World Eye Cancer Hope
life and sight for every child

A Beginner's Guide to Media Release Writing

Introduction

A **News Release** is a communiqué of five or six paragraphs, drawing attention to a particular happening. These documents used to be known as "press releases", but have been renamed in the modern multi-media age. They are the main tool of media relations, used by print media such as newspapers and community magazines, and broadcast media such as television news programmes and radio stations.

Journalists receive hundreds of news releases a week. So yours must be crisp, concise, jargon free and attention-grabbing. It will quickly hit the waste basket if it does not capture interest in the first sentence, or clearly present the potential story.

News releases need to be persuasive, but this does not mean they should use the persuasive advertising language. Journalists are not in the business of free publicity, and favour true human interest stories over highly marketed commercial news.

For example, a news program may not cover the fancy launch of a camera by a local company, but they will be interested in running a feature on a local family is raising awareness of how ordinary album photographs can save a child's sight and life.

The camera company may have a bigger PR budget, but your human interest story has the competitive edge in this arena. Your news release will be persuasive simply by clearly presenting your story from an angle that will be of interest and relevance to the ultimate readers, listeners or viewers.

Basic rules for writing press releases

Length: Do not go over two pages. Remember, you are pitching to the reporter, not writing the article. The journalist will expect the need to call for further details. Just answer the six W questions (who, what, when, where, why and how) in your release.

Stay focused: Make every word count. Use short sentences, and clearly make your point. If you present the information well, the value of your story will speak for itself.

Avoid "PR puffery": Don't use superlatives, hyperbolae, or and unqualified comparatives**.** You may believe your event is the "the biggest" or "the best", but let the journalist make their own judgements about this. This type of marketing speak is disliked by journalists, and is a sure way to lose their attention.

Avoid jargon: Journalists are ordinary people who may not know what various medical terms or abbreviations mean. Using these can lead to misunderstandings, and prevent the reporter from appreciating the important facts.

As a result, they may decide to not cover your story, or unintentionally misrepresent it. Sensible use of abbreviations is acceptable, but do ensure you spell them out in full the first time they appear in the text, and include the abbreviation in brackets at that point. For example, World Eye Cancer Hope (WE C HOPE), retinoblastoma (Rb) or Kenya National Retinoblastoma Strategy (KNRbS).

Give credit: Acknowledge local partners and/or sponsors of your event, and send a copy of the News Release to them. The media may not mention everyone helping to stage the event, but it is important that you acknowledge them.

The Angle: The news element and local or national relevance of a news release is what interests the journalist. So select the angle of your story carefully. The more newsworthy it is, the more likely it is to receive coverage. Here are some examples:

- **Existing Events:** Combining your fundraiser with an established event, such as World Retinoblastoma Awareness Week or Childhood Cancer Month, will create a strong awareness angle, and make your event or individual story more appealing to the media.
- **Local partnerships:** These add a clear local angle to the story. For example, a scout troop planning a fundraiser to honour your child, or a company staging a Wear Red and White Day to raise awareness of checking for red eye reflex.
- **Celebrating a milestone:** This might be x years since diagnosis, surgery or end of chemotherapy.

The Message: Your message will not simply be that you are hosting a fundraiser – you will be sharing this information as a by-product of your message. Your message will be what is influencing this action. For example:

- awareness of "white pupil" as an early sign of retinoblastoma leads to early diagnosis – a child's only hope for healthy vision and life. WE C HOPE co-ordinates a global awareness campaign to achieve early diagnosis and referral.
- Most children with retinoblastoma live in developing countries, and most die due to late diagnosis, even though treatment is available. WE C HOPE is working to tackle this with a model strategy for developing countries.

Follow the convention: There is a standard format for news releases. If you don't use this, your release may hit the waste basket without being read. Follow the tips below, and use the template provided in this pack.

Writing The News Release

General presentation tips

- Keep to one side, or a maximum of two single sided pages.
- Always type a news release – a hand written release looks unprofessional.
- Use an easy to read font that does not take up too much space, such as Arial.
- Clearly state the date, so the reporter can quickly see the release is current.
- Use double spaced text and wide margins, to allow reporters to make notes.
- Don't use formatting. This will require edits if the release is printed verbatim
- If exceeding one page, do not split sentences or paragraphs across the page.
- Include a shortened version of your headline at the top of the additional page.
- Use single sided printing. Letterhead for the first page, plain paper thereafter.
- Staple pages together in the top left corner. Do not use paper clips as pages can become separated too easily.

Clear statement: Print the words "News Release" in a bold font at the top of the page, to let the media know this information is provided specifically for their use.

Headline: Grab attention with a clear, short and snappy headline. If your headline is dull, this may be the only part of your news release that is read by the reporter.

Answer the five W questions

- **What:** Clearly state the event. For example, if you are holding a Daisy Bake, what kind is it (front yard, tribute, part of another local event)? Is the event in honour of someone? What will happen at the event? What makes it unique and fun? Describe anything that would be a good visual.
- **Who:** Clearly identify your event organiser (such as an individual adult or child, family, business, club, school or faith organisation). Name the main organising person. Identify any speakers or special appearances, and what those people will say or do.
- **When:**: When is the event taking place? Include the day of the week, date, month, year and time. Spell out the month, to avoid the confusion of different dating formats. Write the year in four digit format.
- **Where:** Clearly state the location name and address. If necessary, include directions in the Editor's notes.
- **Why:** Give a compelling explanation for your event, and why it is relevant to the local community. Describe why it is important to raise awareness and funds. Give personal reasons that others will relate to, and be inspiring. Include a statistic or two (you can find these in the factsheets included with this media toolkit).

First paragraph – make it snappy: You must grab the reader's attention in the first paragraph, or your release will end up in the bin. So don't include all the information right at the beginning. This paragraph does not have to tell the whole story, but it must make the journalist read on, so lead in with your angle. Keep it to one or two sentence, and no more than 35 words.

For example, consider which of the following is more likely to grab the attention of a busy news editor:

1) The Busy Bees Club will hold a bake sale at St Michael's Church on Tuesday 15 April at 2pm, raising funds for a charity supporting children with eye cancer, and highlighting the early sign that any parent can detect in photos.
2) Childhood cancer awareness will receive a boost from the Busy Bees on Tuesday 15 April, when the toddler's club holds a bake sale to highlight how flash photographs can save young children's lives.

Example 2 presents the angle immediately, and also highlights a photo opportunity (cute kids selling cakes for charity).

Second paragraph – news in brief: Provide all the vital information in the first two paragraphs. They should be able to make sense when standing alone, so that an editor can print them verbatim as a news in brief article.

Third paragraph – quote: Use a powerful quote from a named person. Editors like this because if they use your news release, it will appear that they interviewed you, when actually they are just printing the material you provided. Third party quotes endorsing your story are particularly helpful in bringing a story to life. For example, a medical expert or WE C HOPE spokesperson. However, remember to check with the person you are quoting in advance.

> **Format:** Quotes are carried in their own paragraph. The following is an example of the standard format.
>
> "Introduce the first words of the quotation", said Full Name. "Proceed with the remarks. This may be several sentences long. Do not give attribution again."

Fourth paragraph and beyond – good but not essential: Include further details, such as a brief description of WE C HOPE (who we are, who we support, how and why) and contact details that can be used in any news article, such as our website and telephone number, and how interested people can make donations.

Mark the ending: Let the reader know there is a second page, by writing "more" (UK) or "continued" (N. America), centred at the bottom of the first page. State the ending by writing "ENDS" (UK) or "###" (N. America), centred at the end of the main text on your final page.

Editor's Notes

- Reference the source of any facts stated in the main Release (such as statistics), so the journalist can substantiate them.
- Include the official WE C HOPE Editor's Notes, included in this pack.
- Add Contact details that can be used in any news article, such as our website and telephone number, and how interested people can make donations.
- Availability for interview of any speakers at your event.
- Reference any enclosures, such as background information and photos.

Contact Details: Include details of at least one individual (preferably two) who is readily available, fully briefed on your story and willing to provide further information to the journalist. Ensure the contact person is aware they are listed as such, and that they have a copy of the news release. Include their name, job title (in relation to your event), telephone, cell and fax numbers, and an email address, if one exists.

What happens to the news release?

One of three things will happen to your news release once it has been received by a journalist or editor.

- It will be used Verbatim, or edited slightly.
- You will be contacted for more information, and a journalist with write the story
- It will be binned – perhaps because it is not relevant to the readership, arrives too late, is poorly presented, or the newspaper already has enough news.

If a TV or radio station wishes to run the story, they will either:

- Invite you to the studio to do a live or pre-recorded interview
- Arrange a telephone interview (radio)
- Run a short report, based on your news release, usually following a brief telephone conversation with you.
- Send a reporter or film crew to you.

Review: Only 3% of news releases achieve editorial coverage. Check that your release follows the prescribed format outlined above, and consider the top ten reasons for news release failure. Ask a couple of people to proofread, and check that you have not made any of these common errors.

1. Too long
2. The five Ws are not answered
3. Chatty, with no angle.
4. Inappropriate for the audience
5. Out of date
6. Too much hype or comment
7. Difficult to follow-up
8. Just plain boring

If you follow the advice in this pack, and avoid these pitfalls, your news release is likely to be successful!!

Remember that we are here to help, so please feel free to contact us for assistance.