

# The Press Release is Dead (Will Somebody Please Tell the Clients?)



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INTEGRATED COMMUNICATIONS

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In competing for a piece of business not too long ago, my public relations firm was asked to supply three samples, each of recent clips, bylined articles we'd authored for clients and press releases.

For two of the three requirements, the issue was our embarrassment of riches. But for press releases, we were hard-pressed. These days, we write fewer and fewer press releases—most are the obligatory personnel announcements, with the periodic feature release sprinkled in between.

We just don't see them as being as important a tool for PR as they once were.

Yes, there are exceptions. For disclosure purposes, news releases are mandatory for occurrences or developments that could materially impact a publicly held company. And some businesses have real "news" to report, even if they're not publicly held, that may lend itself to distribution via news release.

But despite the popular image of PR firms as press release factories and their account personnel as pitching machines (and the regrettable fact that many still churn them out and indiscriminately blanket the media with releases that have little or no relevance), the reality is that the press release is pretty much dead as a piece of the strategic communications arsenal.

Think about it. As a society, we've gone from the era of mass production, mass merchandising and mass marketing to one where customization is king.

In this environment, press releases are to PR professionals what the 30-second television commercial is becoming to the advertising industry. As far as most reporters and editors are concerned, they are overproduced, they lack differentiation, they generally aren't relevant and the vast majority just aren't worthy of coverage.


As a profession, we must be falling down on the job of providing education and counsel. Why else would prospects, clients and their bosses still insist on "expertise" in developing press releases, when the pertinent question should be this: "For our business and our purposes, what are the most effective ways to get media coverage?"

Understanding the client and the thinking/strategy behind its offerings is a first step leading to the best possible storyline hooks. It takes getting to know the company and its positioning—intimately. What differentiates it from the competition. The thinking by senior level people in the organization that makes it great.

This takes an investment of time and requires the PR professional to think and act like a reporter—to gather the intelligence that leads to more than just message points, but solid story ideas that will position the company in the best possible light. Researching trends, issues and concerns in the industry generally and the company specifically will provide the fodder for probing questions that form the basis of useful interviews with appropriate executives.

The exercise adds to your knowledge base and gives you an idea of problematic areas that may have to be countered publicly at some point, while giving the executives a taste of the interview process for future reference; it also allows you to position yourself as someone who is thinking more strategically and has advanced beyond PR101 rote.

The second step is to target your media markets and customize your message accordingly. Even products with mass consumer appeal will get more buzz with journalists if you narrow your focus and customize your positioning to reflect the individual journalist's beat, orientation, likes, dislikes and recent coverage topics, as well as the publication's positioning with readers. Much of this intelligence can be gathered through services like MediaMap, or the old fashioned way—doing a byline search and skimming through the journalist's past articles (or segments, in the case of the electronic media).



A short, personalized email—three paragraphs at most—to the targeted journalists with a to-the-point lead-in should not only outline the storyline but also emphasize its relevance to the outlet’s audiences. This personal approach is going to have a far greater chance of grabbing the reporter’s attention than a news release that’s written for the masses.

The third step is to ensure that the people who are actually doing the phone call or email follow-up in pitching the story are brought up to speed on the context of the angle and overall client positioning. In short, they have to be prepared to answer at least some of the reporter’s basic questions.

A pet peeve of mine when I was a journalist was receiving a mass-produced press release that was followed up by a telephone pitch by “sweet young things” whose responses to the simplest questions was inevitably, “Ummmm, I don’t know. Is it important?” Their lack of preparedness reflected poorly on them and the organization they were representing.

For years, the PR profession has indulged in considerable hand wringing over the perceived lack of respect accorded the discipline, particularly compared with other communications disciplines like marketing and advertising. If PR practitioners were to ensure that broader trends were reflected in the performance of even their most basic functions, they would earn the respect they deserve.

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