

## Writing a Successful Press Release

A press release (or news release) is one of the primary ways you can communicate news about your activities to the media. Reporters, editors, and producers are hungry for news, and they often depend on releases to tip them off to news and other developments. In fact, much of what is read in newspapers, magazines, heard on the radio or seen on television originated in press release form. Unfortunately, the average editor receives as many as several hundred press releases each week, the vast majority of which end up getting "filed." Your challenge is to create a release that makes the journalist want to know more and discover that your story is one they must tell.

**1. Make it newsworthy.** Are you solving a problem or fulfilling the readers' needs? Pinpoint what that need or problem is and write the release from that perspective. Is it something controversial?

**2. Use an active headline to grab the reporter's attention**

The headline makes your release stand out. Keep it short, active, and descriptive.

**3. Put the most important information at the beginning**

The reporter should be able to tell what the release is about from the first paragraph. In fact, chances are that's all they may read. So don't hide good information - remember the "5 W's and the H" - make sure your release provides answers to Who, What, When, Where, Why and How.

**4. Avoid hype and unsubstantiated claims**

A writer can smell a sales pitch a mile away. Instead of making over-inflated statements, provide real, usable information. Find legitimate ways to set you and your activity apart and stress those points. To promote your organisation, write a release that answers questions about your line of work, rather than one that provides only general statements about how great or interesting your organisation is without saying why.

**5. Be active and to the point**

Use language that will get the reader as excited about your news as you are. If your release is boring or meandering, they may assume that you will not be a good interview.

**6. Keep your release to one page or less**

On the rare occasion, you can opt for a second page if it is necessary to provide critical details. Otherwise, if you can't state your message in a page, you're not getting to the point.

**7. Include a contact**

Make sure your release has a person the journalist can contact for more information. This person should be familiar with all the news in the release, and should be ready to answer questions. And issue the release on your letterhead - it looks professional and gives the writer another way to reach your organisation.

### **8. Do not use Arabic words unless commonly known**

Most reporters are not experts on Islam, or any religion for that matter. Real English, not jargon, best communicates your story.

### **9. Stress benefits**

This falls into the category of "don't say it, show it." Avoid saying something is "unique" or "the best." Instead, show how people will benefit - i.e. reduce crime, fight prejudice, reduce exclusion, etc. Explanation from the reader's perspective. Give details of the news so the editor understands why it's important to his/her readers.

### **10. Be specific and detailed**

The reader needs to be able to visualise an activity, or know how a new service works. If in doubt, have someone unfamiliar with your work or service read the release and ask them to describe what you are trying to publicise.

### **11. Quote by a spokesperson**

You may wish to include a quotation from a spokesperson or the president. This can often make the release look more authentic and also give it the human touch.

### **12. Proofread**

When you've finished your press release, remember to proofread it for typographical errors. If you don't have a good eye for spelling or grammar, give the release to a friend or colleague who does. If your release looks sloppy and careless, so will you.

### **13. Layout**

Use a font that is clear and not fancy. You can increase the font size slightly to attract attention. Body text would be normally written in size 10 or 11 for official matters, in the case of a Press Release size 12 (or even more) may be used. Don't make the page look crammed, use wider space between lines. Make your headline larger (almost as in a newspaper article).

## **Tips for Sending a Press Release**

- Use personal contacts. This also means having the time beforehand to establish contacts and relationships.
- Target your audience. Try to contact editors who write about Islam or religious / social / political issues.
- Find out the best way to contact your audience. Is it by snail mail, email, or fax? Not everyone wants press releases by email.
- Don't send email releases with attachments only. Send the release within the body of the message.
- Don't 'hassle' editors / journalists. You could end up annoying them by making repeated contact about the same issue.
- Know the editor's deadlines.
- When your publicity comes out, make sure you have someone answering your phones and responding to your mail. As a last resort have a professional-sounding answering machine.
- Don't forget to send information to listings desk or diary of events for local papers and radio – separate to news desks. Sometimes you can fill in details on-line.

## **When to Send News**

You can send a forward planning note to pre-warn about the issue and also follow up with a conversation or a press release immediately prior to the event, or after the event if it was newsworthy and didn't receive coverage.

Don't stipulate an embargo on your press release unless absolutely necessary.

### **Daily Newspapers**

Business and general assignment reporters working for newspapers and online dailies turn around stories within 24 hours. However, feature writers are working on stories weeks in advance of publication date. Press Releases about special events or with holiday tie-ins should be sent a minimum of 2-3 weeks in advance so the reporter has ample time to research and write the story and slot the item in the diary. The same is true for promoting online webcasts and events.

Local newspapers may require less notice than national papers as news is often more difficult to come by.

If a news item is hot then a press release may be noticed the same day and quoted in the next day's papers.

### **Radio and Television**

Allow between 2 weeks notice to a few days depending on the programme. Again much depends on the subject matter being covered.