News releases

Underlying assumptions:

News releases attempt to gain media coverage for an organization, event, or issue by providing the media's gatekeepers—editors and reporters—with ready-to-use news stories. Unlike media alerts or advisories which notify the media of possible upcoming stories and are not meant to be published or broadcast as written, releases are intended to be passed on to the media's audience.

Once a release is issued, the public relations people who prepared it have no further control over it. How or if it's used is entirely up to the media which can edit or add to it in any way they choose.

News releases are the most common type of release, but those that lack real news value in the eyes of the media are a waste of time and may actually damage the credibility of their issuers. Feature story releases are rare, but those that are well-written and emphasize human interest or noteworthy "reader service information" have become more acceptable to editors in the last decade. They're most likely to be used by weekly newspaper editors and special section editors of small to mid-sized daily papers.

The overwhelming majority of releases are distributed in written form although fully-produced tapes or satellite feeds of audio news releases (ANRs) for radio and video news releases (VNRs) for television, whose production is beyond the scope of this tip sheet, have become increasingly popular.

Working tips:

▸ Write the release as if you were a reporter writing a news story. Don't write something that sounds like an ad or promotional material. A "news release" should include news and be written in journalistic style. Be straight forward, factual and balanced.

▸ Be particularly careful that people you quote don't sound too gushy, flowery or self-aggrandizing. Apply the same standards a reporter would. Only quote sources who will appear to be credible and authoritative to the media's audiences and keep the quotes short and directly related to the topic.

▸ Most news releases should be written in the inverted pyramid format using Associated Press (AP) style, unless the media to whom you plan to submit it use a different style. If you prepare a different version of the release for broadcast media, it should conform to the Radio-TV News Directors Association (RTNDA) style guidelines.

▸ Make the release read as much like the media's own work as possible. The more closely it conforms to contemporary journalistic practices and the style of the media who receive it, the more likely it is to be used. Your goal is to have your news release published/broadcast exactly as it was written.

▸ Customizing a release—e.g., by adding city-specific data or writing separate broadcast and print versions—instead of sending a generic release increases the chances of it being used.

▸ Keep releases short and focused with only one key idea per release. A series of short releases is more effective than one long one.

Suggested format for releases:

- Many organizations issue news releases on special pre-printed "news release paper" that immediately identifies the message as a release. Using regular letterhead for the first page of the release is the next best choice. (Use plain paper for subsequent pages.) What's critical is that the paper clearly identifies the issuing organization and provides basic information such as its address and phone number.

- Electronically-distributed releases need to have at least as much identification as a letterhead would— the organization's name, address and phone number.

- The simplest approach is to use the label **News Release** on the top of the page. A popular alternative is **For immediate release** which means it may be used as soon as it's received by the media.

- Headings such as **Hold until**, **Do not release until,** or **Release after** are essentially asking the media not to use the release until the specified date/time. Such embargoed releases are no longer widely used nor recommended since the embargo can't be enforced.

- **Feature release** is used as a heading for non-timely stories that can be held indefinitely.

- Unless they're embargoed, releases are dated with the date they were initially given to the media

- A 1-4 word slug at the top of the page indicates the basic content of the release and makes it easier to keep track of the pages of a multi-page release.

- Include a clear and thoughtful headline. Editors probably won't use it, no matter how clever it is, but it should quickly inform them of the release's topic and possible importance.

- Although date-lines are still an accepted part of AP style and are used by some news organizations, they are rarely used at the start of news releases.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE date of release descriptive slug   Include a Descriptive Headline Releases should begin well down the page, leaving space above the headline for an editor to jot notes or instructions to a reporter who's assigned to develop it into a news story or a compositor who has to key it into the computer. Double-space the text and leave an extra blank line between paragraphs. The notion that releases should always be kept to a single page fell by the wayside long ago. Make it as long as it needs to be to tell the story, but remember that concise releases have a better chance of being used than long-winded, multi-page ones. - [more] -

- If the release has multiple pages, **- [more] -** centered at the bottom of all but the last page makes it absolutely clear that there's more available information than what's contained on that page.

- Do not break a paragraph at the end of a page and continue it on the next page. Instead, move the entire paragraph to the new page even if it leaves apparently wasted space at the bottom of the page.

- An additional page should be on a separate sheet of paper, not the back of the first page. Surveys have repeatedly shown that editors prefer not to receive or work with two-sided copy.

- Some people advocate putting a page number on even the first page, but the more common practice is to begin numbering on the second page using a *page x of y* format where y indicates the total number of pages in the release and x is the current page number.

descriptive slug
page 2 of 2

Continue the release on as many pages as necessary, labeling them to keep the story together and the pages in order. Additional pages are usually on plain paper, not news release letterhead, but it should be the same color as the letterhead to avoid confusion.

Double-spacing also continues throughout the body of the release. However, any additional information, such as contacts, that are not meant to be included in the published story can be single-spaced.

-- 30 --

For additional information:
name of contact, contact's title
daytime and home phone numbers
email address

- The descriptive slug on any additional pages should be exactly the same as the slug on the first page to avoid any possible confusion.

- If the release is meant to tell the public how to contact your organization and there is a phone number or contact information that should be included in the actual story when it's presented by the media, include this in the body of the release. Don't put it at the very end of the release or at the beginning where it could be mistaken for a contact notation meant only for the media.

- Use **- 30 -** or **- [end] -** or **# #** to denote the end of the release.

- Anything appearing after the **- [end] -** is understood to be additional reference material for the media's use and would normally not be included in a story presented by the media.

- **For additional information** identifies one or more people who are available to provide additional explanation and help any media who want to do stories based on the release. He/she/they must be able to quickly and authoritatively answer questions, provide additional information or context, arrange interviews, or assist the media in getting visuals to accompany the story.

- Despite the logic of providing "additional information" at the end of the release, many practitioners prefer to include contact information at the very beginning of the release, either before the headline or under almost as if it were a by-line.

Handling follow up inquiries:

▸ Choosing someone who will be accessible is among the most critical considerations in designating a contact person. He/she should be willing to be contacted and respond 24-hours per day, 7-days per week. A somewhat less knowledgeable or less polished contact who is readily available and responsive to inquiries is infinitely better than a star-quality contact who is not.

▸ The mere fact that someone—e.g., an expert on a subject or a company official— is quoted in the release or wrote the release doesn't automatically make that person a good contact. Even if you want to give them public recognition by mentioning them in the release, you may not want them speaking to the media on behalf of the organization. It may not be in their best interest or the organization's. You may need someone with a broader perspective who is more poised when being interviewed.

▸ The primary role of a contact person is to facilitate the media's use of the release. In some instances, he/she may be the most knowledgeable person about the subject of the release and will be able to immediately and directly answer any questions that are asked. In other cases, the contact person is not the one with the answers but is the liaison between the media and the organization who finds answers and/or experts who can be interviewed when/if the media ask for them.

▸ Contact identification should include a "title" that establishes the person's credibility to talk about the topic of the release or serve as a spokesperson for the organization. In many cases it will be their actual job/position title, but it may be a mini job description instead of a formal title.

▸ If the subject of the release is complex or multi-faceted, it may be best to provide multiple contacts who can deal with different aspects of story. In such cases, clearly indicate the specific expertise of each contact and/or the types of questions that should be directed to him/her.

For additional information:

Todd Hunt & James Grunig, "Preparing News Releases and Press Kits,"
    Chapter 5 in *Public Relations Techniques*.
    Harcourt Brace College Publishers: Fort Worth, Texas; 1994.

Doug Newsom & Bob Carrell, "News Releases for Print Media" and "News for Broadcasting,"
    Chapters 10 and 11 in *Public Relations Writing: Form and Style* (fifth edition)
    Wadsworth Publishing Company: Belmont, California; 1998