The who, what, when where, and why of it all

Press Releases

Other than the telephone, press releases and media advisories—often lumped together under the term “news releases”—are the basic methods of communicating your news to reporters. This guide explains how to create a press release. For information on media advisories, download the SPIN Project’s tutorial on News Releases.

The Reality

Reporters throw away or ignore many if not most press releases because they:

• Do not contain any news
• Do not have contact information or other key data to make the reporter’s job easier
• Are filled with typos and other embarrassments, causing the reporter to doubt the integrity of the organization that sent the release
• Are confusing, poorly written, or worse—boring.

The Press Release

a.k.a. “Media Release”

This document is rarely more than two pages. A press release is typically written like a news story—containing quotes, “color” and background—and summarizes your news. It is written as if it were to appear in the morning newspaper—though, of course, that will not happen since most media will not run your release verbatim. The press release is often handed out at a news event or included in a press kit.

The key to successful news releases is brevity and factual accuracy. Get to the most important part of the news as soon as possible and make sure everything is accurate: facts, name spellings, dates and times. Some reporters have said that if their attention is not piqued by the headline or the end of the lead paragraph, they rarely read any further.

Tips for Press Releases

Starting at the top of the page, all news releases should contain:

• Your organization’s logo. This should be at the very top of the paper.
• Either “For Immediate Release”—meaning the information
can be used as soon as a reporter gets it; or “Emargoed Until [date]”—meaning the reporter cannot use the news until the date specified.

- The date the release is distributed.
- Contact name(s), email and web addresses and phone number(s), including cellular phones.
- A “boilerplate,” a 2-3 sentence description of your organization in clear, concise, jargon-free language.

Reporters’ desks are overflowing with news releases announcing some “big news” that really is not. Most of these are trying to sell some commercial product or event in the guise of news. Fortunately, your release, which will promote your cause, can and will distinguish itself from the others if you follow these basic tips.

**The headline is key.** Most reporters have about thirty seconds to scan a news release. They want the news to jump out at them. If you do not catch their attention in the headline, into the “circular file” the release goes.

**Summarize your news into a headline.** The headline can be up to four lines long, centered, in bold face and written all in capital letters, usually in a larger type size. You may do a stacked headline: a main, attention-grabbing head followed by a slightly smaller, more detailed head. The headline should capture the larger frame of the news, communicate a sense of drama, and pull reporters into the story.

**After the headline, the first paragraph—“the lead”—is paramount.** This is the summary paragraph that communicates the most important components and frames the issue for maximum media impact. It must also capture attention. *Caution:* Do not try to explain everything in this paragraph.

**Write the remainder of the press release in descending order of importance.** In journalism, this is called the “inverted-pyramid” style of writing. The most important, base-laying news goes at the top, the lesser details below.

**Frame your news**—establish its importance and impact, and your position—by the end of the lead paragraph. At the latest, your news should be framed by the end of the second paragraph. By the third paragraph you should move your key messages.

**Include one or two pithy soundbite quotes in the press release.**

**Since your event will feature strong visuals, tip reporters off to the photo opportunities** at the end of the media advisory. This is utterly essential for TV.

**End press releases with the marks ###, or -30-.** This lets journalists know the release is over. If your release jumps to the next page, write “more” at the bottom and center it. At the top left corner of the next page, write “Page 2” and provide a subject reference.

**When to Send the Release**

**In general, you should mail** (including email, for those reporters who prefer emails) **the release ten days before the event, fax it five days before the event, and follow up with a phone call within three days of the event.** Of these three methods, faxing (or emailing) and calling are paramount.

*Remember:* Do not call reporters to ask if they got your release. They do not have time to respond to every release they receive. Instead, call them to pitch the news and remind them about the release. Be prepared to send another if the first was misplaced.
Do's and Don'ts

Don’t:
• Include jargon or political rhetoric in your releases.
• Place mission statements in releases.
• Write in long sentences and ponderous paragraphs. One- or two-sentence paragraphs are fine.
• Forget to spellcheck. Typos, factual inaccuracies and other mistakes kill the integrity of your organization and news.

Do:
• Keep it short.
• Write a strong headline or stacked headline.
• Write a tight and hard-hitting lead paragraph.
• Move your messages!
PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
March 20, 2006

Contact: Mariah Carey (202) 555-1212

END HUNGER ANCHORAGE

March 20, 2006- End Hunger Anchorage, the unprecedented United Way community partnership officially unveiled today at Food Bank of Alaska, has moved 20% more food to hungry people since the fall and expects to move much more with the launching of their second project: a food purchasing cooperative.

Today, more than 30,000 people or nearly 12% of Anchorage residents are "food insecure" - they do not know where their next meal is coming from. Based on the food distributed by Food Bank of Alaska partners, only about half will have their food needs met. The remaining 15,000 children, women and men remain in need. Eliminating the gulf between those experiencing hunger and those finding relief is the goal of End Hunger Anchorage.

"Imagine what it means for a child to concentrate on her studies instead of her growling stomach," said Michele Brown, President, United Way of Anchorage, "or what a relief it is for a struggling breadwinner to not have to choose between paying for his family's medicine or food. Ending hunger benefits us all through improved health, better education outcomes and enhanced economic productivity."

Last fall, United Way brought together 7 anti-hunger agencies to explore how together, united, they could make more food available, distribute food more quickly and effectively, and how they could increase awareness of Anchorage's growing hunger problem.

With the help of supply chain logistics experts from Alyeska Pipeline Service Company, the group identified several significant barriers to getting more food to hungry people. Since then, the group, now known as End Hunger Anchorage, has been systematically addressing them.

Results from their first project are being felt across the community. End Hunger Anchorage's pioneering agreement to share services and their streamlined donations process for all food donors is getting more food to the hungry in our community, 20% more in just 3 short months. By centralizing food collection, storage and transportation, increased resources can be dedicated to acquiring more food.

End Hunger Anchorage founding partners include Bean's Cafe, Catholic Social Services, Kids Cafe Programs of Anchorage, Lutheran Social Services, Food Bank of Alaska, New Hope on the Last Frontier, The Salvation Army, and United Way of Anchorage.

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Rasmuson Foundation is a private family foundation located in Anchorage, Alaska that works as a catalyst to promote a better life for Alaskans.

Founded in 1955, the Foundation invests approximately $26 million annually in both individuals and well-managed nonprofit organizations dedicated to improving the quality of life for Alaskans primarily in the areas of arts and culture, community development, health, and human services.

Our grantees are passionate about their work. Given today’s crowded media environment, their ability to effectively advocate on behalf of their constituents and tell their story is of critical importance to their success. The Foundation supported the development of this toolkit to provide a comprehensive and accessible resource for its grantees both to build internal capacity and to work more effectively on a day-to-day basis with strategic communications.

In today’s crowded media environment, organizations working to build a fair, just and equitable society can scarcely be heard. Organizations hoping to shape debates and shift public policy must embrace strategic communications to achieve their goals. The SPIN Project strengthens nonprofit social justice organizations, small and large, to communicate effectively for themselves.

The SPIN Project provides accessible and affordable strategic communications consulting, training, coaching, networking opportunities and concrete tools, such as this online communications toolkit. Our skills and expertise are blended with our commitment to strengthening social justice organizations and helping them engage in communications to achieve their goals.

We develop communications skills, infrastructure and leadership, strengthening organizations to achieve their social justice goals.