

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA: Do's and Don'ts¹

The first place to start with developing good media relations and getting your articles in print is to know your newspaper, its writers and editors, specifically their styles and what types of events/stories they generally cover. Develop your list of contacts.

After you've written your press release and are ready to share the news with media, if you deliver it to the newsroom be brief. Most reporters are not sitting at their desks waiting for a story to fall on it. Always have specific information and a fact sheet for background.

Respect deadlines.

Learn when the deadline is and stick to it. If you have been asked for specific information, remember to respond in a timely manner that accommodates the newspaper's deadline. Remember – morning papers usually need information at least the afternoon. If you are planning an event or news conference, always give editors plenty of time to assign or schedule coverage. Reporters hate to be called the afternoon of an event (which was pre-planned) to cover it.

Should you follow up after sending a release?

If you do not hear from them and do not see it in print, it is OK to ask if the release has been received and use it as an opportunity to point out the importance or highlights or ask if they need more information, but be brief.

Letters to the editor

Remember that the "letter to the editor" section is a highly read area of the newspaper. Never underestimate its value to getting your word out to a broad group. Utilize this to clarify myths and rumors and to present your facts. You can also use it as a way to update your community on your accomplishments. Remember when sending "update" letters to legislators, key stakeholders, etc. you can use the same information as a letter to the editor.

Use a broad range of individuals to write letters to the editor of the local newspaper, making sure each takes a different issue or perspective on an aspect related to the particular advocacy message you are trying to convey.

Letters to the editor should be brief and straight to the point (three to five paragraphs). Most newspapers have a length limit of 250 words. It is preferred to make only one point per letter. Letters must be signed and must include the writer's address and daytime phone number. Most prefer letters that are short, and that express timely opinions on topics of broad interest.

¹ This document is adapted from the SmartStart early childhood education website. Available online at: <http://smartnet.smartstart-nc.org/index.htm>

Key points to remember:

- Address your letter to “Dear Editor” not “Dear Sir”
- Letters should be short and to the point – a maximum of three to five short paragraphs.
- Your letter should focus on one topic or point.
- If your letter is about a “touchy” situation, start with the name of your Association (and/or partnership) and the purpose of your message. Next include some background information and conclude with what you want readers to do.
- If your letter is to clarify inaccuracies – briefly mention the inaccuracy then spend the majority of your time with your facts. Do not go line by line reprinting the incorrect information and responding to it. You want readers to focus on the correct information. Rehashing only gives more opportunity for readers to digest the incorrect information.

Newspaper columns/op-ed pieces

Many newspapers will run regular columns from organizations if they are provided. Try for a series if the regular column is too demanding on your Association or too bold for the newspaper. Use op-ed pieces or special columns written by business leaders, ministers, psychology advocates and others.

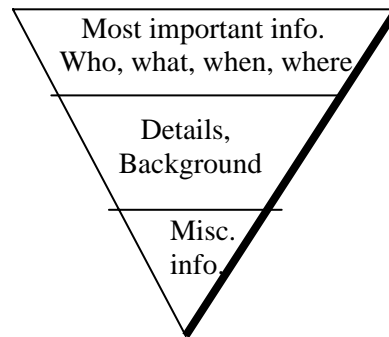
Writing Press Releases

Press releases are one of the most important and frequently used items in your media relations activities. Because editors and reporters generally receive numerous releases each day, it is important to offer it in a clear format that presents your story well. Here are just a few reminders about writing press releases.

- Always use standard size paper and include the following: date and when it should be released usually marked “For immediate release,” a contact person with phone number, an address, e-mail address and Web site information.
- Leave plenty of margin space for editors to write on.
- Include a headline that briefly tells the whole story.
- Your message should be able to stand alone in the first two paragraphs.
- Avoid jargon – keep your message simple. Remember you are trying to peak an editor’s interest with your story – not educate him or her about every detail!
- Use quotes to make your points stronger. Always important to have others tell the key parts of the story.
- Your lead (first few sentences) should always contain the basic most important facts: Who? What? When? Where? and Why? You should start with the strongest information first (frame the point of your story here), the middle section should include general information or background and your concluding paragraphs should not be as strong. The tendency for many people is to conclude on a strong note or

build your case for the big finish – **not so in press releases**. Start with your strong point and end with less important information. Many reporters/editors will skim through the release. If your strongest point is made at the end, it will likely be missed. Also, if your newspaper chooses to run your release word for word – the editor may run out of space and need to “cut” it somewhere and it’s simplest to cut from the bottom. Your message should be able to stand alone in the first two paragraphs.

- Think of the press release as an inverted pyramid:



- Keep your release to no more than two pages. If it is more than one page put the word “more” at the bottom and on page two put a small heading indicating it is page two. At the end of your release use the standard “# # #” or “-30-” to show conclusion.

News and feature stories

Maintain regular contact with the local reporter(s) and editors. Share news clips from other papers in the province so they can get ideas and see examples of well done features. Stay in touch with public affairs directors at radio and television stations. Don't forget public access channels.

Press conferences

Use press conferences to announce new programs, program results or plans for the future. Hold on location to show the program in action. Invite local leaders and legislators. Use routine announcements as a stage for photo opportunities.

Press Kit

Keep a current fact sheet on your Association’s accomplishments. Use it as the basis for an information kit which includes news clips, annual reports, letters of endorsement, evaluations, contributors and other positive information on your accomplishments, current projects and future plans. Also include province-wide stories and editorials for a broader perspective. Make sure board members, media representatives, politicians and other decision makers have a copy.