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Marketing wisely on a shoe-string budget

This is the fourth in a series of articles intended to help Chapter marketing teams maximize their “bang for the buck”, particularly when faced with a limited budget. Last time we took an in-depth look at the mechanics of developing a website. This time I’d like to revisit the bread and butter for Marketing and PR folks: the Press Release.

I. THE PRESS RELEASE

A press release is a short, compelling news story written by a public relations person and sent to targeted members of the media. The goal of a press release is to pique the interest of a journalist or publication. The press release should contain all the essential information — who? what? where? when? how? and most importantly why? — for the journalist to easily produce his own story.

A. COVER LETTER

It is not always necessary to include a cover letter with your press release, but there are certain events when it can make the difference between your story being covered or not. For example, if your group will be performing in a public place such as a park pavilion, civic building or shopping mall for a sing-out or even a “flash mob” it would be to your advantage to include a short cover letter advising the media of a photo or video opportunity, and refer them to the press release that follows.

B. FORMAT

Let’s start by understanding the format of a press release. While there are a number of styles available, I encourage following the Associated Press industry standards as much as possible, as they tend to convey an added sense of professionalism to the journalist.

If you are planning to mail your press release via postal mail, it should be printed on your organization’s

letterhead whenever possible, as that lends additional credibility to your story. If you will be sending it via email, embedding a small image of your logo at the top of the message will have a similar effect.

VERY important if you are sending your press release via email is to clearly identify it as a press release. The subject line of the email message should begin with “Press Release:” followed by the title of your story.

C. HEADINGS

At the top of the first page, type PRESS RELEASE in all capital letters. It should be centered and in boldface type.

Hit return twice to skip a line, and on the left side provide the release date in boldface capitals. If your story should be released on a future date, type FOR RELEASE ON MONTH DAY, YEAR. Otherwise type FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE.

On the same line as the release date, but on the right side, type CONTACT INFORMATION (or CONTACT INFO.), again in boldface capital letters. Go down to the next line and list the name and phone number of at least one contact person.

D. HEADLINE

The standard press release begins with the headline, arguably the most important four or five words in the whole press release. The headline will be what the journalist reads first. If it’s not intriguing, newsworthy and unique, he’ll read no further. We’ll look at forming a good headline later in this article.

E. SUMMARY

Below the headline often comes a brief, one-line summary of the press release. Like the headline, the summary should draw the reader in quickly and motivate him to learn more.

F. BODY – answer the When, Where, Who, What

While some experts advise to never write a press release longer than one page, others will say to write it as long as it takes to tell your story. Do your best to keep it concise, but don’t remove important information just to make it fit on one page. If your press release does span more than one page, it is customary to place a line with “— MORE —” centered at the bottom of each page, except of course the last one.

1. Leading Paragraph

The leading paragraph should begin with a dateline to answer the “when” and “where”: CITY, [State,] Month Day, Year – and then continue with answering the “what” in the rest of the paragraph. The city should

always be capitalized; the state is typically omitted for major or well-known cities such as HONOLULU, LAS VEGAS, LOS ANGELES, PHOENIX, SAN DIEGO, or SAN FRANCISCO, but when included be sure to use the Associated Press style abbreviations — Ariz., Calif., Nev. — rather than the US Postal Service abbreviations; Hawaii and Utah are always spelled out. Separate the dateline from the rest of the paragraph using an em-dash (—).

Examples:

LOS ANGELES, December 1, 2018 — ...

SACRAMENTO, Calif., December 1, 2018 — ...

2. Include quotes

Whenever possible, the second paragraph should include at least one quote from a prominent figure in your organization, or better still from a widely known public figure that discusses why this is an important event, adding further credibility to your press release. Be sure to identify the people you quote, using their title and organization in addition to their name.

3. Answer the Why and How

The rest of the body of the press release should answer all of the questions a journalist might have about the product, service or event that you’re announcing. Although a press release is a public relations tool, it should not read as overly promotional. If it sounds too much like a sales pitch, it will lose credibility in the eyes of the journalist.

4. Call to action

The last paragraph is where you can make a call to action. This is your opportunity to prompt your target audience to do something. It can be as simple as “For more information visit <http://your-website.org>”. Be sure use the complete URL, including the http:// (or https://), not a hidden “click here” link.

5. Ending

It is a journalistic standard to signal the end of the press release with three hash symbols (###) centered directly below the last line.

G. BOILERPLATE INFORMATION

It is a good practice to follow the body of your press release with additional information. This can often provide the journalist with additional, relevant information to include in his or her article. Quite often this will be the same information, regardless of the press release, so you may want to consider making a template — referred to as a “boilerplate” in the press industry — that has this information already written and checked for spelling and grammar.

1. Organization Summary

Include a short summary about your group beneath the heading “About [your group name]”. For Quartets this might include your names, voice parts, and cities where you live as well as how long you have been together and any awards or other recognition you’ve received. For Choruses, this should certainly include when your Chapter was founded, the approximate number of members, then name of your director, and when and where you meet.

2. Contact Information

Beneath the heading, “For more information — Press contact ONLY:” include the complete contact information of a person the media can follow up with: Name, Organization Name, Phone Number(s), E-mail Address, Company URL. The heading and information should be on the left side and in boldface type.

II. EXAMPLE HEADLINE

As mentioned earlier, the headline is arguably the most important four or five words in the whole press release. The summary sentence that follows is the next most important.

Structurally, the headline should be in boldface and set to a larger font size than the body copy. Conventional press release headlines use the present tense and exclude the “a” and “the”, as well as forms of the verb “to be” in certain contexts. The first word is always capitalized, as are all proper nouns, but everything else should be lower-case.

A good practice is to write the body of your press release first, and then write a suitable and intriguing headline and summary.

A. Extract important keywords

The simplest method to create the press release headline is to extract the most important keywords from your press release. From these keywords, try to frame a logical and attention-getting statement. If including a summary sentence after the headline, the same rules apply. Using keywords early will give you better visibility in search engines, and it will be simpler for journalists and readers to get the idea of the press release content.

B. Know your audience

If you will be submitting your press release to *Westunes* or *The Harmonizer*, the following title for this example show would be more than appropriate:

**Ringmasters to appear on Masters of
Harmony show**

It works in this case, because both the editorial staff and the readers of these publications are very familiar with both groups. However, once you leave the Barbershop “inside” world, that title has little or no meaning. So let’s replace our title with something that has meaning to the general public:

**World champion barbershop quartet,
chorus to perform**

That title clearly has meaning to a reader who is not familiar with barbershop, and “world champion” certainly adds intrigue. But after reading the article again, I realize that our title is missing two very important keywords that could give more mass appeal. First is the fact that the headline Quartet comes from a long ways away, so we should bring that into focus as a “once in a lifetime” opportunity. Second, the show will be held at a very prestigious venue, adding even more credibility to the event. So let’s take another pass, and work those into the title:

**World champion singers from Sweden
appearing at Segerstrom**

For the sake of brevity we’ve omitted MoH from the title, but we can include them in the summary:

**The world champion Ringmasters quartet from
Stockholm, Sweden and world champion Masters
of Harmony chorus from Santa Fe Springs join
together for a spectacular concert of
a cappella harmony singing.**

From these examples I hope you can see the importance in putting some “spin” on the title to make it as enticing as possible to a massed audience. But to drive the point home, here are some more “real world” examples:

**Ice cream social, concert to benefit high school youth
Barbershop harmony group delights
holiday shoppers**

**Singing valentines deliver old-fashioned charm
Benefit concert to send area high school boys
to music camp**

**Hometown quartet advances to 5-state
regional competition**

**Stockton singers hold open house
Area singers present landmark 75th annual concert
Local barbershop singers donate music
to high school choir**

**Singing group to perform music of Cole Porter
Quartet honors fallen officers
Local barbershop chorus wins regional title**

By now you should be getting the idea.

III. RESOURCES

- There are some great resources available on the Far Western District website at <https://farwesterndistrict.org/education/leadership-academy-presentations/vp-marketing>
- *The Associated Press Stylebook* is an excellent resource for English grammar style and usage, created by journalists over the past century and updated annually each spring.
- *The Elements of Style* by Strunk & White is the de facto standard for all writers of the English language. Don't leave home without it.
- I would be remiss not to mention the tremendous value of Google in finding additional resources on style, grammar, press release examples, and even readability tools to help you become a better writer.

IV. CONCLUSION

Writing effective press releases takes practice, and it's always a good idea to have a few people proofread them and offer suggestions, especially people who are not barbershop "insiders" and even better if they have some journalistic experience. Read your local papers to see what kinds of events are being published, and use them as examples for what works. Don't get discouraged if your press release doesn't get picked up. Use a different angle next time, and keep trying.