

Do-it-Yourself News Releases for Small Business

By Heather Reimer

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How do you create some serious buzz about your online or offline company on zero budget? That's what Celina wanted to know. She's the owner of a website that specializes in desktop publishing and site design.

It's a small, fairly new company with no money to commission a professional media release. Still, Celina wanted to get the word out so she asked me for some tips on how to write her own release.

MAKE BELIEVE YOU'RE A JOURNALIST

First, put yourself in the reporter's shoes. Try to imagine what kinds of stories would interest her and how you can make her job easier by dropping a good story right in her lap. Ask yourself:

What sets your gizmo or your company apart from the competition?

Have you recently launched a new product or service?

Personnel changes, awards, events, surveys, poll results and joint ventures can all be spun into news stories.

OH, THE HUMANITY!

Did you have to overcome some great challenge or difficulty to arrive at where you are now? Or maybe one of your clients had a special, urgent need that was filled by your product/service?

Bottom line - human interest sells. For example, big lottery jackpots would never make the news if they blatantly promoted the lottery corporation itself. But notice how the media flacks writing the releases always focus on some aspect of the winner's life... an ailing grandmother in need of expensive treatments, a house that recently burned down and now can be rebuilt, etc. In other words, the human angle that newspapers, radio and TV just gobble up!

THE INVERTED PYRAMID

Write an enticing subject line, headline and first paragraph. Get to the point quickly. Believe it or not, most news writers and editors only take five seconds to decide if they'll act on your announcement or not.

News reporters themselves have been trained to write using the "inverted pyramid", putting the most important information -- who, what, where, when, why and how -- at the top. And that's what they expect to see in your media release.

Unfortunately, most releases wind up in the garbage/delete folder because they start weak, take too long to get to the point, or are full of hype and puffery.

JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

Keep the self-promotion to a minimum but do include all your contact information -- e-mail and snail mail, URL, phone and fax numbers -- plus a brief explanation of what your company does. Emphasis on brief! In fact, keep the entire release to under a page if possible.

The exception to the rule is complex subjects, like for example an economic forecast, aimed at a niche market not a general audience.

ONE PHOTO = A THOUSAND WORDS

If a photo is available and helps tell your story, by all means include it. This could make your release jump out and demand attention from a busy editor who sees nothing but black and white type all day.

MILK THE LOCAL ANGLE

Try to send your release to a specific person working on a specific beat at each media outlet, at least locally. This will require some research but will ensure that a warm body actually gets your announcement.

And keep in mind, the media love a "local boy/girl makes good" story so really target your hometown newspapers, magazines and TV/radio stations and work that angle!

GET A SECOND OPINION

If you're having a hard time finding any angle at all, ask a friend or a business associate to lend a fresh perspective. You may be too close to your own business to see the forest for the preprocessed paper products. An objective bystander's insights might surprise and inspire you!

GET OUT THE DICTIONARY

Finally, proofread your finished product meticulously for errors. Then get your friend to do so as well. Two heads are better than one. Ten proofreads are better than two.

In conclusion, give the media something they can sink their teeth into. Dig hard, think laterally, navel gaze until you find the one thing about your company that the public (and therefore the media) would be interested in.

By handing reporters a ready-made story on a silver platter, you're sowing the seeds of some serious buzz!

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