Five commonest mistakes in press releases

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It's a sad fact that most press release end up in the waste bin. Even sadder is that the reason for this high rate of loss is not the callous, insensitivity of the press but a few simple factors all well within the control of those writing the release. Here are five of the commonest mistakes.

1. Lack of targeting

The number of releases produced and sent is so high that editors have only minimal time to decide whether to use it. If the person who receives the release and glances at it for a second or two, doesn't recognise it as being intended for them, they won't look any further. They'll assume the release is aimed at someone else – maybe Horse and Hound, or Gas Turbine World, or Stamp Collecting.

There are, in turn, several reasons why the release has turned out to be mis-aimed. The first is that the writer wants it to appeal to as many publications as possible, so that it will get published as widely as possible. So he or she couches the news in the most general words possible.

Does this kind of sentence sound familiar? "Both domestic and industrial users will benefit from the higher capacity and lower running costs of the new Nimbus 2000 from Technology Solutions Corporation."

There isn't anyone anywhere on the planet who is going to identify with this – even someone who might actually benefit from a Nimbus 2000 – whatever it may be.

Journalists are taught to deal in specific and concrete facts. Faced with generalisations like this, most will simply give up, assuming that if there were any real facts to be had, the PR person would have communicated them.

2. Too exclusive

The second common mistake is, paradoxically, almost the opposite of the first – that of inadvertently making the release too exclusive.

In the course of researching a release about, say, a new product or a big order win, the writer has the good fortune to get a glowing comment from an early customer or user – but the customer is a big name – say Tesco, or BA, or Harrods. Naturally the writer builds his or her release around this superb quote or case history, without realizing that doing so nails the Nimbus 2000 to one and only one market or industry or user group. It's very powerful to get a quote from someone at Tesco, but that makes it a supermarket story. A quote from BA makes it an airline story, thus re-focusing the story away from every other publication.

It's essential to keep in mind that it's not the importance of the release that matters so much as how relevant the story is to its intended target audience. The more relevant it is, the more the editor will feel a sense of obligation to communicate it to his or her readers.

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3. Failure to engage the reader

Of course the 'bin' in which most releases end up is only a virtual scrapheap. Most releases are sent and scrutinised online. This means that editors now have even more releases to contend with than in the days of paper and even less time to make decisions. If your release is scrutinised for more than a couple of seconds you are luckier than most.

This means that you have a microscopic window of opportunity in which to hook the editor, grab his or her attention and engage their interest. It's like a combination of keyhole surgery and writing a Hollywood blockbuster. If your headline and first sentence don't do it, you might as well have not bothered writing the rest of the release, because no-one is ever going to read it, except your Mum.

You don't have a single second or a single word to waste. You must make absolutely sure that your whole meaning is communicated immediately and with complete clarity.

Learn how to make your releases engage your readers Here

4. Incomprehensibility

Everyone has on his or her desk a simple way to measure the readability of any text - objectively - on your PC. It's the Flesch Reading Ease Scale. I'll explain how to use it in a moment but first the scale itself. It runs from zero to 120 where 120 would be "the cat sat on the mat" and zero means quite literally incomprehensible!

To give you some points of comparison; Reader's Digest typically measures around 60 while the Harvard Business Review scores about 30. Anything less, in my view, is asking for trouble. In the United States, the Flesch scale is used as a legal test. For example in Florida insurance policies must register at least 45 or they're considered legally unreadable.

When I write I aim to score 50 to 60, even with technical or scientific matter. This article, for instance, scores 63. The Flesch scale comes with Microsoft Word. When you spell check a document, select 'check readability statistics' from options and at the end of the check you'll see a dialogue box listing the Flesch score among other factors.

Having an objective measure is sometimes very useful. Clients love nothing more than to take a blue pencil to the texts I spend hours on. I run their version through Flesch and show them the result. Often the readability will shrink from 50-odd down to 20 or even less.

It's by no means uncommon for press releases sent out to the media to have very low readability scores – including zero in a distressingly high number of cases. Usually this is because the client – or the lawyers – have got their paws on it. Now you have a valid tool to fight them off when they try to turn your golden words into leaden dross!

Learn how to make your releases more readable Here

5. PR people who are 'passionate'.

I said earlier that editors are put off by marketing generalisations and lack of clarity. They are probably even more rapidly put off by clichés. They assume that anyone who allows their words to be chosen for them by other people isn't worth listening to. Currently the fashionable cliché is 'being passionate' about everything from aardvarks to zoology.

People who think outside the box, push the envelope, re-write the rulebook, move the goalposts, or shatter the paradigm, are just assembling phrases they've heard or read because they can't be bothered to engage their brains.

We all need a few days in cliché rehab now and again to regain our sense of ourselves. But switching off our originality when writing press releases is the PR equivalent of putting a pistol to our head, spinning the chamber and pulling the trigger.

The PR consultant's cliché-button is most likely to be pushed when he or she gets a request from a journo for a fast contribution to a feature story and the client is too busy to bother writing it himself. It's tempting to fall back on the expensive verbiage on the website, or the company brochure, or the latest corporate Powerpoint presentation.

The problem here is that it's likely to be mainly composed of techno-talk and marketing mumbo-jumbo. The journo on the receiving end has the task of choosing the best quotes to use in his feature, and this kind of stuff just is not the best.

What is a cliché exactly? Is it a phrase that's been used so often that's it's starting to get worn out and tattered round the edges? Sorry - it's a lot worse than that. A cliché is any phrase that you've heard or read before. Put your own words together and your originality will be repaid by getting the attention of editors. Use other people's and it will show.

If you've found these tips useful, check out our one-day **Workshop in PR Skills** and one-day **Workshop in Creative Writing** run at The PR Training Centre - they are packed full of useful tips and techniques designed to make writing less of a chore and more of a pleasure.