

Special Report: Writing Effective News Releases & Query Letters

Editors and producers are deluged with materials from individuals and companies seeking publicity. They're also usually busy and pressed for time. But *they need good material* that will be of interest to their audiences. So having pertinent newsworthy information or a good story from their perspective is key to getting their attention. But they are also in the habit of getting news releases and query letters in a specific format. So sending your message in *the format they expect* and are used will help them respond more quickly and easily.

The Standard News-Release Format

You can create a news release on your own letter head or use pre-printed papers like the one illustrated in the *Color Inserts* in *Getting Business to Come to You*. It should be double-spaced with margins of at least one inch. (It is preferable to use even wider margins to allow for an editor's copymarks.) Use standard typefaces even when you are using a word processor; fancy fonts should be restricted to any accompanying artwork, such as charts and graphs, or other elements of your publicity kit. You may, however, use a slightly larger and/or bold typeface for the headline. Your news release should include the following elements.

Contact person.

In the upper left-hand corner of the front page, indicate the contact person and his or her phone number. *If you are doing all your own public relations*, use your name. If you have a secretary, administrative assistant, or spouse who is helping you, use his or her name because most editors expect the media contact to be someone other than the business owner. *An outside firm* handling your public relations will use their letterhead, address, and phone number.

Date.

The date of the release should appear either in the upper right-hand corner or on the first line of the first paragraph. In

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addition, to the date you should *give some indication of when the information is to be available* for use; in most instances that will read FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE."

However, in some cases, such as for appointments and openings, you may want to indicate a particular date as of which the information will be most appropriate; for example, "FOR RELEASE: OCTOBER 31, 1991."

Headline.

The headline, which is in all caps and centered, should be no more than two lines long. There are *two philosophies for writing news release headlines*. The classic approach is to have a simple one-line grabber that, although you don't necessarily expect the publication to use as is, gives the editor an idea of the impact the headline can have. The alternative is to use a two-line headline consisting of two or three clauses or sentences that encapsulate the release, allowing the editor to determine quickly whether to consider it further or discard it. The latter is particularly useful when you must send your release to a large group of varied publications.

Body.

The body of the release begins immediately below the headline. If you are using "*for immediate release*" and the location of the event you are announcing is different from that of the contact, you will need to begin the body with the actual location and date of the event; for instance, "Lancaster, PA--October 31, 1991--)."

Keep your news release to a maximum of two pages. One page is preferable, but two pages are acceptable as long as the information truly warrants them. If you must include more than will fit on two pages, split any additional information or backup data, such as technical specifications, into a second document that is appropriately labeled, such as a "Fact Sheet."

If it is necessary to use more than one page, be sure to *indicate subsequent pages* with the word more at the bottom of each sheet. Ensuing pages should be headed with the first two or three words of the headline of the first page,

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followed by the page number. Indicate the conclusion of your release with either the symbol -30-, the word *End*, or three ### symbols centered at the bottom of the page.

Use at least one good quote from yourself or from someone else involved in whatever you are doing. For example, a landscape designer who is donating a tree could use a quote such as:

"Nancy Jones, director of the Summerville Nursing Home, stated, 'This generous donation and magnificent tree given by Lawrence Landscaping will not only provide a beautiful addition to our garden but will also provide a cheery new view from our public rooms.'"

If you are sending out a single release without your publicity kit and with no photograph, as for ***a hot news flash***, fold it so that the headline is visible and place it in one of your letterhead envelopes. If it is exceptionally important or time-limited, be sure to write "FLASH" on the envelope itself. You might consider having a stamp made that says "FLASH" and using a bright ink that coordinates with your logo if you do this type of release frequently.

Writing a Release That Gets Results

In writing the release, keep in mind that ***you are not writing an ad***; you are imparting information to an editor. You must, however, impart it in such a way that the editor immediately sees its potential value to his or her readers. Therefore you must state it as briefly and in as exciting a manner as possible. Omit most adjectives, use action verbs, and eliminate nonessential descriptions. Nowhere are these instructions more important than in your headline writing.

Attention-grabbing headlines.

Whenever possible, your headline ***should match the style of the publication*** to which you are submitting your release. A small staid newspaper in New England might respond positively to a headline such as "Exercise Improves Marital Relations," while a hip health-and-fitness magazine might prefer something more sensational, like "Exercise Makes You Sexy!"

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A local orchestra got a lot of attention from both consumer and trade publications from a release announcing, "Conductor Stephen Gunzenhauser asked to leave the country!" in conjunction with covering his invitation to conduct a holiday concert in Germany.

The primary goal of the headline should be to ***arouse curiosity and stimulate at least one primary question*** in the mind of the reader, and the first sentence of your release should answer that question. For example, the headline for one of psychologist Linda De Villers' news releases read EXERCISE CLASSES CAN IMPROVE YOUR SEX LIFE

Make-up artist Sally Van Swearingen's release one fall season declared NEW FALL COLORS CREATE SPECIAL DEMANDS ON BRIDES.

Software publisher Vericorp sent a release to the computer trade press announcing THE ORIGINAL EDOS PACKAGE.

Such headlines ***prompt a question that is then answered in the first sentence*** of text. As you read the headlines, don't you find yourself wondering how exercise could improve someone's sex life, why fall colors create demands on today's brides, and what the original EDOS package is?

The first sentence should not only answer this initial question; it should ***raise still further questions*** like "What kind of exercise classes are these?" "What kind of special demands?" and "How did the software get better?" And the rest of that first paragraph should fill the reader in with what the now inquiring mind wants to know.

By the time the editor reads those first few lines he or she has a good idea whether or not the material will be applicable to his or her program or publication. The balance of the release should ***fill in the details*** with all the additional information an editor needs for further consideration.

The following are ***sample press-release ideas*** for a variety of businesses and the type of publications for which each might be most applicable.

BED & BREAKFAST HOSTS RECEPTION FOR

(name of celebrity)

This is an *ideal publicity opportunity*. As the owner of the inn, you could work out the details for media coverage of the reception with the guest's agent and send out a news release announcing the reception along with your publicity kit to all local publications and the local television news. If you *follow up your release with a phone call* to the editors, you may well be able to line up both print interviews and local television news coverage at the event itself.

After the event is held, you might send a query letter to local or regional television or radio talk shows about their doing a feature on the growing popularity of bed and breakfast inns, being sure to include information about the news coverage you have just enjoyed.

MOST FREQUENTLY OVERLOOKED TAX TRAPS FOR NEW BUSINESSES AND WAYS TO AVOID THEM BY NOTED LOCAL ACCOUNTANT

If, like this accountant, your business has a seasonal element, you can send a timely news release to the local daily paper and appropriate local business publications. This type of release can be adapted to serve a wide variety of businesses. A dog trainer or veterinarian could send a similar release on the onset of flea season and what to do about it. A floral arranger could send a release on novel gift ideas for valentines. A computer tutor could send a release about how using a computer can be a useful tool for kids starting school in the fall.

Such releases lend themselves to *interesting feature stories* and need not be limited to seasonal events. Some subjects have year-round appeal. A marriage and family counselor, for example, could send a release on what couples argue about most and how to avoid these arguments, and a real-estate agent could submit a release about the five most important features families want in buying a home.

LOCAL LANDSCAPER PRESENTS "MONEY TREE" TO NURSING FACILITY

This landscape designer has created a media opportunity by making a gift of an unusual species of tree. The release would be suitable to send to local daily and weekly papers, local radio and television, and feature publications. By making such a donation or sponsoring a charity or civic event, you are provided with the opportunity to talk with the media about the unique features of the product or service you are contributing. Similarly, that landscaper can *get the most exposure* from a cash donation by tying dollar bills to the branches. The new headline might read:

MONEY CAN GROW ON TREES!

Such an approach is a particularly good way to *get exposure for a hard-to-publicize business*. For example, if you are a medical transcriptionist or operate a mailing-list service, stories featuring your work might otherwise be limited to very specialized business publications.

Keep in mind *what you write is usually not what is printed*, except on rare occasion. Therefore, you must write to attract the interest of the editor who will decide what information is worth pursuing. Even if the editor chooses to print your information as you wrote it, it is still not you who is saying it - it is the publication. Many businesses and organizations do what is referred to as "*drying down*" *information* that goes to the press. They are so worried about the possibility of offending someone that they remove humor, enthusiasm, and dynamics from their press materials. The result is that they never get the chance to offend someone because the material is never printed.

To help you determine whether the information is boring, simply *imagine yourself in the editor's shoes*. You read 200 or more press releases every day, that is, you read 200 or more headlines every day! Take a hard look at your headline and first paragraph, would it arouse your interest or make you yawn?

If you believe the headline is strong enough to stand out from the other 199 plus, then take a look at the subject. We

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know it is of interest to you, but ***will it be of interest are you sure it would be of interest to the publication's readers?***

For example, suppose you are an artist about to give a talk to a local business group on art in corporate offices and want to send a release to the business section of the local paper to increase attendance at the event. If your headline and release is focused on the artist, the business editor will probably toss it aside.

Instead, you might headline the release something like, "Does art on the walls increase productivity in the office?" Such a focus ***will relate your subject to an editor's readers.*** And that is what an editor is looking for.

Creating such media opportunities is also an excellent way to ***boost your business during slow times*** of the year. By planning ahead sufficiently you can arrange to sponsor events or make donations at just the times when you need a little extra business.

Using Query Letters

While there are many opportunities to send out a news release, suppose you don't have anything to announce or don't have the time to create an event or activity that would be suitably newsworthy? Another way in which you can approach the media is to send a query letter, along with your publicity kit, introducing ***ideas for features or interviews about you, your field, or your business.***

A query letter is printed on your stationery and serves as a cover letter for your publicity kit. Addressed to the editor or producer, your query letter is to simple, but effectively, ***make a case for doing a story*** on the ideas enclosed in your kit.

Sample Query Letters

The following letters query the possibilities for a variety of promotional activities from getting included in newspaper

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feature article to being a guest on a radio show and giving a speech or seminar.

Note, in the second example, the query letter and kit were being sent as a *follow-up to an initial phone call*. We find this to be a cost-effective approach to getting publicity. If an editor or producer expresses initial interest on the phone, he or she is more likely to look over your material when it arrives.

Dear (Editor/Producer's Name):

The most serious issue we face as the 90's come to a close is the state of the environment. Many species face extinction; wilderness areas are in danger of disappearing. But we as individuals can make a big difference.

I am an environmental interior designer. Please look at the enclosed information and consider a story or interview on how each and every one of us can help to improve our environment simply by changing the products with which we decorate our homes.

After years of research I know how to find paint, wall coverings, carpeting, and even appliances that can help save the environment. My clients not only enjoy a healthier environment for themselves and their children; they know they are making a difference for us all.

Thank you for your consideration.

Dear (Radio Producer's Name):

It was great talking with you by phone today about your show and the possibility of my talking about networking and the Power of Schmoozing on the air in early August. Enclosed is my publicity kit, which describes how I help people further their careers through networking. You'll find information on the seminar I do and on my company, which I began five years ago. I've also included a list of ideas for subjects we can cover.

Please call if you'd like more information. I look forward to talking further with you soon.

Best regards,

Terri Mandell
Author, *Power Schmoozing*

Dear (Name of College Dean) (Sent by E-Mail)

The specter of suicide casts a dark shadow over most universities especially as examinations at approach. The fear of

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disappointing parents and themselves can make many students feel desperate.

I'm looking for the person/department that arranges for outside speakers. I am a UCLA professor of psychiatry, author, and expert psychological resource to the media (having worked with CNN, TODAY, msNBC, Court TV, *Los Angeles Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*) and have given a guest lecture entitled "The Suicidal Person" for the past ten years as part of an undergraduate course entitled "Death and Suicide." The course is a UCLA favorite and has been jointly offered by the Departments of Psychology and Sociology for the past 35 years.

My talk has become a cult lecture at UCLA, because in it, I play a severely suicidal person who challenges the 300 undergraduates in the audience to talk me out of killing myself. And they can't. After 30 minutes of this experiential phase the students and I discuss what it was like for them to try to help a desperate person, whom they could not reach, and what it was like for me to be unhelpable, unreachable, and in despair. Students take away from the talk how to recognize fellow students who might be suicidal and how to intervene and help these students to find help.

Over the years, many students and faculty members have suggested I offer this talk to other universities. I would appreciate if you would be so kind as to direct me to the appropriate department to query their interest in this talk.

Thank you.

Yours truly,
Mark Goulston, M.D., F.A.P.A.

Remember, it's important to ***follow-up on materials*** you send to the media with a phone call. If they have any interest, they will take or return your calls and you can begin developing a relationship.

Even if your news releases or query letters do not lead to a specific feature or mention at the time you send them in, ***do not be discouraged***. If you continue sending interesting, intriguing materials to your media list (See **Chapter 10** of ***Getting Business to Come to You***), of interest to their particular audiences, over time you will get the attention. The media may begin ***seeking you out*** at some point when

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they need your expert advice for a news story or feature they're doing.

Resources:

- *Handbook for Public Relations Writing*, by Thomas H. Bivins, Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Business Books, 1996. by Thomas H. Bivins, Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Business Books, 1996. www.amazon.comwww.amazon.com