



THE ULTIMATE PRESS RELEASE

How to Create Breakthrough Press Materials
for the Digital Age

Tactics Anybody Can Use to Craft and Distribute Releases
That Drive Media Coverage and Consumer Response



By Evan Cooper

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The Amazingly Popular—and Often Unread—Press Release

Some time about a dozen years ago, the press release broke through the fourth wall. Let me explain.

“Breaking the fourth wall,” is a term used in film, theater, television and literary works referring to a character directly addressing an audience, or actively acknowledging that the characters and action are not real.

In applying this analogy to press releases, I’m not saying that the content of press releases are fiction. (Although some of my colleagues in the press might argue that releases aren’t precisely non-fiction either, but that’s another issue). Rather, it’s the form and construction of press releases that are based on a certain fiction: that the information being conveyed—while written by the source of the information—is coming from a neutral, disinterested third-party.

Let me make that explanation more concrete. An airline publicizing a new route would not write a release starting: “Attention air travelers headed for Brazil—we just started flying 747’s non-stop from New York to Rio de Janeiro every day of the week.” Instead, a PR person would write: “North South Airlines today announced that it has inaugurated daily non-stop Boeing 747 service between New York City and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.”

Formality and tone aside, the biggest difference between the two versions is that the latter was written the way a newspaper or wire service would start the story. This convention, or fiction, of writing about one’s organization in the third-person came about for a good reason. Until the advent of the World Wide Web, the only non-advertising conduit available to newsmakers trying to deliver their message to the public were newspapers, wire services and other formal print and broadcast “media,” which literally sit in the middle between the creators of the news and the consumers of news. To help reporters and editors who gather, assess and craft information that is then disseminated—and to help increase the odds that the story being pitched will be among the relative few that the journalist-middlemen pick out of the crowd—publicists imitated the media’s style and wrote their material in the form of a news story.

While press releases written by the most experienced former journalists seldom appear in print or on air precisely as composed (no self-respecting writer or editor would let a press release pass through her hands without doing something to it), they often appear in the finished news product in a way that’s eminently recognizable.

But back to the fourth wall business . . .

Once the Internet wove itself into our lives in the Nineties, the public was able to get its hands and eyes on the same raw news material—the press release, or news release, as the vehicle is now more widely known—that had been a tool used