

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

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Contents

1	The Amazingly Popular—and Often Unread—Press Release	1
2	What’s News and Who Cares? How to Develop News Sense	3
3	Writing the Break-Through News Release	7
4	When the News Is Softer: Writing Non-Breaking and Feature Releases	11
5	11 Press Release Do’s, Don’ts, Always and Nevers	15
6	Other Release Tools: Photos, Fact Sheets, Bios, By-Liners	17
7	Targeting and Placing Your Release in the Online Age	20
8	One More Consideration: Luck Comes to the Prepared	25
9	Resources, Online and Otherwise	26
10	Frequently Asked Questions About Press Releases	27
	About the Author	29
	Bonus Materials: Press Release Success—Reports from the Front Lines	30

1

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,” says Wikipedia, is a term used in film, theater, television and literary works. It refers to a character directly addressing an audience, or actively acknowledging that the characters and action are not real. “Various artists have used this jarring effect to make a point, as it forces an audience to see the fiction in a new light and to watch it less passively,” says the online encyclopedia.

Applying this analogy to press releases, let me emphasize that I am NOT labeling press releases fiction. (Some journalists might argue that releases aren't precisely non-fiction either, but that's another issue). But the *form and construction* of the press release 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 stating simply, “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 (or anybody saddled with publicity for their startup, company or client—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 even 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 . . .