



Effective news releases

**Get the most from
this fundamental
communications tool**

by Brigid Sanner

A mainstay of most communications and marketing programs, the news release allows health and wellness groups to control the information they issue to the media. Through this vehicle, an organization can decide what it wants to say, when it wants to say it, and to which media outlets it wants to direct its news. Yet sending out a release does not always lead to media interest or coverage. Also, once sent, a news release can sometimes take on a life of its own. As a result, an organization may feel a loss of control over how the media decide to cover this news.

So what are the secrets that will help you place a news release successfully? As with almost all strategic communications activities, the effectiveness of a release depends on good planning, careful execution and credible follow-through.

Is it news?

To get the most from a news release, you must first understand the proper use of this communications tool. A news release is a timely news story that a business or organization writes and sends to specific media outlets, such as daily and weekly newspapers, trade publications, and magazines. Above all else, a news release should contain *news*—current, accurate information of interest to the target audiences of these outlets.

Making Health Communication Programs Work, a resource published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, offers pointers for creating a release of interest. Of primary importance, the story should appeal to the media's audience, notes the publication. Also, the media especially like fresh angles or twists on topics that will attract public interest.

“To get news coverage of your company, you must first know what writers and

editors want; that is, what they consider to be news,” advises Mark Landsbaum, author of *Streetwise® Low-Cost Marketing*. “Next, give them what they want,” he says. “Don't forget to show how their readers will benefit from your story by linking your news to their readers' interests. And, of course, make it easy for them to publish your news,” continues Landsbaum, “by anticipating and answering as many of the questions that writers and editors will have.”

Reaching your audiences

When planning a news release, consider what news you have, who would be interested in your news, and which media outlets to target.

The media are the conduit through which you place a news release, with the ultimate goal of reaching specific target audiences. For example, if you were launching several new fitness facilities, your news might interest people in the business community who want to know about local business growth or expansion, as well as new jobs in the area. Strategic targets for this release would include chamber of commerce publications, local business reporters, and industry trade publications. Another audience might be potential members or clients who live or work near the new facilities. To appeal to this group, you might distribute a release to local city and neighborhood publications and offer special events geared to the consumer, e.g. open houses, free passes or trial memberships, or free seminars. In fact, you could easily develop two releases to convey your news: one for a business audience and one for a general consumer audience.

To garner greater media coverage, you “must convince the press that you have something interesting to say—perhaps a new ‘fact’ about the world, a new way of looking at an important issue or

something that links into an active policy debate,” states the *Communications Toolkit*, created by the Economic & Social Research Council in the United Kingdom. “Think about your story from the journalists' point of view,” suggests this resource, “the key question to ask is ‘so what?’”

Building your media lists

Once you establish the nature of your news, you need to develop a list of the media to which you will distribute your release. There are literally thousands of media outlets, including newspapers, magazines, trade publications, wire services, newsletters, Web-based media, television and radio. To determine where to send your release, ask yourself the following questions:

- Which audiences are interested in my news?
- What media do they read, watch or listen to?
- Who are the specific editors, reporters and news directors at these media outlets who would find my release of interest?

Once you answer these questions, you can start to build your media list. But before you leap to the step of sending your release, be sure to familiarize yourself with the different media. Read, watch or listen to the outlets, so you have a sense of the news they cover, their style, their editors and reporters, and the topics or issues they tend to feature. The more you target the right media outlets for a news release, the greater your chances of success in the competition for media coverage.

Distributing your news

Susan C. Hegger, assistant managing editor/features editor of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, receives 20–25 releases each day. Like many metropolitan

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newspaper editors, Hegger pays more attention to a news release if she “can immediately see a local hook,” she says. “If it is not local, it is more likely to get disregarded.”

Hegger offers several practical tips for sending a news release. Firstly, find the name and contact information for the editor of each publication or section you are directing your release to, she advises. This can be done by looking on a newspaper’s website for the assignment editors. “My biggest gripe is that a lot of PR people do not know who to send news releases to,” says Hegger.

Secondly, when targeting broadcast media (television and radio), learn who the news or assignment editors are and distribute the release to them, rather

than to on-air personalities or broadcast journalists.

Thirdly, send a release electronically, rather than in paper format, recommends Hegger. “It enables the person receiving the release to forward it to another reporter if needed,” she explains. Finally, a follow-up phone call doesn’t hurt, she suggests. “Sometimes things get lost,” says Hegger. “Or an editor or reporter has so many releases a follow-up call is responsible.” But use common sense. One call to a reporter or editor is good business; continually calling can be both annoying and unprofessional.

The timing of a news release is also important. “Many magazines have editorial deadlines two or three months

before the publication date,” comments David Sakrison, author of *Getting the Most from Your News Releases*. As well, “Daily newspapers often prepare special sections days or weeks in advance,” he states. Here again, a media outlet’s website can give you information about the best time to send a release.

Events outside your organization or business can also enhance the timing of a news release. For example, there are multiple fitness-related observances in May:

- Older Americans Month (sponsored by the U.S. Administration on Aging);

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Successful news releases: an editor’s words of advice

How do you grab the media’s attention with your news releases? David Olmos, health editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, recently gave the *Journal on Active Aging* his take on what works and what doesn’t.

What type of story interests him? Olmos seeks the extraordinary in a story. He looks for interesting, fresh and unique ideas—something that breaks new ground or advances other or current stories.

Human interest stories are big, he says, as are research and science stories. A truly good human interest story catches his attention, he adds, using the example of a woman who overcame breast cancer to run a marathon. This type of story is compelling and inspiring, explains Olmos. And, ultimately, such a story may help readers improve their health.

What makes releases stand out? Clear writing is what it’s all about to Olmos. Other key factors are the quality of the content and the placing of information in the bigger picture. Also, a release’s scope must go beyond the self-serving or any one organization or story. Again, Olmos uses the example of the breast cancer survivor who ran the marathon. This woman was Hispanic and dealing with unique problems and with cultural issues, says Olmos, and all these challenges made her story more compelling.

What mistakes do organizations make? Olmos lists four major missteps organizations make when sending him new releases:

1. They do not know what the publication has covered in the past. Most publications do not want to rehash content.
2. Their news has no context.
3. Their release exists just to gain publicity.

4. They have no knowledge of what the section writes.

Does he have other words of advice? Wire and news releases are equal in Olmos’s eyes. He encourages organizations to send releases by email, not mail, and emphasizes that samples are unwelcome.

Unlike Susan C. Hegger of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (see above), Olmos prefers that organizations do not follow up with him after sending a news release. Most of these documents get discarded for the reasons described above, he explains, while others may sit in an active file or get passed to other journalists. However, there are exceptions. Something that is time sensitive or an urgent, major news story warrants a call, he adds.

Finally, respect the editor’s or reporter’s time and volume, says Olmos.

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- Physical Fitness and Sports Month (sponsored by the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports);
- National Running and Fitness Week (May 12–18, sponsored by the American Running Association);
- Bike to Work Week (May 13–17, sponsored by the League of American Bicyclists); and
- National Water Fitness Week (May 25–31, sponsored by the United States Water Fitness Association).

Linking your release to a broader observance can help develop its news value. Keep in mind, however, that other organizations may also tie in with observances and compete for media attention.

Ten tips for crafting a quality release

Once you have your news story clearly in mind and determine your media list,

you can start writing your release. The keys to a good release include keeping it concise, direct and to the point. Here are 10 tips for developing a first-class news release.

1. Always include a contact name, phone number and email address at the start of a news release. Place this information at the top of the first page, before the headline and body of the release. Consider including an after-hours or cell phone number if the release refers to an event taking place on the weekend or at a time when no one will be in your office. Give your website address if further information is available there.

2. Date the news release. If your release can be used as soon as you send it, put *For immediate release* along with the date at the top of the first page. If the

information is embargoed, meaning it is not for release until a certain date and time, indicate the embargo details in the same place, e.g. *For release 3 p.m. EST, May 22, 2005.*

3. Use a clever headline, but limit it to as few words as possible. The headline needs to grab the attention of editors and reporters, so they will read the release.

4. Put the most important information at the beginning of the release, preferably in the first paragraph. Editors and reporters scan a release quickly to determine if it holds interest for their specific audiences. They look for *the five W's and H*: who, what, where, when, why and how. It is essential to state this information clearly and concisely at the document's start.

Gaining media coverage: a reporter's views

Lorraine Anthony, a correspondent with the multimedia news agency the Canadian Press, talked to the *Journal on Active Aging* lately about what attracts her interest as a reporter and what turns her off.

JAA: *As you receive so many news releases, how do you decide which stories to cover? What makes a story newsworthy?*

LA: A story has to be something of interest to Canadians or of real importance to people. Aging is important to everyone, as are the joys and concerns that go with it, so if there is new Canadian research about aging, I'm interested in following it. Also, a timely story appeals to me.

During the winter I am always eager to do a story on safety while shoveling snow, or signs to look for in a loved one who may suffer from winter depression.

JAA: *Is a follow-up pitch important to your decision?*

LA: Follow-up pitches *are* important. Sometimes I am interested in a particular idea, but get caught up in more timely stories, and I'll put an idea in a file. If someone sends me a follow-up email, I remember to look at my file again and try to schedule a time when I can do the story.

JAA: *What steps can an organization take to make a news release stand out for you?*

LA: Include a variety of contacts, so I have an alternative if one person is on vacation.

JAA: *What missteps should an organization avoid?*

LA: Calling me constantly. Emails are welcome, but calls can be bothersome.

JAA: *What final advice would you give people about communicating with the media?*

LA: Have a few *stories* in mind, not just a *topic*. I'll never forget someone who pitched a story about blind people. It was as if she had just discovered there were blind people we should tell the world about. I gently tried to tell her that a topic isn't good enough for a story. There has to be something that stands out—a reason why I should write a story on blind people now, as opposed to a month from now.

*If your news release
results in coverage in
your local, regional or
trade press, use this as
an opportunity to build
a stronger relationship
with the reporters and
editors who carried
your story*

- 5.** Limit your news release to no more than two pages, double-spaced, in 11- or 12-point type. Many editors prefer just one page.
- 6.** Write the release in the third person and keep the style businesslike. Aim for accurate, crisp, clear and factual writing. Avoid jargon, highly technical language and acronyms.
- 7.** Steer clear of descriptive or extravagant words, such as *outstanding*, *remarkable*, *unprecedented* or *devastating*. Remember, you are writing a *news* release, not advertising copy.
- 8.** Limit the number of spokespersons or experts quoted in a news release. Quotes can help bring a story to life, but try to avoid quoting more than two individuals in a single release. And select spokespeople based on their expertise related to the topic, rather than on their roles within your organization. For example, if a release focuses on a new fitness program at your facility, a credentialed exercise physiologist who can address the program's health and wellness benefits usually makes a better spokesperson than the chief executive officer (CEO). But comments from the CEO would be appropriate for a business-related announcement, e.g. the opening of new facilities.
- 9.** Back up facts with reliable sources. An example: "Despite the obvious value of leading an active lifestyle, almost 57% of adults ages 55–64, and 64% of adults ages 65 and older, do not meet the U.S. Surgeon General's guidelines for moderate physical activity, notes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention."

- 10.** Use a resource such as the *Associated Press Stylebook* or the *New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* to guide you as you write and edit your release.

Proofread your release carefully before you send it out. Often, when you have written and rewritten a release several times, you are apt to miss typos, misspellings or grammatical errors. So identify someone in your organization who is a stickler for detail, and ask this individual to read the release for you as a final check for accuracy.

If your news release results in coverage in your local, regional or trade press, use this as an opportunity to build a stronger relationship with the reporters and editors who carried your story. Send each one a short thank you note and include your business card. And ensure you offer to act as a resource for future articles that relate to your business or industry. ☞

Brigid Sanner specializes in freelance writing, marketing consultation and communications training. She currently provides communications and marketing support to the Active for Life® national program at the Texas A&M University System Health Science Center School of Rural Public Health. She has provided consultation and communications services to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; the National Council on the Aging; the OASIS Institute; and the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. For more information, contact her at 214-553-0621 or bsanner@comcast.net.

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Sample press release

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For immediate release

Lack of Physical Activity Contributing to “Super-Sized” Older Adults

(College Station, TX. September 22, 2003): A good deal of national attention has focused on the epidemic of childhood obesity in the United States, and certainly it is a serious public health concern. But children are not the only group suffering from the consequences of enormous portions of food, high fat snacks, and sedentary lifestyle. “Too much food and too little physical activity is contributing to an epidemic of “super-sized” older adults in the United States,” says Marcia Ory, Ph.D., MPH, director of the *Active for Life*® National Program Office at The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center.

October 1, 2003 is the International Day of Older Persons, and Ory sees this as an opportunity to focus awareness on the importance of engaging in healthy behaviors, including physical activity.

According to U.S. government surveys, 27.1 percent of adults age 50–64 are obese and 19.8 percent of adults 65 and older are obese. “Over the last ten years we have seen an alarming increase in obesity among all adult age groups,” Ory notes. “Among adults age 50 to 64, the number of people who are obese increased from 16.9 percent in 1991 to 27.1 percent in 2001.”

“If you look at other health behaviors, specifically physical activity, you begin to see an even grimmer picture—60 percent of adults are not engaging in enough leisure time physical activity. And older adults are the least active of all Americans,” says Ory. “The irony is that we know regular physical activity can help people maintain ideal body weight, as well as help prevent or control other chronic diseases including heart disease, hypertension, arthritis, and some types of cancer.”

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data show that one in three adults older than 65 report no leisure time physical activity, and more than one in four adults age 50 to 64 report no leisure time activity. The U.S. Surgeon General recommends moderate physical activity for 30 minutes a day on most days.

With funding from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Ory is heading up *Active for Life*, an initiative based at Texas A&M’s School of Rural Public Health. *Active for Life* is integrating programs that have been proven effective in helping older adults become more active into community settings such as churches, hospitals, senior centers and fitness centers.

“People understand they need to be more active,” comments Diane Dowdy, Ph.D., deputy director of the *Active for Life* program. “Yet the majority of people remain sedentary. We hope to learn how a group-based behavior program and a telephone-based coaching system might be used to help motivate mid-life and older adults to increase the amount of physical activity they do.”

The *Active for Life* program is being implemented in community settings in California, Illinois, Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas.

The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center School of Rural Public Health is the first school of public health to focus on the often-unique health issues and needs of rural populations.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, based in Princeton, N.J., is the nation’s largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care.

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