the release in different formats

Content, as we are continually told, is king. To provide greater interest to readers, and further improve SEO, a press release can be turned into a short video, a series of informative tweets or, if data-driven, an infographic.

5. Target the right media

The most clever and well-written press release will not generate coverage if it is provided to the wrong media. The recipients of each press release should be researched, identified and refreshed each time a release is produced.

Particular attention should be paid to those vertical sector media, bloggers and industry associations who might also be interested in the story. Journalists can be targeted on the basis of their given interest in a subject area, whether they have written around similar subjects in the past, or whether a story meets a specific news requirement.

ROUTES TO MARKET

When it comes to disseminating a press release, there is no substitute for a personal email sent to a journalist, blogger or other contact, as it helps to develop the longer-term reputation of the sender as a reliable source of interesting news.

And, while phoning journalists up to see if a press release has been received is not recommended, conversations to discuss the issues raised in a press release, with the offer of interviews or opinion pieces on the subject, can result in further coverage and spin the story out for longer.

The official newswire still has a place in today's media landscape but the last few years have seen a number of hybrid newswires emerge. These allow users to distribute press releases and often feature news themselves. Few, however, offer any real personalisation or targeting of media, and often exist solely to drive SEO – and poorly, at that. Most do not offer the depth of trade and technical media that business to business organisations typically require.

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION

While an increasingly online news environment places new demands on the tools and techniques adopted by marketers, it is reassuring that a well-told, relevant and newsworthy story remains a cornerstone of successful PR activity.

Does the press release still deserve a place in the PR toolbox? The answer, as has been shown, is a resounding 'yes' - although it's true to say that today's press release is a very different animal to the creature of ten, or even five, years ago. The press release has evolved to meet the needs of today's fast-moving news environment and, in its latest incarnation, definitely justifies its continued use by marketers.

Despite the arrival of Twitter and 24 hour rolling news, the press release still provides a great vehicle for the news that business to business organisations need to provide, and the stories they need to tell.

Copies of other Passnotes, the Henley Group's guides to best practice in PR and marketing, can be downloaded at www.henley.co.uk



The Henley Group is a specialist PR agency with over thirty years' experience helping mainly B2B organisations realise their PR and marketing goals. Client experience includes work for some of the best known technology and industrial brands, as well as high-tech start-ups, not-for-profits and businesses seeking to secure a foothold in the UK.

For further information:

T: 01491 570 970 | E: group@henley.co.uk | W: www.henley.co.uk



@henley_group



The Henley Group



The Henley Group International

Corporate
Communications

Trade Media
Relations

Digital
Communications

Project
Public Relations

Advertising &
Marketing

Special
Events