Perfect Press Releases: An Insider's Insight

The media play an important role in the dissemination of findings from health research. Press releases are a major source of information (responsible for a third of medical news stories). They are widely employed by medical researchers to attract favourable media attention and promote their research.

Writing a press release is not difficult, though there are conventions that should be followed if you want your material to attract the attention of gate keepers.

Here we describe the approach employed by Niche Science & Technology Ltd. to deliver effective press releases.

Key Insights

Ultimately, success in the sciences will eventually need you to produce a press release. Their value cannot be over-stated as it is through the distribution of press releases that the wider scientific community and the general public learn about current scientific progress. Estimates suggest that more than half of US adults follow health news closely and it seems that the general public gets most of its information about science from the mass media [1,2]. Whether you call it a 'press release', 'press statement', 'news release' or 'media release', they serve as a key source of information for many of the medical stories that appear in newspapers [3].

A press release is intended to provide journalists with the basic information needed to develop a news story for publication. They are often used by medical researchers to attract favourable media attention and by journals to focus interest on research they publish [4-9]. They may embellish them with additional resources/information but they must be able to stand alone without these supporting materials.

Not surprisingly, a great deal of time and effort are spent each year in developing press releases – many authors are infrequently called to prepare releases and have to learn the process from scratch. There tend to be various rules and conventions that should be followed. Therefore, we thought that we summarise the process here for our readers.

Copy tasters, those running websites, journalists and editors are flooded continually with potential stories and pitches. They need information presented to them in a succinct and absorbable fashion. How do you go about writing a great press release that will stand out from the crowd, avoid common mistakes and capture the attention of content managers and get featured.

Headlines

The press release's title must grab the attention of a reviewing journalist or editor, stimulating them to read further. Don't kid yourself, you are not writing the eventual article's headline. Most journalists/editors will change the copy you provide to suit their readership – they may even look to create a headline with a double meaning or pun. Therefore, don't waste too much time worrying what your title will look like in print. What you need it to do is catch the reader's attention.

The headline should be centred and provided in capitals (sometimes bold). Use a short and snappy phrase to grab the attention of your journalist. Provide key words, use action verbs and understandable language, possibly including a 'call-to-action'. Make your target understand why they should care.

tl;dr

Avoid getting tagged with "too long; didn't read."

Layout and style

Traditionally, press releases have followed a formal format (see our press release template). Adherence to the accepted format for a press release has become less critical in the post internet age. Nevertheless, demonstrating your awareness of the formal structure is likely to increase the possibility that your article will be 'picked-up' by more established news services.

Make it clearly identifiable as a communication for publication or broadcast by using the heading 'News Release', 'Press Release', 'Press Information' or such like. You should start with your contact details as the source and an indication of when you would like the news to be released. You should also provide a newspaper-like heading (headline) written to target your intended audience. Many guides suggest that your headline should be written in capital letters with a larger font size (18 pt). Leave space between the headline and the body of your copy (you may also want to include a subtitle).

Use wide margins (about 3 cm) and provide unjustified text. Most press releases are succinct – rarely more than a page or 300 - 400 words (two pages may be acceptable but never more). Where hard copies are required they should be provided as single-sided A4. Where your text is longer than a single page, break your text at the end of the last full paragraph and type 'MORE' at the bottom of the page.

Layout checklist

- Contact details (Name, Address, Mobile phone number, web address – if appropriate on company headed paper)
- PRESS RELEASE (in caps)
- IMMEDIATE RELEASE or EMBARGO – RELEASE DATE XX/XX/XX
- HEADLINE (in caps)
- Copy Text – 5W's, basic font, double spaced, page numbers
- Finish copy text with 'END'
- Notes to the editor: list key information, cite data sources, describe provided images
- Proofread: spelling, grammar, sense etc.

Provide your copy as double-spaced text. This derives from the need to provide sub-editors with the space to make edits and text changes in the days of hard copies.

Access our free to use Niche press release template at
http://www.niche.org.uk/
asset/008%20Press%20Release.jpg

Do not underline any of the copy as it's a universal mark used by printers to indicate that your text should be set in italics. Do not attempt to highlight key points by making your font bold or italic. Put references to titles of books, films or published articles in single quotes and use double quote marks for direct quotations.

In closing your copy type END or ENDS in capitals. Traditionally, the journalistic standard for defining the end of a press release was three hashtag symbols – ###. Provide a side-heading termed 'Notes to Editor' if you have special points that you want to draw to their attention to, such as explanation of technical terms, data sources or how to obtain follow-up information. Close your document with a word count.

Copy/content

Be brief and factual, keep sentences short. Include no more than three sentences per paragraph – don't feel bad about using only one sentence if that will do. Decide on your 'message' before you start writing.

Your first sentence needs to grab the reader in no more than 15 words. Your opening paragraph should contain the essence of your story. Answer the who?/what?/where?/why?/when? questions right up front. There shouldn't be any new, crucial information covered after this that the reader might miss.

Stick to three or four short paragraphs totalling 300 – 400 words. Your second, third and possibly fourth paragraphs should expand on the story, describing relevant points in order of the decreasing significance (or newsworthiness). This is called an inverted pyramid reporting style and makes sub-editor's job of editing the article much easier.

Copy checklist

- Provide a catchy headline
- Grab attention with your top line (first 15 words)
- Capture the 5 W's and essence of your story in your first paragraph
- Be concise: 3 – 4 short paragraphs, 300 – 400 words
- Give relevant points in order of decreasing significance
- Adopt a factual style avoiding adjectives and emotive words
- Avoid clichés, jargon words, expressions of opinion and puffs
- Provide facts/hard numbers
- Use quotes from actual stakeholders
- Adapt your content for your target audience/dissemination channel
- Make sure it's newsworthy

Adopt a factual style avoiding flowery adjectives, superlatives and emotive words. This is particularly important if you are writing about accomplishments, new product releases or services. Journalists are not in the business of marketing and any whiff of promotion will be deleted immediately (or get your story rejected). Avoid clichés, jargon words and comments that are expressions of opinion. Leave the artistry to the journalists.

In your second and third paragraphs offer details that strengthen your narrative – describing why the reader should care. Pack your press release with hard numbers that support the significance of your story. Remember to cite your data sources and be sure to include the position or role of people you identify by name or quote.

You might want to consider providing a couple of quotes from those involved. Touchy-feelies go a long way with journalists – they provide a human element and can include positive (promotional) statements. Use double quote marks for direct quotations (the actual words spoken); this is standard newspaper style. Include details of when and where comments are provided, never write 'recently' or 'today' – always give a date.

Use your final paragraph to provide background information and relevant links to additional resources where it is possible to find out more.

Review your copy

Including errors looks unprofessional. Proofread your press releases – and get others to proof read them before release. Ensure that your grammar is flawless. Grammar is important because it helps with the reader's comprehension.

It is your sentence structure that conveys precise meaning from the writer to the audience. Eliminate grammatical errors from your writing, rewarding your readers with clear communication.

Key components of press releases

NOTES TO THE EDITOR
Beyond the essential information that should be provided on your press release (name, address, contact details, etc.), you may also want to give the reader additional information. You should add this at the bottom of your press release in a section termed Notes to Editors. Here you might provide a paragraph of background information, links to additional sources and notes on any supporting media (e.g., video, audio or photographic materials). In the electronic age it can also be useful to provide keyword hashtags when considering web publication.

Numbering or listing these various items in bullet form is a good way to keep the press release looking clean and approachable
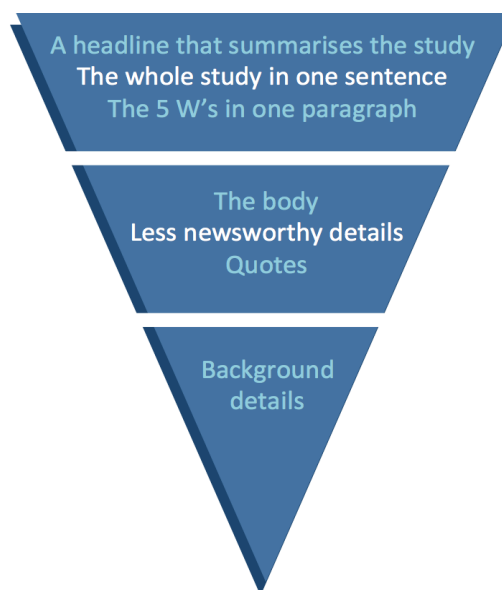
WRITING FOR DIFFERENT AUDIENCES
Consider your target audience. Readers of a speciality journal are likely to have very different 'triggers' than those of a national newspaper or a science-based website.

Consider preparing different versions of your press release for the different audiences. It is important to take into account the level of knowledge these different interest groups may have about the subject area, the players involved and the significance of of the news being reported. You should also take into account the type of language they are likely to understand or how best they will engage with the story. Adjust your copy accordingly.

Inverted Pyramid Structure

A headline that summarises the study
The whole study in one sentence
The 5 W's in one paragraph

The body
Less newsworthy details
Quotes

Background
details

QUOTE – UNQUOTE
After setting the scene, you need to bring the details to life. Including a quote from one (or at most two) people involved in 'the story' can help bring colour and depth as well as a unique angle or insight.

Ideally, quotes should come from key stakeholders and detail how the news impacts on a given industry/customer base/landscape. Quoting key figures, clinical experts or industry leaders underlines the importance of a story.

Any quote should help shape your narrative and emphasise the key point of the announcement. However, be objective – a quote can be opinionated but should be contextual and realistic. Quotes should also sound like a real person – it should not be used to simply include a bunch of statistics. Quotes also need to be simple, avoid complicated jargon, technical language and information not suitable for the target audience.

NO PUFFS
In many cases, regretfully, press releases have more to do with narcissism than news. It may be that a company executive or lead investigator wants to stretch their ego.

Releases should not end up as blatant advertising messages on behalf of an organisation, company or individual. You will get instant rejection from an editor if you put out a news story that is nothing more than a thinly veiled advertisement. It may also ruin your future reputation as a press relations professional.

In the industry these efforts to gain free editorial space for what should really be paid-up advertisements are call 'puffs'. There is no reason why a new product or service shouldn't form part of a news story, particularly if submitted to a relevant section of the press or a specialist association. However, journalists are particularly sensitive to puffs.

Timing and embargoes

The timing of your press release is fairly critical. There is no excitement for something that happened a month ago. Topical and timely is best. In the past, press releases might be sent to news services by mail or fax, and in those cases it was often best to phone ahead to let them know that your story was coming (to ensure that your story wasn't lost amongst the many others that may have arrived that day). This is only mentioned here because this may still be relevant for some specialist industry magazines or journals.

Most press releases are now transmitted electronically, either by uploading to a central web location or by email. How do you ensure that your story stands out? Here's a clue: Don't post your content at the top or bottom of the hour – very predictable and a sure fire way to have your press release arrive with all the others.

Sometimes it is necessary to provide your press release under embargo – that is limiting the use of the material to a specific date and time. Journalists and editors tend to dislike embargoes so try to avoid them when you can (and they are not necessarily binding when you do use them). However, they do give journalists time to research or follow-up the story in advance. When issuing a press release 'under embargo' make sure that the restriction is absolutely clear and unambiguous. For example:

EMBARGO: THIS INFORMATION IS ISSUED IN ADVANCE FOR YOUR CONVENIENCE. IT IS NOT FOR PUBLICATION, BROADCAST OR USE BEFORE (Time) ON (Date).

Essential images

Traditionally, press releases have been about copy provided to journalists. Only the more important 'stories' would merit the space necessary to include a photograph or image. However, things are different in today's media age. People like to look at pictures and there is an infinite amount of publishing space for the right materials. Now images, photographs and videos to accompany your press release have become compulsory.

Choose your images carefully, always include a caption listing the names of any people who appear in your shots. Ensure that the images you select enhance your story, complement your messages and are appropriate for the channel of communication. Local press and lifestyle publications generally prefer photographs of people, scientific journals prefer images of your research findings, graphs and data. Industry and specialist publications might expect photos of equipment or production plants. Websites may consider video footage and/or audio recordings. Head and shoulder shots are generally considered to be dull and shots that have large logos in the background can be a huge turn off.

It is a good idea to include in your 'Notes to editors', that photos are available on request, rather than sending them out as an attachment. Including large image files can clog email inboxes, get flagged as spam and/or meet problems crossing firewalls.

Boilerplate text

Many press releases are employed by businesses as part of their marketing and public relations efforts. As such, it is often best to provide your press release on company letter-headed paper and boilerplate text.

A boilerplate is usually found at the end of a press release, and briefly describes the company or organization related to the information in the press release.

The short paragraph consisting of just a few sentences concisely explains the company or organization. The same boilerplate is usually used on all press releases that the company publishes. It should briefly explain what you do, who your customers are and why the company is great.

Steer clear of jargon and complex industry terms. Include your mission/philosophy/strapline. Stick to a maximum of 100 words. It'll make it more inviting to read, and will force you to include only the most important details. Add a link to your website, social media site or other contact details.

What to do with your press release

Writing a press release is really only half the battle (or less than half). Once completed you need to get it distributed (and used). Develop an action plan that defines when you expect to distribute your press release, who it will go to and how, contact details and 'actions on' – that is what you plan to do in response to your releases overall reception.

In the digital age it is relatively simple to conduct your own publishing campaign. You might put your release on your company website, distribute it to your network of industry colleagues via email and post to followers/subscribers on social media providers like Linked in, Facebook and Instagram. However, you need to go further than this if you want to deliver a professional and successful campaign that gets the maximum mileage through legitimate channels. Remember to tailor your press release to suit your audience, channel and/or message vehicle.

The most obvious approach to getting professional coverage is to email your press release to every known journalist and editor – though this does require you to have their contact details (and also has the potential to irritate a lot of people). Alternatively, you could reach out to a few key journalists who have experience of covering your industry. Send them a personalised message explaining why your information connects with what they tend to report. Include an attention-grabbing subject line and paste your text into the email rather than include it as an attachment – not only does it make it less likely to be flagged as spam it also has more chance of getting read.

Do your research. Identify contact details, working patterns, styles, subject matter and deadlines for your target dissemination channels. Keep your list up to date. Collect details of online news services/agencies – you never know when you might need them. Also consider using specialist services for big news items – like virtual press offices and video news releases.

Don't assume all will go according to plan – follow-up. If your press release gets picked up in the media you will want to keep 'the buzz' going. Be prepared to release a second wave of materials, sharing the various iterations from different news outlets with your network.

An interview with our Managing Director

Q Where is the skill?

A The true art of writing a great press release is summarising the five W's (when, where, who, why and what) in a single sentence, while still managing to captivate the reader. Then you need to provide the remaining essential information in 300 words.

Q What is the best advice you can give to newbies?

A Study examples from newspapers so you can pick up how journalists employ a reverse pyramid style of writing to produce snappy stories. Authors should also give serious consideration to the message they want to communicate, the hook they want to use to capture attention and a call-to-action.

Q What is the biggest mistake people new to writing press releases make?

A Newbies often think that the secret to writing an effective press release is providing a good story. However, a successful press release is one that gets picked-up. Those are ones that get read. You need to adopt the press release format to be given serious consideration.

Q What differentiates a good press release?

A It is always good to see a quote from an involved party. It provides an opportunity to communicate more than just the facts. You get someone's opinion. The more authoritative and respected the source, the better. But keep the quotes short, you still need to provide facts and/or evidence to support your news story.

And finally…

Don't underestimate the power of the press release. Several studies demonstrate their importance [4,5]. As a channel of communication between medical journals and the press, they serve as a means by which journals can convert research findings into news [4]. In fact, research suggests that high citation rates are more often related to the level of media coverage than the scientific 'importance' of the research, making the press release a key factor on health care utilization, clinical practice, and researchers' behaviour [1, 10, 11].

Sadly, medical news in the mainstream media is rarely accurate and/or balanced [12–15]. Research highlights how press releases often focus on preliminary findings failing to provide the cautions and/or caveats required to contextualise their meaning or relevance. They also tend to overstate the importance of the findings [16]. Data confirms that press release quality impacts on subsequent media coverage content [17].

In some cases, the 'spin' found in press releases is a result of authors having simply transcribed biased reporting in the abstracts and conclusions of a published article. Thus, authors of press releases have an important role to play in the managing the dissemination of scientific findings. Be careful to provide information that reflects the research findings. Do not over-interpret or mislead your audience.

Example press release:

PRESS RELEASE

niche science&technology

CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Dr Tim Hardman on 07957 144814 or tim.hardman@niche.org.uk

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 12:00 on 11 October 2018

EUROPEAN REGULATORS, SPONSORS AND CROS MEET TO DISCUSS THE FUTURE OF PHASE I INVESTIGATION IN THE WAKE OF BIAL

The first formal conference of the EUropean Federation for Exploratory Medicines Development (EUFEMED) held in London (12 May 2017) was the result of a collaborative effort of its founding associations. The conference provided opportunity to discuss developments and concerns and the changing regulatory environment with stakeholders from academia, industry, and European regulatory agencies, including the European Medicines Agency following the Bial incident in January of 2016.

Conference attendees discussed innovation and risk management in early clinical drug development. Among other innovations discussed were immunotherapy in oncology and inflammatory diseases as well as the importance of adaptive trial designs in early clinical drug development. Consideration was given to assessing and mitigating risk in early clinical drug development. Different measures to minimize risks in healthy volunteers and patients in first-in-human trials following the Bial incident were discussed in addition to the importance of non-clinical data and the need for reliable biomarkers.

MORE

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PRESS RELEASE

During the meeting, Dr Tim Hardman, Chairman of the AHPPI, noted, "This meeting of our various country organisations, sponsors and regulatory agencies offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss progress." It was clear from the level of agreement among attendees and the willingness to promote future collaborations that this meeting will improve volunteer safety and result in faster delivery of new medicines.

The conference was well-attended and facilitated valuable cross-discipline interaction. It has achieved its objective of focusing on early clinical drug development in a changing regulatory environment. In closing the meeting, the EUFEMED president elect, Prof. Dr. med. Hildegard Sourgens, Association for Applied Human Pharmacology (Germany), summarized how the topics discussed served to foster a shared appreciation of the innovative nature of the early clinical development space, and welcomed the commitment of all parties to addressing concerns over risk and improving our understanding of the challenges ahead.

ENDS

Word Count: 300 words

Notes to Editors:
- Presentations given by invited speakers are published on www.eufemed.eu/london-conference-2017
- The next EFEMED conference will be held in Lyon in 2019 (see www.eufemed.eu for details)
- Photographs of the meeting, speakers and the organising committee are available on request
- Further details of the Bial incident published in the journal Science can be found at: www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/06/new-clues-why-french-drug-trial-went-horribly-wrong
- Keywords: #EUFEMED, #AHPPI, #EMA, #CLINICAL

Boiler Plate: The EUropean Federation for Exploratory MEdicines Development (EUFEMED, www.eufemed.eu) is a not-for-profit association that aims to improve the early phase clinical drug development process in Europe. The founding associations represent the Phase I community for Germany (Association for Applied Human Pharmacology), UK (Association for Human Pharmacology in the Pharmaceutical Industry), Belgium (Belgian Association of Phase-I Units) and France (Club Phase-I). Dr Tim Hardman is Chairman for the AHPPI as well as Founder and Managing Director of Niche Science & Technology Ltd., a UK-based clinical research organisation incorporated in 1998.

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Next Steps

We created this Insider's Insight into writing press releases to share a few helpful pointers and key learnings that we have gained over the years.

I hope you found our guide useful, if you would like to discuss support with any of media challenges please contact me at the email address below.

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