

# The Care and Feeding of Press Releases

by Ami Hendrickson

## Purposes and Preparation

Press releases are an important part of any business – they're easy to produce, they're timely, their content is controllable, and – best of all – they're free.

This means that if they're used correctly, they can drum up free publicity for you, your business, or your cause.

Press releases are not feature articles. They are not editorials or opinion pieces. They are not letters to the editor. They are not brochures. They are simply a way of communicating with the media and telling editor and other decision makers of your involvement in a current event.

Press releases can be used in a variety of situations. They are appropriate, for instance, if you have:

- Been nominated for, or received, an award,
- Recently sold or published a project,
- Begun a new business venture,
- Landed a major client,
- Reached a significant educational milestone, or
- Been instrumental in bringing a celebrity or other notable to the area.

## Think “Dragnet”

Press releases are easy to write. They are nearly skeletal in their construction. Only the facts are necessary. If the editor of the publication wishes more information to round out the release, he or she can contact you.

When writing a press release, bear in mind that most news media publish text with very short paragraphs. As you lay out the facts, each paragraph should have only a few sentences in it. Single sentence paragraphs are fine. Tell your news succinctly, and be done.

Also, remember that there is no guarantee that your release will be published. Shorter releases have a better chance of publication than longer releases, simply because they can be used to easily plug page holes.

## What To Include

The first thing your press release should include is your **contact information**. Write “Contact” at the top right or left side of the first page. Then include your name, phone number, e-mail, and fax number. It is also appropriate to include your mailing address.

After your contact information, include the **date**. This tells editors of the release’s timeliness.

Immediately under the date, type “FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE” in all caps, and center it on the page. If the information in the release is valid for a specific time window, you may wish to write “FOR RELEASE THE WEEK OF \_\_\_\_\_ THROUGH \_\_\_\_\_” instead.

Come up with a straightforward **title** for the release. Don’t be clever or vague. Use present tense and just tell it like it is. Something like “Local Vocalist Receives Awards” is perfectly adequate. If the editor of the publication wants more pizzazz, he or she will punch up the headline.

The **body** of the release should be double spaced, with the beginning of each paragraph indented. Or you may choose not to indent the paragraphs and add an extra space between each. Either is acceptable.

Remember your high school journalism classes. Start your release with the most important item of information. Be sure to name the subject of the release and put that subject into context for the reading public. For example, a press release for someone who has just received a national award might begin:

*Inspirational vocalist Sharie Conard, of Bridgman, MI, has been named the 2005 Female Vocalist of the Year for the United States Association of Gospel Entertainers and Musicians (USAGEM).*

Then proceed to cite the facts that merit mention. Arrange your facts in order from the most important to the least important. Remember to refer to all persons by their surname, as befitting the news media:

*Conard also received USAGEM’s Ruby Award, given annually to an individual who has shown outstanding dedication to the organization.*

*Conard received her awards Friday, November 4, at USAGEM’s annual convention and awards in Nashville, TN.*

After a few opening paragraphs citing the news, feel free to include a short, relevant **quote**. Quotes can help add human interest to what might otherwise be a fairly dry or fact-filled story.

Finally, **finish the release** with the less crucial pieces of information. Remember, if a

release is printed, the editor may decide to use only part of it. Generally, if the press release is cut for space, the last paragraphs are the first to go – so don't save the best for last!

The final paragraphs of a press release are where you can mention what you've done in the past, drop the name of your latest book, remind people of past accomplishments, and cite your links to the community:

*Conard travels extensively throughout the country giving concerts, speaking, and teaching. In addition to her music ministry, she conducts workshops and seminars on cancer awareness. She is in great demand as a Women's Ministry presenter.*

*She has performed onstage at such venues as the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, TN, the Blue Gate Theatre in Shippshewana, IN, and the Champaign Theatre in Branson, MO.*

*Conard owns Studio I: Hair Designs and More, a full service hair salon in St. Joseph, MI. A medical side of the salon also offers hair and breast prosthetics and serves special people with special needs*

*In 1998, she was crowned the first ever Mrs. Southwest Michigan. She went on to be named first runner-up in the Mrs. Michigan International™ Pageant. She has been a guest judge and consultant for subsequent pageants.*

*USAGEM world headquarters are in Nashville, TN. Members are dedicated to enhancing the music and entertainment industries with their talents.*

You get the idea.

When you are finished, your press release should not be longer than two pages. One is ideal.

The last thing to do is follow the time-honored tradition of indicating the end of a piece. Center either "-- 30 --" or "# # #" at the end of the release to signify THE END.

### Using What You've Got

Once you've written your press release, there are several things you can do to make it work overtime for you.

Before you send it out, make sure you proofread it thoroughly. Pay special attention to any dates, names, or places you mention. Be sure your contact information is correct. (This, of course, should go without saying. But there – I said it.)

Of course, you'll send the press release to all the local newspapers. If you don't know which editor to address it to, get online and page through the contact information posted

on the paper's website. Then send it via e-mail to the appropriate editor.

*Do not send the press release as an attachment!* Copy it and paste it in the body of your e-mail. This holds true when sending any unexpected document anywhere electronically. It's just too much to ask someone who doesn't know you to trust you enough to open an attachment.

Then, get creative. Think about who else might be interested in your news. Places that are appropriate recipients of your press release include:

- Your local Chamber of Commerce,
- Any professional organization to which you belong – especially those with regular newsletters,
- Trade magazines within your profession, or to which you subscribe,
- Electronic newsletters with a suitable audience,
- Your hometown newspaper (be sure to tweak the release to mention your connection with the town in the first paragraph),
- The alumni newsletter of your college or university (again, tweak the release to include your graduation information),
- Local AM and FM radio stations, and
- Local television networks and news stations (you may get some air time, depending on the magnitude or human-interest merit of your news, and the current events vying for attention).

### **Additional Uses for A Press Release**

You may also wish to create a “Media Information” page on your website, complete with downloadable bio, photos, and other pertinent information about you or your business. If you do, a current press release is a worthy addition to the page. Just make sure that it doesn't become outdated. Remove or replace it after a month or so.

See? It's easy. Unfortunately, too few people understand the potential power in press releases. They think that they have to write a lengthy, brilliant piece of prose to warrant getting any press. But then too much time passes before they get around to creating a feature article masterpiece, and no one ever learns of their success.

Writing the article is not your job. That's the reporter's job. All you have to do is make his or her work easier by supplying timely, interesting information in a clean, clear, easily usable way. Do that, and you will have tapped into the power of the press.

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*About the Author:*

*Ami Hendrickson is an award-winning screenwriter and bestselling author. She has written for some of the leading horsemen in the world including the United States Hunter Jumper Association (USHJA), hunter trainer and judge Geoff Teall, neurosurgeon Dr. James Warson, and Clinton Anderson, of Downunder Horsemanship. Find out about her latest projects at [www.amihendrickson.com](http://www.amihendrickson.com).*

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