



ImPRESSive

A MEDIA TIP SHEET FOR ADVOCATES

October 1998

DRAFTING A NEWS RELEASE

PURPOSE

Chances are you're issuing a news release because you want a particular issue to be highlighted in the media. More importantly, you want the issue to be highlighted from your perspective. A news release is an opportunity to bring attention to and frame an issue from *your* viewpoint. While preparing your release, always keep in mind that a reporter should be able to write his or her entire article using just your release. Imagine reading a newspaper article about the topic you are addressing:

- How would you like it to be written?
- What would you say about the issue?
- What are the key points you want to get across to readers?

WHEN TO ISSUE A NEWS RELEASE

A news release must present new information or old information in a new way. Be careful not to issue a release for everything that happens. If the media see your releases time and time again, they're less likely to take them seriously. However, stay on top of your issues and make your presence known to media.

Once they get to know you, your releases will reach the top of the pile on a reporter's desk more quickly.

A news release vs. a statement

Keep in mind that a news release is distinct from a statement. A release presents new information and is comprised of facts. A statement responds to something that has happened and allows you to editorialize.

Examples of when to issue a news release:

- You're releasing a study.
- You're holding a press conference.
- You're organizing a Medicaid enrollment drive.
- Your organization has just received a prestigious award or grant.

Examples of when to issue a statement:

- The governor announced cuts in a vital health program.
- The new infant mortality rates have just been released.
- A member of the state legislature introduces a bill that would give families more access to health coverage.

NEWS RELEASE CONTENT

Header

The header should include a contact name and phone number. In coalition work, deciding whose name to put on the release or whose letterhead to use can be difficult. Keep in mind the contact should be someone who members of the press can call if they need clarification on information or if they'd like a formal interview, so choose someone who is comfortable talking with press. It is acceptable to specify more than one contact on your release, but limit the number to three.

Whether you place the contact information on the left, right or in the center is up to you. But be consistent. Establish a standard look for your press releases and stick with it, so a reporter can easily recognize your release each time it comes across his/her desk. For coalition releases, consider using letterhead made specifically in the coalition's name.

Headline & Kicker

To get the media's attention you need a "hook." This hook is expressed in the *headline*, which is located at the top of the news release under the header. The headline embodies the most intriguing aspect of the information you are focusing on. A "kicker" is a smaller subtitle under the headline. The kicker should complement the headline without being

redundant and clue the reporter in on why your organization is interested in the issue.

A kicker is not always necessary and should only be used to signify critical information beyond that given in the headline. Going back to the imaginary news article, ask yourself, "*What headline would grab my attention?*"

Use bolded font for the headline and kicker. The kicker is usually in a smaller font size than the headline, but both are in larger font sizes than anything else in the document.

Lead

The first paragraph is the *lead*. The lead contains the most important aspect of your story. It's possible reporters will only read the first paragraph or even the first sentence of your release, so your lead must make an impact. Also, identify your organization in the first paragraph to establish name recognition.

Organize your news release as an inverted pyramid. Place the most vital information in the first paragraph, the second most important information in the second paragraph, and so on. All of the background information should come later in the release.

The paper's only duty is to print what its editors perceive to be news. Therefore, your job is to make your material as newsworthy as you possibly can.

-How to Win in Washington, Basil Blackwell Publishing

SAMPLE

Header



Headline



Kicker



Lead



NEWS RELEASE

HOLD FOR RELEASE

September 15, 1998, 9:30 AM

CONTACT: Mary Smith
202-555-6768
Jason Willis
415-555-9295

DESPITE NEW LAWS, WORKING FAMILIES STILL LACK ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

CONSUMER HEALTH COALITION'S NEW STUDY
EXPOSES SHORTFALLS OF RECENT LEGISLATION

DesMoines, IA—Despite recently passed legislation, over 40% of working families will remain without health insurance according to the Consumer Health Coalition's new study, *Does Health Care Legislation Work for Working Families?: An Analysis of H.R. 2000*.

Body

The body of the news release should be concise, yet detailed enough to provide vital information related to the story. A reporter should be able to write his/her news release in its entirety using your release or even just a portion of the release. Each paragraph of your release must have the ability to stand on its own. The reader should be able to eliminate paragraphs one by one, beginning at the bottom of the release, and still have enough to write a story when only the first few paragraphs remain. To give the release more credibility and realism, include quotes from the key spokespersons or parties involved. Quotes also be arranged hierarchically. Place the most important quote on the first page of the release. Incorporate stories of local people in your news release.

Reporters often ask for real-world examples to use as anecdotes. Choose your story carefully. Make sure it supports your major points. For example, if you're writing a release about the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and you want to demonstrate the need for extensive outreach, choose a family who didn't know about their CHIP eligibility whose life would be changed as a result of outreach.

Always screen the person telling the story and verify the story itself by asking many detailed questions. Make sure the person is comfortable with media and is able to answer detailed questions about their story. Also, be sure to get permission to have their name and story released.

Solution

When you're addressing a problem, try to end the release with a solution. It's easy to find complaints, but solutions are hard to come by. Ask yourself, "*What can we do about this?*" and offer an answer in your release. If you're proposing several solutions, accent the least obvious or the one that will have the most impact on the problem.

Concluding

Include a "*boilerplate*," a brief description of your organization and its cause, as the final paragraph of the news release. Once you have completed the release, use three number signs (###) at the bottom of the page to signify its end.

Length

Be sure to keep your release brief. Reporters digest bits of information better than whole chunks. If the release is too long, many reporters won't read it. As a rule of thumb, your release should not exceed two pages. There are always exceptions. If you need to include more detailed, technical information it may be acceptable to use three pages, but only if necessary. Another alternative is to attach tables or graphs. Just remember, key information should be included in the first page of the release.

If you're having trouble fitting your release on two pages, and you've already eliminated any unnecessary text, try using a smaller font or adjusting margins and line spacing, but make sure the document remains easy to read. Also,

bullets and numbers are a great way to lay out facts more succinctly.

QuickTips

- ✓ Keep it simple and conversational, limiting the use of technical terms.
- ✓ Be brief and to the point.
- ✓ Make every word count.
- ✓ Use powerful verbs; avoid weak qualifiers (e.g.—very, really, truly).
- ✓ Have someone unfamiliar with the issue read your release for clarity.

ASSESSING THE NEWS ENVIRONMENT

Be aware of other events that are happening during the time of your release. While it's impossible to predict news, it is possible to avoid scheduling your release around planned events that may compete with your press coverage. For example, if the governor, or a member of his administration, is giving a speech, it's quite possible that your story, which might have otherwise been covered, will be bumped.

At the same time, it may be possible for you to take advantage of competing events. For instance, if a managed care horror story is receiving attention in the local media, you could draft a release about the need for patient protections and how protections could have prevented the problem.

SENDING IT OUT

Embargoes

To *embargo* a news release means to prohibit the publication of the information it contains until a specified day and time. This means the information from your release can not appear in a publication or on TV or radio until the date and time you've specified on your news release. Indicate an embargo by typing "Hold for Release" or "Embargoed" in the header of the news release (adjacent to the contact information), followed by a date and time on the next line. The main purpose of an embargo is to control when the media releases your story. This is especially helpful if you are staging an event or news conference around a report that you're releasing, because it increases the likelihood that press will attend since reporters like to be the first to break a news story. The date and time of the embargo should coincide with the date and time of your news conference.

Embargoes are not always necessary, especially if you are not holding an event. If you don't need an embargo, type "For Immediate Release" followed by a date (no time is needed) where you would otherwise place the embargo language.

Sometimes reporters, especially print, will ask if they can receive your information early in order to prepare their stories in advance with the agreement they will not run the story until the embargo

is lifted. If it is a reporter you can trust, allow that reporter early access to your information. Giving a reporter more time to examine the information often results in better reporting. However, be aware that if a reporter releases the story before the official embargo date, it may threaten your credibility in addition to decreasing the likelihood that other reporters, who may feel that the newsworthiness of your story has diminished due to its early release, will want to cover that story. So emphasize the embargo.

Who should receive it?

Send your news release to those media contacts who work on your general issue. Also, consider creating an additional media list tailored to the specific issue. For instance, if you are doing a CHIP release, you should have a general list of health reporters and editors that you will send your release to and a more specific list of reporters who cover CHIP, Medicaid or children's issues.

In addition to creating press lists, there are many other considerations to sending your release, such as deciding whether to focus on national, state or local media and choosing among print, media, and radio outlets. Be on the lookout for upcoming issues of **ImpRESSive** for more detailed tips on targeting media and creating press lists.

How should you send it?

Whether you send your release by fax, mail, e-mail or personal delivery will vary. If possible, it's best to include information in your press list about the individual reporter/editor's preference for receiving news releases. While some are happy to receive faxes or mail others won't even give you their fax numbers and will insist that you send news releases via e-mail.

Adhering to each individual's preferences is not always possible and is often time and resource consuming. If you have a report or a lot of materials to include, mail is probably the best way to send out the news release. However, if you are only sending a news release, fax is usually the best method. E-mail works nicely, because it saves paper and time, but not everyone has an e-mail account.

Tell us what you think...

ImPRESSive is a new series of tip sheets from Families USA providing media guidance to advocates. This is our first issue, and we hope we've been helpful in our effort to provide you with a template for successful news releases. We'd love to hear your feedback and suggestions for future tip sheets. Please feel free to call or e-mail us with your comments and questions. Thank you.

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