

WHAT IS PUBLIC RELATIONS?

Public relations is planned and continuous communication designed to promote an organization and its image, products or services to the public. Practitioners write news releases, produce video news releases (VNRs), orchestrate viral campaigns online, research markets and evaluate the success of publicity, all in the hope of getting publicity for their client. Success depends, however, on writing that will be acceptable to the news media. The beginning of this chapter gives a context for understanding the public relations practitioner's job, while the focus is writing for news media and working with journalists.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCIES

Some practitioners work in a public relations agency, representing companies or other organizations either throughout the year or for special events, such as an anniversary celebration or an election campaign. Public relations practitioners in agencies handle several accounts simultaneously. Agencies may be as small as a one-person consultant contracted to write and edit a company's print and online communications. This includes news releases, newsletters, brochures, blogs, RSS newswires, tweets, webcasts, websites and videos, for example. Or an agency can be a large, international network of offices. International conglomerates usually hire worldwide agencies to handle their public relations needs in different countries and cultures.

CORPORATE, NONPROFIT AND GOVERNMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations practitioners may work within a company (such as General Electric), a nonprofit organization (such as the American Cancer Society) or a government agency (such as the U.S. Department of Education). Publicists are also in public relations, often for celebrities, such as Tiger Woods. Public relations practitioners in corporate, nonprofit or governmental settings have two audiences they communicate with—an internal audience of officers and employees and an external audience of consumers, investors and the general public. Practitioners may handle either internal or external communications, or both, depending on the size of the organization.

Internal Communications Practitioners handling internal communications work to keep company employees informed about the organization. They ensure that all employees, whether in the same building or in a branch office several states away, think of themselves as part of the company.

For example, supervisors for Ford Motor Company in the Detroit headquarters want their employees in a production plant in Ohio to understand government regulations that might affect their work. The public relations practitioner creates lines of communication between supervisors and employees to make the employees aware of their roles in and contributions to the company's operations. Through the company website, newsletter or annual report, the practitioner informs employees of activities at the headquarters as well as other plants or offices. The practitioner helps employees understand changes in policies or business practices that will affect them, such as the opening of a plant or the launching of a new health care plan.

Some practitioners write features about employees and their contributions to the company. Others publish photographs and brief biographies of new employees in a company newsletter or press release or online article. Still others stage companywide competitions or host awards banquets for all personnel. In many ways, the practitioner resembles the theater director who coordinates the performances of others. The practitioner interviews and quotes a department head praising the new employee for the newsletter. The practitioner takes photos of the CEO shaking the hands of the winners of the companywide contests for the online press release. And, the president reads the practitioner's prepared speech at the awards banquet.

External Communications Public relations practitioners promote a positive image of the organization by identifying different publics and researching the best way to reach them. Those publics may be investors, customers, business associates, suppliers, government officials, industry advocates, community activists or opinion leaders. Practitioners may also want to enhance the employees' image of the organization. To influence opinions or project a positive image, most practitioners write news releases and features and send them to the media. Other tools and skills include developing press kits that contain information about the company; setting up speakers' bureaus; staging events; filming news clips; writing public service

announcements; holding meetings; and designing posters, brochures and pamphlets. Many of these and other public relations tools are also in video form and online. Public relations practitioners tweet and blog constantly and search print and online publications for mentions of their clients' names.

Corporations, such as BP Amoco, whose drilling operations caused a massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, sometimes face a crisis that requires working with the news media to keep the public informed of what they are doing. Hiding information from the media and the public can create a crisis in public confidence toward the corporation or organization. Toyota shook public confidence when it was found out that top executives may have known about the braking problems of its cars, but chose not to be proactive. Public relations professionals must deal with such crisis situations and get truthful information out to the public to protect the organization's reputation.

BECOMING A PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER

Numerous U.S. universities and colleges offer specializations in public relations. Many P.R. practitioners majored in journalism. A survey of members of the Public Relations Society of America found that professionals consider a news reporting course more important for public relations majors than any course in public relations. The class teaches students such things as how journalists define "news," news writing style and the importance of deadlines. In addition, many companies hire former reporters and editors as public relations practitioners because journalists have writing skills that are essential to the job.

WORKING WITH NEWS MEDIA

Public relations practitioners use the media to get information about their client to the public. First, practitioners determine which media outlets will best serve their purposes. In addition, practitioners know the writing styles, deadlines and other procedures of each target medium. News releases sent electronically to online and print news organizations are written in Associated Press style. Releases sent to radio stations are written in broadcast style and format so radio announcers can read them verbatim over the air. VNRs—video news releases—are produced so they can be inserted directly into a TV newscast. At one time, promotional material was put into folders and sent by postal carrier. Now, practitioners send digital press releases to an email address. Usually, press releases also are listed on a company's website.

A press release must be newsworthy and well written. If it is, it has a better chance of being used by the media. If the news release is poorly written or contains nothing newsworthy, it usually receives only a quick glance before being zapped by the delete button.

To make their promotional efforts effective, practitioners also learn whom to contact. They identify the proper news departments and the people in charge of the departments before sending out a release. "Shotgunning" a release—sending it to multiple departments in a news organization—wastes time and money. For example, most editors will delete a news release about an employee's promotion, but a business editor might report the promotion in a weekly column or section devoted to local promotions. Similarly, most editors would discard a news release about a Christmas program at a church, but a religion editor might mention it in a roundup about Christmas activities. By sending news releases to the right editor, practitioners increase the likelihood the releases will be used and decrease the chance of harming their reputations by wasting an editor's time.

Reporters also might follow up on an idea presented in a news release, but interview their own sources, write their own stories and present their own angles. Thus, although it appears practitioners are using journalists to achieve their goals, news releases help journalists stay informed about their community.

ELEMENTS OF A NEWS RELEASE

Journalists use news releases for several reasons:

- They are newsworthy.
- They are well written.
- They include important information that the public can use.

- They are not advertisements.
- They are localized.
- They are timely.

The following suggestions describe how to write a successful news release for news media. See the illustration on Page 539 describing the parts of a press release.

LIST A CONTACT PERSON AND A FOLLOW-UP

Reporters might want to follow up a news release to verify information or answer a question. Thus, an effective news release lists the contact information (name, email address, telephone number) of someone familiar with the subject of the release who can answer questions. Some releases might include a cover letter telling the editor more about the sponsoring company or suggesting ideas for using the attached release.

SEND THE RELEASE ON TIME

A news release received too close to deadline is less likely to be published or broadcast because editors have little or no time to verify information or get answers to questions. If the release is sent too early, then there is the likelihood that it is forgotten by its release time. If releases are sent by conventional mail, practitioners allow adequate time for mail to be handled and delivered. If sent by fax or email, practitioners know the correct fax number or email address so the release gets to the proper department or person. It is good practice to save and send electronic releases in several versions (e.g., a Microsoft Word document and Rich Text Format [RTF]) so the news organization can open the file.

USE JOURNALISM'S FIVE W'S

Practitioners write press releases in journalistic style. Reporters appreciate public relations practitioners who understand their definitions of news and write stories that could have an impact on the public. The best news releases are so good that it is difficult to distinguish them from the stories written by a news organization's own staff.

WRITE WELL

Similar to a journalist, a practitioner synthesizes sometimes difficult-to-understand information from different sources into something that is clear and useful to the public. A news release is written so readers with varying education levels can understand it. Language is concise and simple. Grammar and spelling are perfect. Sentences average about 20 words. Paragraphs are short and get to the point immediately. Practitioners write in the active voice, using the passive voice only when necessary.

Practitioners think of their news releases as a community service providing information the public needs. Their writing is lively and to the point, not boring and literary. They care about the quality of the work they produce so that it appears in the desired news medium.

LOCALIZE INFORMATION

News releases often present generalized information, failing to indicate how that information affects people in a community. Too often, practitioners confuse "localization" and "proximity." In fact, localizing can mean reflecting a psychological as well as geographical closeness. A press release about a U.S. Food and Drug administration report on a possible link between breast implants and cancer will affect the community of women with breast implants wherever they are. Similarly a Harvard Medical School study about the vision problems of elderly drivers will have personal importance for all who are elderly or who have elderly relatives. These topics affect the everyday lives of hundreds of thousands of readers and viewers.

PROVIDE VISUALS

Visuals, such as photographs or information graphics, catch the eye of readers, draw them into the story and illustrate major points. Public relations practitioners think about what visuals might be relevant to a release. Can a photograph help illustrate the information in the release? Can an infographic help the audience grasp the information? Thinking visually can help practitioners get their releases accepted by editors.

The Parts of a Press Release

The organization's contact information: Complete mailing and web address of the organization sending the release should be here. Also provide the name, telephone number and e-mail address of a contact person the journalist can reach in case of questions.

Release date: The release date tells when the information may be published. It might say, "For Immediate Release," or it might specify a date and time. News organizations have no legal obligation to adhere to release dates, but they usually do so as a matter of professional courtesy.

Immediate Release

**AMERICAN HORSE PUBLICATIONS
PRESS RELEASE**
For more information, contact: Heidi Kellar
49 Spinnaker Circle Dr., So. Daytona, FL 32119
(386) 760-7743 Fax: (386) 760-7728
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www.americanhorsepubs.org

DEADLINE DATE IS JAN. 14 FOR AHP STUDENT AWARD CONTEST

November 17— The AHP Student Award will give up to three \$750 travel awards to attend the AHP "Hoofprints in the Sand" Seminar in San Diego, California, on June 16-18. Travel Award winners have an opportunity to meet leading equine publishing professionals and discuss career possibilities during the three days of educational sessions and related activities.

One Travel Award winner will be selected at the seminar as the Student Award winner. The Student Award winner will win a cash award of \$1,000 plus an all-expense paid trip hosted by Publishers Press to one of their Two-Day Customer Education Seminars in Louisville, Kentucky, to have a unique experience to learn the printing process.

Student Award applicants are required to send a completed application form plus additional information by **January 14, 2011**. Eligible students may access guidelines and application at the AHP website at www.americanhorsepubs.org/students/student-award/index.asp

American Horse Publications is a non-profit association. . .

For Student Award Contest guidelines or more information on American Horse Publications and its programs, visit our website at www.americanhorsepubs.org or contact: Heidi Kellar, American Horse Publications, 49 Spinnaker Circle, South Daytona, FL 32119; Phone (386) 760-7743; Fax (386) 760-7728; E-mail: AHorsePubs@aol.com.

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American Horse Publications, 49 Spinnaker Circle Dr., So. Daytona, FL 32119. Phone: (386) 760-7743 Fax: (386) 760-7728.

The headline: Summarizes the information. It is typed in capital letters. If it requires two lines, it is single-spaced.

The body: Almost all releases are one page. If it is longer, then "more" needs to be placed at the bottom of the first page and a slug with the page number is at the top of the second page.

The closing: Type three number signs (###), or the word "end" or the number "30" within quotes or dashes. Some news releases repeat the contact information here or give a short descriptor of the company, if it is not in the body of the story.

Sections of a news release are standardized. This makes it easier for news reporters to look for needed information when deciding if and how to use the information.

But don't overwhelm editors with visuals. Keep them simple and to the point. Usually, one or two will do. If the information is online, then a video or podcast might help.

PROVIDE LINKS

Most organizations or corporations have websites, which can provide additional information on the topic addressed in the release. Websites that provide links to statistical information or other data help reporters answer questions they might have. In addition, links to trade or professional associations can supply expert sources for a story if reporters want to follow up the release. It is important that the release has adequate information, and the means for reporters to get additional information.

TYPES OF NEWS RELEASES

News releases may publicize a new company, explain a new company policy or point out the effects a company has on a community. The most common types of news releases are advance stories, event stories, features and discoveries. Examples of news releases are online at <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/>.

ADVANCE STORIES

Practitioners write announcements whenever their company or client will sponsor an activity such as a speech or seminar. Advance stories often use an “agenda” lead telling news organizations or readers what the event is, where it will be, whom it is for and whether those who want to attend will have to pay or register to attend. The advance release may also include some background information explaining the importance of the event. For example, a release announcing a clinic to screen people for risk of strokes might include statistics on the number of people who suffered strokes and what percentage of the strokes were fatal.

EVENT STORIES

When practitioners write a story before an event, they write it as though the event already has happened and the news organization is reporting on it. A release written in this manner serves two main purposes: First, it lets reporters know what will occur at the event, in case they want to cover it; second, it helps reporters write the story.

Journalists rarely publish such a release verbatim, and they should always verify the event occurred, as planned. There is nothing more embarrassing than publishing a story only to find out later that the event did not happen. The threat of being fired loomed when sportswriter Mitch Albom wrote a column early, but in past tense, as if he and his two interview subjects were at the Michigan State–North Carolina NCAA tournament Final Four game in St. Louis. In reality, none of the three were anywhere near the game.

Practitioners give reporters copies of speeches before they are delivered. This practice enables reporters to quote the speakers accurately. However, reporters usually attend the speeches because speakers may change some of their comments at the last moment.

FEATURES

Practitioners often write feature stories as press releases. Many features can interest a national audience. They provide interesting and important information and deal with subjects ranging from health, medicine and science to home and auto care. A well-written feature appears as an information piece rather than a blatant publicity piece for a client or organization. Sometimes features mention the client or organization as the sponsor of an event; at other times, they quote the client or organization as an authority or source for the article.

A religious organization, for example, might issue a feature story about a member who has just completed a mission abroad. The feature would describe the member’s work, whom the member met and what the member’s conclusions are about the accomplishments of the mission. All of this would be written in the style of a news feature story. Although most news organizations would not run such a release in its original form, reporters might follow up and seek to interview the member to prepare their own story, using some information from the release as background. Even if the release is never published verbatim, if it has attracted the attention of reporters it will have served its purpose.

DISCOVERIES AND RESULTS

Universities, hospitals, corporations and research institutions want the public to know about their discoveries and the results of their work. Announcements of discoveries highlight and enhance an organization’s reputation and keep the public aware of new advances in science and technology.

A news release from the National Federation of the Blind announced the development of an automobile that could be driven by a blind person without assistance from a sighted one. The release said the

vehicle, a modified version of a Ford Escape, had been developed as a result of the NFB Blind Driver Challenge. The release described the program, the people who were responsible for creating it, the team of university students and engineers who developed the vehicle and the significance of the discovery for blind people.

FROM THE JOURNALIST'S PERSPECTIVE: WORKING WITH PRESS RELEASES

Newspapers are besieged by individuals and organizations seeking free publicity. Metropolitan newspapers receive thousands of news releases and other requests for publicity each week. Smaller newspapers receive hundreds of releases in a week.

For most news organizations, news releases are an important source of story ideas and information. No news organization can hire enough reporters to cover every story occurring in a community. Instead, news media depend on readers and viewers to notify them about church and school activities; charitable events and fundraisers; business and medical news; art, music and theater events and schedules; speakers; and festivals.

Reporters handle news releases as they would any other type of story—and they follow up for verification. Their first task is to identify a central point. If the release lacks a central point, the reporter discards it. If a central point is there, then the reporter identifies the relevant information and discards the rest. Reporters also use the central point to identify what information is missing.

Reporters then critically examine whatever information the news release provides and summarize that information as clearly, concisely and objectively as possible. The task often is difficult because some news releases fail to emphasize any news. Others contain clichés, jargon and puffery. Moreover, most fail to use the proper style for capitalization, punctuation and abbreviations.

Typically, editors will discard 100 news releases for every three or four they accept. Some editors do not even open all the news releases they receive. Rather, they glance to see who sent the release, then throw it away if they recognize that it came from a source that regularly submits trivial information. For example, journalists are unlikely to use a news release from a company that has no presence in a community or surrounding area, such as manufacturing plants or franchise outlets. Some companies send out announcements about the promotion of executives at corporate headquarters hundreds of miles away. Few news organizations will use such releases because they are of little interest to people in their community.

The worst news releases, usually those submitted by local groups unfamiliar with the media, lack information that reporters need to write complete stories. They also omit the names and contact information of people whom the reporters might call to obtain more information, or explanations of unclear facts.

Editors usually do not use news releases as submitted. Instead, they have reporters rewrite them, confirming the information and adding to it with quotes and additional facts. These editors are aware that the same release was blasted out to many other news organizations and they want their story to be different. Also, they might want to confirm the accuracy and truthfulness of the information submitted by publicists.

Other editors use news releases primarily as a source of ideas. If editors like an idea provided by a news release, they will assign reporters to gather more information and write a story. Sometimes the published story is very different from the one presented in the news release.

THE NO. 1 PROBLEM: LACK OF NEWSWORTHINESS

Journalists obviously prefer news releases about topics that satisfy their definitions of news. They look for topics that are new, local, interesting, unusual, relevant and important to their audience. Journalists also look for information likely to affect hundreds or thousands of people. Action is more newsworthy than opinions, and a genuine or spontaneous event is more newsworthy than a contrived one. Only weeklies in small communities publish news releases about ribbon-cutting and groundbreaking ceremonies or publish photographs showing people passing a check or gavel.

LIMITED INTEREST

News organizations might not use releases like the following because their topics would not interest many people—except, of course, members of the organizations they mention. Those organizations can use other means, such as newsletters, to communicate with their members. That is not the job of a news organization:

May-Ling Chavez, president and CEO of Your Home Security Services, has been selected to attend the Tri-State Business Leadership Conference to be held in Washington, D.C., the first week in April.

CONTRIVED EVENTS

Reporters are likely to discard the following news releases because they announce contrived events:

The president has joined with the blood bank community in proclaiming January as National Volunteer Blood Donor Month and is urging everyone who is healthy to donate blood to help others.

Every week and every month of the year is dedicated to some cause, and often to dozens of causes. For example, May is Arthritis Month, National High Blood Pressure Month, National Foot Health Month, Better Speech and Hearing Month, National Tavern Month and American Bike Month. Furthermore, the news release states the obvious. Most responsible adults would urge “everyone who is healthy to donate blood to help others.”

REWRITING FOR NEWSWORTHINESS

Many of the people writing news releases seem to be more interested in pleasing their bosses than in satisfying the media and informing the public. They begin news releases with the CEO’s (chief executive officer’s) name. Or, they might begin with the organization’s name and information about the organization before focusing on the news aspect of the release.

Rep. Wayne Smith, R-Mo., is leading the fight to push the Federal Trade Commission to combat predatory and exorbitant interest rates charged by the nation’s banks and credit card companies.

Smith is sponsoring legislation in Congress to cap interest rates that can reach as high as 24 percent on some credit cards. In addition Smith says banks and credit card companies continue to send out credit card solicitation offers to people who already are weighed down by a mountain of debt.

“These solicitations go out to everyone, but young people, seniors and minorities are among the most affected by these practices because they can get into debt quickly and never get the balances paid off,” Smith said. “The payments are so low on many of these cards that the only thing that gets paid if there is a balance due each month is the interest.

Smith said many people carry huge amounts of credit card debt because the high interest rates add so much to the balance each month.

REVISED: Congress is considering legislation to lower the interest rates that banks and credit card companies charge consumers.

The legislation, sponsored by Rep. Wayne Smith, R-Mo., will seek to have the Federal Trade Commission investigate lending institutions accused of charging consumers exorbitant interest rates on their credit cards or practicing predatory soliciting to get consumers’ business.

Other news releases are editorials that philosophize or praise rather than report information beneficial to the public. News outlets do not praise or editorialize in a news story. That is not their job, nor is it ethical for them to do so. A news release submitted by a state’s beef producers announcing National Meat Week and praising the flavor and health benefits of beef is unlikely to find space in a newspaper or time on a news broadcast.

News organizations might use the following release, with revisions, because it describes a topic likely to interest some readers:

TV programs making violence exciting and fun entertainment are said to lead the new Fall programs, according to the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV). NCTV has just

released its most recent monitoring results of prime-time network programs. Violence is portrayed at the rate of about seven violent acts per hour, with new programs taking three of the top four violent spots.

REVISED: Prime-time network programs contain about seven acts of violence every hour, and this fall's new programs are among the most violent, according to the National Coalition on Television Violence.

THE NO. 2 PROBLEM: LACK OF OBJECTIVITY

Too many news releases promote rather than report. They contain laudatory adverbs and adjectives, not facts.

ADVERTISEMENTS

The worst news releases are blatant advertisements, obviously written to help sell an image, product or service. Most journalists would reject the following news release for that reason. Some news organizations might find that the information fits in the travel or business sections.

Nothing says romance like an intimate getaway to a beautiful sugar-white sand beach, an evening of dancing, champagne toasts, culinary delights and spectacular sunsets. With several love-themed packages, the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa—located on the beaches of Northwest Florida—is giving couples the opportunity to experience the ultimate romantic escape this February.

“The Hilton Sandestin provides the ideal atmosphere for couples at this time of year, thanks to our stunning location, enjoyable temperatures, and countless recreation *and* relaxation options,” said Karen Cooksey, Director of Sales and Marketing at the Hilton Sandestin. “With packages designed with love in mind, we’re offering couples the opportunity to experience it here in February.”

LAUDATORY ADJECTIVES AND PUFFERY

Journalists eliminate laudatory adjectives in rewriting news releases. Terms such as “world famous,” the “best” or the “greatest” are subjective at best and difficult to verify. Calling someone a “guest speaker” is a redundancy, and no speaker should be labeled “famous,” “well-known” or “distinguished.” If a speaker is famous, the public already will know the person—and will not have to be told of his or her fame.

No news story—or news release—should call a program “wonderful,” “successful,” “timely” or “informative.” Similarly, nothing should be called “interesting” or “important.” Reporters also avoid phrases such as “bigger and better,” “the best ever” and “back by popular demand.”

Puffery often appears in leads of news releases:

Anyone wanting to learn how to deal with conflict needs to talk to a professional—and that professional is Jason Taylor. Taylor is a well-known expert and extremely talented speaker on the subject of handling conflict. His six-step program on conflict resolution has been touted as



the best program ever to help ordinary people deal with the huge conflicts that can arise in their lives and rob them of the quality of life they so richly deserve.

Taylor will be presenting a two-hour seminar about his program beginning at 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 9, in the Fellowship Hall of First Presbyterian Church, 1387 Downing Ave. The title of the program is "Managing Conflict in your Life."

REVISED: Jason Taylor, who is an expert in conflict resolution, will present a seminar on his six-step program for resolving conflict beginning at 7 p.m. Sept. 9, in the Fellowship Hall of First Presbyterian Church, 1387 Downing Ave.

TELLING THE PUBLIC WHAT TO DO

Instead of reporting news, some releases urge readers and viewers to donate their time and money, to buy new products, to attend events or to join organizations, such as the following examples:

- You have to see this display to believe it!
- Every dollar you give stays in your community. So give—you'll be glad you did.
- Tickets are available for \$60 per person, or reserve a table of eight for \$400. That's a savings of \$80. Seating is limited so get your tickets right away!

Journalists delete such editorial comments or rewrite them in a more factual manner. Reporters might summarize a story and then, in the final paragraph, tell readers how they can respond, but not say that they should respond:

Tickets for the program are available to the public at the Performing Arts Center and by calling 422-4896, for \$15 each. Seating will not be reserved, so the public is urged to arrive early to hear this most important message on the subject of health care.

REVISED: Tickets cost \$15 and can be obtained at the Performing Arts Center by calling 422-4896 or going online to www.performingarts.org.

OTHER PROBLEMS WITH NEWS RELEASES

STATING THE OBVIOUS

Public relations writers who lack journalism training often write releases that state the obvious:

- The state fire marshal's office today emphasized the importance of having working smoke detectors in homes and businesses as a way to save lives.
- Parents are worried more than ever about the amount of violence in our society.

A fire marshal is expected to encourage the use of smoke detectors to save lives. That is a routine part of the official's job, and not news. Similarly, violence has always been a problem; generations of parents have worried about it.

In some releases, the real news is buried in subsequent sentences or paragraphs.

Helping people is a rewarding experience, especially for those who volunteer their time or donate money for their local communities. The reward is seeing friends and neighbors, as well as strangers, benefit from the time and money donated for community projects. Dr. Ronald Bishop, a social psychologist specializing in the subject of private giving, claims that the act of giving is part of the social fabric of a community and helps people become more connected to their community.

Bishop is one of several experts who will present a program on volunteerism and how to get involved with your community that will be presented at 7 p.m. Tuesday, March 5, in the Town Hall auditorium. This interesting and challenging program is designed to raise awareness of volunteering as a way for communities to help themselves develop and achieve common goals.

REVISED: Ronald Bishop, a specialist in private giving, will be one of several people presenting a program on volunteerism and community involvement at 7 p.m. March 5 in the Town Hall auditorium.

ABSENCE OF SOLID FACTS

Some sentences contain generalities, platitudes and self-praise, but not facts. By rewriting news releases, journalists eliminate sentences that praise a seminar's "array of speakers" or the "excitement" of a theatrical performance.

Such gush often appears in direct quotations, but that never justifies its use. If a quotation lacks substance, reporters will discard it, too:

"We're very excited about the opening of the new store," said Betty McKinney, president. "The store represents a new direction for us and extends our commitment to provide customers with the highest quality products at the lowest possible prices."

The platitudes and generalities sound familiar because they are used so often. For example, the following platitudes are similar but appeared in news releases that two different companies used to describe new employees:

- We are fortunate to have a woman with Russell's reputation and background as a member of the team. Her knowledge and experience will be invaluable as we broaden our sales and marketing base.
- We were impressed with Belmonte's accomplishments and his professionalism. We're extremely pleased with our good fortune in having him join us.

ONE-SIDED STORIES

Almost all news releases are one-sided and benefit the client. The client's opinions sometimes are presented as fact.

Reporters might be tempted to accept the information provided by a news release because doing so is fast and easy. Reporters check the facts in a news release to avoid serious errors. For example, a college newspaper missed a major story because it received and immediately published a news release announcing that eight faculty members had received tenure and promotions. The news release failed to reveal the real story: the fact that the college had denied tenure to a dozen other faculty members, including some of the college's most popular teachers, because they were not considered good researchers. Moreover, the faculty members who did not get tenure were, in essence, fired. A single telephone call would have uncovered the real story.

USING THE MEDIA

Media analyze the objective of news releases to avoid being used. For example, Paul N. Strassels, a former tax law specialist for the Internal Revenue Service, charged that the IRS uses the media to scare taxpayers. Each year, stories about tax evaders who have been sentenced to prison begin to appear in the media shortly before the April deadline for filing income tax returns. Strassels explained: "It's the policy of the IRS public affairs office to issue such stories at the time when you are figuring your taxes. The service knows that prison stories make good copy. It's simply manipulation." A member of Congress accused the IRS of using tactics "carefully designed to threaten the American taxpayer"—to keep people in a constant state of fear so that fewer will cheat on their taxes.

SOME FINAL GUIDELINES

Whenever possible, reporters localize the news releases they handle. A news release from a national organization might announce the awarding of college scholarships to students across the country. A perceptive reporter will examine the list of scholarship winners and, if there are any from his community, rewrite the press release to put that fact at the top of the story.

Second, avoid unnecessary background information, especially statements about a group's philosophy, goals or organization. The information rarely is necessary. Moreover, it would become too repetitious and waste too much space if reporters included it in every story about a group. If an organization has an ideological or political agenda, that ideology should be described briefly, usually in a sentence or less.

Check **LISTS**

Checklist for PR Practitioners

DOES THE NEWS RELEASE PROVIDE THE PROPER INFORMATION?

1. A contact person, telephone number and email address?
2. The address of the public relations agency or department?
3. The client and a website?
4. A release date, indicating an appropriate publication date? (Normally, news releases are written in advance of an event.)
5. Links for more information?

IS THE NEWS RELEASE WRITTEN IN JOURNALISTIC STYLE?

1. Does the opening paragraph, or lead, of the release focus on the who, what, when, where and why of the story?
2. Does it have a short headline summarizing the release?
3. Does the text conform to Associated Press style, especially in the handling of addresses, employee titles, dates and time elements?
4. Is it localized?
5. Is puffery eliminated?

Checklist for Journalists Handling News Releases

DOES THE NEWS RELEASE HAVE NEWS VALUE?

1. What is the central point of the release?
2. Is it newsworthy?
3. Does it involve an issue likely to interest or affect many members of your community—or only a few, such as the members of the organization distributing the news release?
4. Does it involve a genuine rather than a contrived event, such as a proclamation, groundbreaking or ribbon cutting?
5. Does it have unnecessary words and puffery?

DOES THE NEWS RELEASE NEED REWRITING?

1. Does the lead emphasize the news, or is it buried in a later paragraph?
2. Does it begin by stating the obvious?
3. Does it begin with an unnecessary name?
4. Does the lead need to be localized?
5. Is the release clear and concise?
6. Does the release contain only information necessary to fully develop its central point?
7. Is the release comprehensive enough to develop the central point?
8. Does the release contain any clichés, jargon or generalities? Even if they appear in direct quotations, eliminate them.
9. Whom does the news release benefit, the public or its source?
10. Is the release objective, or does it include puffery, self-promotion and unsubstantiated claims?
11. Does it unnecessarily urge the public to act (on the client's behalf)?
12. Does the news release present every side of a controversial issue? Most likely not, so the journalist has some work to do.