

The untapped power of the press release

When your boss calls you up in the middle of the night and says he wants an official reaction in the papers the next morning to a controversial issue concerning him directly, what's a PR practitioner supposed to do? For one thing you must understand that a lot of the world's media are primed to spot the press release and shoot it down a mile off.

By [Chima Nwankwo](#) 20 Jan 2009



This is not as a result of sadism but because the painful truth is that not much thought goes into the writing most press releases. The traditional press release, as we know it today, has taken quite a bit of bashing from mostly lecturers of Mass Communication and Media Studies as well as other intellectuals who see it as a rather laid back means of getting publicity.

As a matter of fact many do not see it as a bona fide tool of public relations. Indeed even Reuters, the BBC and Channels TV on the local scene insist that their reporters do not use press releases to write stories.

For instance most press releases lack depth. I'm not saying that the PR officer should make the release more intellectual. However, let me say that the best releases which actually stand a good chance of being used are timely, topical, free of typos and most importantly, are actually newsworthy.

News as the name connotes must be new to say the least. The biggest rule in the news business is freshness. Followed by accuracy, fairness and objectivity. The story must be new or perceived to be so. This means that even if the issue of the press release is one that the public is tired of or story fatigue has set in, the PRO has to think like a journalist and uncover a new angle, spin or twist to the story. He must click the refresh button on the story.

Contrary to the popularly perceived notion, public relations is not just about wining and dining. The document must also contain correct facts, numbers, dates and names of key people in the organisation. It must also contain relevant information such as the mobile telephone number and email of the CEO (not a land line please!) who can be reached at short notice in case reporters want to confirm, check or recheck certain facts. The story must be topical or relevant to other news events. It must connect to the day's news agenda. In fact you as a PRO can use your release to dictate the news agenda. This by extension of implication means that the PRO must be on top of events not just in his narrow field but in general current affairs as well. I can tell you from experience that the easiest press releases to use are often tied to the most burning issues of the day. Have you ever noticed that some people appear to have stories on themselves or their organisations in the papers everyday? The chances are that they are offering media outfits good news content. It's difficult to turn down people like that. So the next time those kind of documents come in the

average journalist actually thanks the PRO for making his life easier.

Try to ensure that your press releases are free of typographical errors. There are few things that annoy a sub-editor who is under intense pressure at 1am in the morning trying to produce the daily paper more than a badly typed press release full of grammatical errors. At times like those it is easier to chuck aside a scrap paper that doesn't seem to add value to an editor's life than begin to make long phone calls back and forth and send emails trying to confirm a vague story.

It is imperative that the PRO must learn a bit of journalism or at least how the media works. For instance, the press release must contain an identified source. There must be quotations from somebody senior enough to speak on behalf of the company. A trade secret which I will reveal to you against my better judgement is that you can actually send a PRO to get other points of view on a matter from your adversary or if you don't like that idea; you can always do a vox pop.

The point of the exercise is that when you do write your story it will be accurate, objective and balanced - a complete story and every journalist's dream!

Another secret is that if you're really serious about getting publicity for yourself, get embroiled in controversy. There's nothing like using sugar to catch ants. Can you calculate how much Salisu Buhari, Femi Fani-Kayode, Chimaraoke Nnamani, Ken Nnamani Patricia Etteh, Nuhu Ribadu, etc owe the media based on the sheer amount of high but not necessarily positive visibility they have commanded in recent times. Other examples are Adams Oshiomole, Dr Pat Utomi, Donald Duke or on the foreign scene, Bill Clinton. He was Nigeria for the 14th *This Day* Awards this month. The man is no longer president but when he clears his throat to speak everyone is silent. These men are a reporter's delight. At any point in time they have something very relevant, profound and catchy to say about any event under the sun. They are newsmakers.

One cannot afford to send shotgun press releases to all the media outfits you know. You must target them you really want your story to be used. If you are writing to a TV/radio news editor, your story must be focused. It must have an interesting, catchy and engaging lead or as the *Reuters Handbook of Style* puts "It must be able to tell the viewer something he does not already know." The release must be able to answer the question 'so what'? If you as the PRO can't answer if asked 'so what's the big deal about your own story' then don't expect the editor to do it for you.

The ideal press release should be made of the intro or lead, explanation, amplification and summary. In summary according to the *Reuters Style Guide*, you must:

1. Look for a new fact, angle, interpretation and reaction and use it to 'tell the reader/listener/journalist something he doesn't already know'.
2. Tell the story in the first two paragraphs. The lead paragraph is key. If you get it right, the rest will follow in the remaining one or two.
3. Make the headline powerful. This is the only reason a tired editor may bother to open and read your release.
4. Make sure your story is balanced and objective.

Lastly, find out and make sure your press release gets to the paper/station before its deadline. Every media outfit has one and it's your responsibility as a PR practitioner to find out when these times are.

ABOUT CHIMA NWANKWO

Chima Nwankwo, currently leads the management team at Cellmark Limited. He is a retired TV anchor/editor of over a decade's standing. He began his career while still a student at the

University of Jos, as a disc jockey on Radio Plateau 90.5 FM in Nigeria, before moving on to become deputy editor of Citywatch Magazine. He then began a stint with TV that has seen him work in beats as varied as sports, foreign affairs, business, health and politics. He led the sports desk at multiple award-winning news station, Channels TV. He was deputy editor (news and current affairs) at Superscreen TV, Lagos and pioneered the Abuja Bureau of Business TV. He is also an associate member of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations and a proud Alumnus of the prestigious Fate Foundation, Lagos. When he's not running the company, Nwankwo is a contributor to A24 Media, Reuters TV and CNBC Africa among several other international media. He can be reached at +234 705 570 5004 or chimanwankwo@gmail.com.
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