



Public Relations



Elements of a Press Release

The press release is the basic communication tool for working with the press. Journalists get hundreds of news releases each week. Your job in writing a good release is to make the job of a journalist easier - this will keep your release at the top of the pile and out of the wastebasket. The less rewriting required by the journalist, the better the news release. You may even see your release printed word-for-word in the newspaper, which is the ultimate way to control your message!

In general, if you are sending a release by email you should copy and paste the text into the body of the message. But some journalists will prefer an attachment in Word, a fax or even by snail mail - the only way you will know their preferences is to ask.

The most important thing about a news release is that it should be news, not an advertisement. Therefore it should be written as a series of factual statements, not opinion or hype. If you want to include a lot of superlatives, leave that for a quote. "Jefferson Library is once again hosting that hilarious hunk of ham, Wilbur the Pig. The program is the third in a weekly series of free summer events for children," not "Come and see the amazing Wilbur the Pig at the Jefferson library. You'll laugh. You'll cry! It is going to be sooo fun!"

BEGIN WITH YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION. This sounds like a "Well, duh" kind of tip, but there is nothing more frustrating to a journalist than to have calls to a contact person unanswered with a deadline looming. You should include your name, phone number and email address. Most public information officers make themselves available day and night with a cell phone or Blackberry. A reporter is unlikely to call you at odd hours about a library story so if you are

willing to share your cell phone number, include that too.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE. Most news releases begin with the phrase "For Immediate Release" because they are about information that can be shared immediately. If your release has information that must be held for a certain publishing date, use "For Release [Date]" Many news releases are double spaced so that journalists can make comments and edits between the lines.

Next you should write an attention getting headline. It should be catchy but not so creative that the reader doesn't know what the release is about. "Library launches Virtual Branch with New Website" not "Surf's Up at Library's New Site."

THE LEAD. The first paragraph starts with a lead sentence. Journalists sometimes spend as much time thinking about their lead sentence as they do writing the rest of the article, so your lead sentence should be something that motivates the reader to keep reading. The next two or three sentences in the first paragraph should summarize the news.

5 W's and H. The second and third paragraph should fill out answers to the questions, who, what, why, where, when and how. Later paragraphs can give background information or supporting facts. This is the "inverted pyramid" of news writing. It refers to the notion of putting the most important facts first so that the reader will get the gist of the story even if the whole story is not read. In the pre-digital age this was important, because an editor could cut the story from the bottom, according to space demands, without needing to rewrite the story. You should write in short sentences and keep the big words at home in the dictionary.

QUOTES. Take a look at how news stories are written in the newspapers. A key element that helps to tell the story are quotes. Quotes break up the text and provide a welcome human element to the story, presenting a face to the facts. You can get a quote from your library director, a customer, a colleague or in a pinch you can quote yourself (!) The person you are quoting may be grateful if you draft a quote for them, and it may be a way to get a catchy quote for your release.

Always send the quote you have drafted to your “quotee” to give them a chance to edit it or put it in their own words. If you can get a quote from more than one person, go for it. It is important that the quotes amplify the text, not just repeat it.

ABOUT YOUR LIBRARY. At the end of the press release you may want to include a paragraph about your library, especially if there is something about your library that is not well understood. This paragraph is commonly referred to as a “Boilerplate.” Your “boilerplate” paragraph commonly includes information such as your key messages or talking points as talked about in the Communications section.

An example of a press release can be found in the Resources section of the toolkit in section 8, page 6.

Dealing with Bad News and What to do when the Media Calls

Inevitably, all organizations have to deal with bad news. Budget cuts. Trimmed hours or closed branches. Parents who want to ban books from the library.

While bad news is never good, it can be turned into a positive media message. For example, when a teenage hacker crashed Seattle's King County Library System's computer system, closing the library down for three days, the story became the marvels of the technology rather than its failure, thanks to the library's quick and thoughtful response.

Some bad news you can see coming — budget cuts are generally in the works for weeks. Others, like crimes, cannot be anticipated. Either way, it's important for libraries to have a crisis communications plan.

HERE ARE A FEW TIPS FOR HANDLING BAD NEWS:

DON'T OVERREACT. If only one small paper carries the story, only respond to that paper. Don't send out a release to all your media contacts. If they don't know about the bad news, you probably don't want to tell them about it.

BE STRATEGIC. If the news is huge, consider holding a press conference to communicate the facts, new developments, and the library's response or message. It will save you time and resource to hold one press conference rather than take a dozen individual interviews.

SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE. The most common mistake in crisis communications is to have several spokespeople

saying different things. Have one spokesperson, or make sure that all your spokespeople are saying the same thing.

UNDERSTAND INTERVIEW TOPICS AND FORMATS BEFORE ACCEPTING INTERVIEWS.

During these times, it is very important to be sure you understand the nature of a talk radio show or TV interview before you agree to go on. Don't speculate. Know who else will be on the show, if there will be call-ins, and what the host's position is before making a choice to go on. If you don't think you'll be giving a fair hearing, it might not be best to accept the interview.

FOCUS ON THE SOLUTION. Explain how the library is going to address the situation or say that the library is looking for a speedy solution.

APOLOGIZE WHEN APPROPRIATE. "We apologize for any inconvenience to our users. We are doing our best to..." Empathize. Convey caring and understanding.

HAVE ALL THE FACTS BEFORE RESPONDING.

Often, when news just breaks, not even the media has all the facts. Make sure you know exactly what is going on before responding to something that could just be a rumor or an exaggerated allegation.

PREPARE BRIEFING MATERIALS. As soon as you can, have briefing materials for the media, with accurate facts included.

LET LAWYERS REVIEW STATEMENTS BEFORE

RELEASING THEM. If this situation has legal implications, make sure you consult with a lawyer before making a statement. Avoid “legalese,” but make sure that what you’re saying is ok to say.

STICK TO THE HIGH ROAD. Avoid criticizing or getting personal with your opponents. Don’t be defensive. Staying focused on your message and on the high road will ultimately be your best weapon.

WHEN THE MEDIA CALLS:

ASK QUESTIONS. Determine the name of the publication or the network. Find out what the story is about, the reporter’s angle, when the deadline is. If you do not feel qualified to address the question or are uncomfortable with the approach, say so. Suggest other angles. Refer them to talk to your director, but only after you’ve advised your director of the situation.

BE CLEAR ABOUT THE POSITION YOU ARE REPRESENTING. You may want to check your library’s handbook for a policy statement or request fact sheets available from ALA on a variety of topics.

NEVER SAY “NO COMMENT.” “I’m sorry I can’t answer that” or “I’ll let you know as soon as I know” are acceptable alternatives.

BEWARE OF MANIPULATION. Some reporters may ask leading questions, something like “Wouldn’t you say...?” followed by an idea for your agreement. Instead, make your

own statement by stating what you mean before the reporter started to turn the tables.

PAUSE BEFORE ANSWERING QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY AND THE BEST WAY TO SAY IT. Keep your comments positive and to the point. Never repeat a negative.

KNOW YOUR KEY MESSAGE. What is the most important point you want the reporter to convey to the audience? Use every interview as an opportunity to deliver a key message about libraries — and librarians. Sample key messages are available from ALA’s Public Information Office.

BE PREPARED TO ANSWER THE STANDARD “WHO-WHAT-WHEN-WHERE-WHY AND HOW” QUESTIONS. Have supporting facts and examples on hand. ALA’s Public Information Office has background information on a wide range of issues.

KEEP YOUR ANSWERS SIMPLE AND BRIEF. This is even more important with broadcast media when you may have less than 20 seconds to answer. Too much information can overwhelm the reporter, the reader or the audience - and it may keep you from being quoted.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ADMIT YOU DON'T KNOW. “I don't know” is a legitimate answer. Reporters do not want incorrect information. Tell them you'll get the information and call back.

Dealing with Bad News by Patricia Glass-Schuman.

General tips for Public Relations

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE AND THE KEY MESSAGE YOU WANT FOR THEM. Teens, seniors, who's reading, listening or watching and what their concerns are. Feel free to ask the reporter/producer requesting the interview. Deliver the message at the first opportunity and aim to repeat it at least twice.

TALK, DON'T "SPEAK." Use simple language. Avoid acronyms, jargon.

REMEMBER LESS IS MORE. Limit yourself to three talking points. Keep your answers short, to the point, about 25 words or fewer (12 seconds). Let the interviewer ask questions.

SPEAK DELIBERATELY. Pause after you answer. It will make you appear more authoritative and give the interviewer time to react.

HAVE THE ANSWERS. Anticipate what questions you're most likely to be asked and have answers. Also, don't be afraid to ask in advance what questions you will be asked.

KEEP THEM INTERESTED. Use statistics sparingly as people don't remember them. Tell stories/use examples to illustrate key points.

"LISTEN" TO YOUR AUDIENCE. Watch for the wandering eye, the bored look. Make adjustments. Change your pacing. Pause. Raise and lower your voice.

SHOW YOUR ENTHUSIASM. Deliver the message in a way that makes people feel, not just think, libraries are

important. Let your enthusiasm show, but don't go over the top and seem fake.

TIPS FOR . . .

- **PRINT** - Don't let a reporter "seduce" you into saying more than you want to say. Remember that there is no such thing as "off the record." All other rules apply.
- **RADIO** - It's all in the voice. Use lots of expression. Highs and lows. Enthusiasm. Use simple, colorful language that paints a picture for the listener. Tell stories but keep them brief, to the point.
- **TELEVISION** - How you look is as important as what you say. All of the techniques used in public speaking -- keeping an open face (eyebrows raised), maintaining good posture, using hand gestures and varying your vocal expression -- will help you appear as a credible and enthusiastic spokesperson. Props such as a book, poster or large photo can add interest.

LOOK AT THE INTERVIEWER. Not the camera or the audience, unless you are doing an interview by remote or the interviewer is behind the camera.

PRACTICE "ACTIVE LISTENING." Look at who is speaking. The camera may still be on you.

PICTURE WHO YOUR AUDIENCE IS. Speak directly to them from your heart as well as your mind. Use stories and examples listeners can relate to.

WEAR MORE MAKE UP THAN YOU NORMALLY WOULD. Heavier lipstick and blush will counteract the

WHAT CAN MEDIA ATTENTION/PUBLICITY DO FOR YOUR LIBRARY?

harshness of the lights and still look natural. Powder will help to minimize shine. Some stations provide professional make-up assistance.

AVOID HARSH COLORS LIKE BLACK, NAVY, WHITE, BRIGHT RED. Rich colors such as bright blues, rust, wine or purple work well for most women as does charcoal gray or brown for men. Dress as you would for a business meeting. A blouse and suit with an open collar is flattering to most women.

KEEP JEWELRY SIMPLE. Medium-sized earrings or a pin can help focus attention on the face. Avoid dangling earrings or necklaces that move or glitter when you talk. They will distract from what you are saying.

TIPS FOR STAYING IN CONTROL . . .

- **NEVER ANSWER A QUESTION YOU DON'T FULLY UNDERSTAND.** Say, "I'm not sure I understand the question, are you asking...?"
- **FOCUS THE INTERVIEWER,** e.g. "That's an excellent question" or, "The real issue is . . ."
- **BUY YOURSELF TIME TO THINK BY SAYING, "THAT'S A GOOD QUESTION."** Or, "let me think about that and come back to it."
- **"FLAG" KEY THOUGHTS WITH WORDS AND PHRASES LIKE "THE MOST IMPORTANT POINT I WANT TO MAKE IS..." OR "THIS ISSUE IS CRITICAL BECAUSE..."**
- **"BRIDGE" TO THE POSITIVE.** When asked a "negative" question, answer briefly without repeating any "hot" or negative words. Add a positive statement.

Publicity is everything when you are trying to gain visibility and support for your school or library. It may seem daunting, but with some planning and dedicated effort you can shape and organize effective communications outreach. Media attention has its limits, however. What are its limitations?

MEDIA ATTENTION/PUBLICITY CAN:

- Increase public awareness of your programs, personnel, and services.
- Attract and increase involvement of public and private partners.
- Create, change, build, or enhance your public image.
- Encourage contributions of money, materials, services, and time.
- Win support for city, state, federal, foundation, or individual donor funding.
- Help you reach new or never before approached audiences, such as non-English speakers.
- Clarify misunderstandings about what libraries do and how they're financed.
- Mobilize opinion leaders in your community to become active supporters and advocates.
- Help knit together a vital network of libraries throughout the region, state, and nationwide.
- Help build public and private support for libraries.

MEDIA ATTENTION/PUBLICITY CAN'T:

- Guarantee exclusive positive coverage.
- Substitution for quality projects at your library.
- Sompensate for poor service delivery.
- Eliminate the need for strategic planning within your library or with your library system.