

Business Focus: PR

How to Write Compelling Press Releases

The press release is perhaps the best-known PR tool, but it is also the most frequently misunderstood and misused! Press releases are designed to secure targeted media coverage that supports your marketing objectives – such as driving new business, growing your market share or raising your media profile. This easy step-by-step guide will outline not only how to develop your own press releases, but how and when to distribute these to target the media.

Picture That Headline!

To help you start off on the right foot, picture your ideal headline and work backwards: your release should give the journalist everything they need to develop an article with that headline – so include information, evidence, statistics, ‘did you know’s’, quotes and testimonials. This will all help to maximise your chances of securing accurate, on-message coverage.

WATCHOUT: By its very nature, editorial coverage written by a third party means you will not have 100% control of the final output. The journalist takes your release and implements their own perspective, experience and research angle, so you need to stick to avoiding the five cardinal sins to ensure your messages pull through into the final piece:

The Five Cardinal Sins of Press Releases

1. **Not newsworthy:** If your story is totally devoid of any news value for readers or audiences, it will go straight to the ‘delete’ folder. Also – beware of dressing up old news as ‘new’ – the media will not consider re-hashing old stories with no new angle.
2. **Bad headline:** Journalists often receive hundreds of releases each day and your release is a split-second decision away from the bin while they scroll through their email inbox. Make sure the headline (i.e. email subject) is short, snappy and to the point. Stick to that ideal headline!
3. **Jargon-tastic:** Relevant for all industries, but particularly medicine where we can all catch ourselves speaking in jargon and acronyms – avoid wherever possible.

4. **Corporate spiel:** Stick to the news and why it matters to readers, don't regurgitate marketing brochures or wax lyrical on your business acumen.
5. **Typo overload:** Bad spelling, structure or grammar will irritate journalists and make it less likely for them to read your whole release. It's probably a good idea to get a colleague to take a second look and spot these mistakes.

Get Writing

In my experience, a press release is rarely written in 'one go' from start to finish. It's important to put yourself in the journalist's shoes – test the strength of your story by asking some key questions to help shape your approach before starting, like “So what? Who cares? What does this story give my readers?”

Overall, your release must answer the five Ws: the **WHO, WHAT, WHY, WHEN, WHERE and HOW.**

The more you can do to provide the journalist all the information without them having to do additional research, the better your chances of coverage. It is also crucial to keep your release clear and concise – just one page long and clearly structured to capture interest.

Other ways to strengthen your release could include linking to an existing story in the mainstream or local press, offering different opinions, insights or data.

For example, if your story talks about a new dermal filler product or technique, you could link to recent stories talking about latest trends or statistics of increased cosmetic procedures. Case studies or quotes from other expert sources can be compelling additions to underline your key messages.

Press releases also don't have to be text only: you can improve your chances of grabbing attention by including infographics, images and illustrations that you own the copyright for. Just beware of file sizes – compress any images to avoid overloading their inbox or being diverted as spam.

Structuring for Success

Now that we have finessed our approach and gathered our 'raw materials', we can look at how to combine everything into a strong release structure:

- **Headline:** This must tell the whole story within a punchy five to six-word limit (i.e. email subject or desired newspaper headline).
- **Sub-header:** This gives more context to the headline at a similar length.
- **Embargo, author, date:** Stipulate when the news will be released (and should not be published before), and indicate the author of this release and the date of issue.
- **The first line:** The first sentence is crucial and should encapsulate the whole story, but in no more than 25 words. Imagine if the journalist only read the first line – would they still understand and care about your story?
- **Paragraphs one to three:** The rest of the release should contain the story's key messages, answering the five Ws and providing some additional expert quotes or case studies to underline the importance/relevance of the story.
- **Notes to Editors:** Include any additional useful information for the journalist such as a short description of the company, service or product.

Distribution

Nowadays, 99% of news releases are sent via email, so you will either need to manually build up your own distribution list, or alternatively use an online distribution service which allows you to upload your release and send out to a pre-defined list of media contacts.

These distribution services can be free or paid-for, thus reflecting the quality of media outlets reached. They often share health and beauty news, connecting journalists, companies and PR professionals.

However, the disadvantage is that you lose a personal approach and connection with the media contacts, and it can be difficult to find a service that targets the specific media that you need for a medical aesthetic story.

Consider which media contacts will want to receive your release – be that medical trade press, regional newspapers, local magazines or even national press.

If creating your own list, you can research publications that have written about similar topics, find the most appropriate journalist to contact and source their email address through Google.

If you can't find a relevant individual journalist, find out the contact details for the editorial team or newsdesk, who will then field your release to the appropriate contact. Of course, don't forget to add any media contacts with whom you have a personal relationship.

Timings

An important consideration is finding out when your target publications go to press. If you can't find this information online, it's best to give them a call as this will inform when you need to send your release to maximise the chances of it being seen and covered. The last thing you want is to send something just after the filing deadline, as not only will you miss this window of opportunity, but your release could end up on the bottom of the pile for next time as newer items come through.

Approach

I always recommend a personal approach: don't underestimate the importance of addressing the journalist by name and including some details of why you think this story is relevant to them, or their particular publication. Maybe they wrote about a similar topic recently? Maybe their publication includes a regular 'beauty' or 'medical' focus section? The more specific you can be, the better – there's nothing worse than a blanket approach of 'Dear all'!

Keep your email short and to the point, and don't forget to include details of any further information available on request, as well as your contact details for any additional queries.

It's a good idea to paste your release into the email body, as well as attaching as a word file (preferably not a PDF) as sometimes there can be issues with attachments not opening or incompatible files. Be conscious of file size – 1MB is the maximum total for any attachments, so make sure you compress any files.

Get feedback

Resist the temptation to chase the journalist if you don't hear anything after an hour or two – they will get back to you if the story is of interest or if they need further information. If you still haven't heard anything after a day or two, get in touch (preferably by phone for a more personal approach), to check whether they received it and to ask for feedback.

Don't shy away from a 'no thank you' response – take it as an opportunity to understand their take on the release and what they might like to receive from you in the future.

Conclusion

You should now feel more confident about creating your own press releases and using them to drive your business marketing objectives. By adopting a tailored and personalised approach, as well as ensuring your releases are structured, relevant and compelling – you will maximise your chances of successfully securing valuable coverage of your clinic and services.



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