



DISRUPTING THE PRESS RELEASE

Breaking through the clutter
and engaging journalists with
credibility and value

A WEALTH OF INSIGHTS ON HOW OUR PROFESSION CAN WRITE MORE EFFECTIVE NEWS RELEASES AND BUILD STRONGER MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS WITH REPORTERS.

The insights contained in Greentarget's *Disrupting the Press Release* have validity because they are drawn not from the folks who write press releases but from the journalists who tell us they read them. The importance of crafting press releases that appeal to the target audience may seem self-evident, but we believe it's something that professional communicators all too often lose sight of—and the journalists we surveyed would seem to agree.

That's especially problematic in today's world, where, more than ever before, it's vital for all types of communicators to understand and empathize with the audiences they're trying to reach. Just as journalists are inundated with press releases, readers of all stripes are struggling to avoid drowning in an ocean of content.

This is why we believe many marketers should embrace corporate journalism. Using key elements of traditional journalism—accurate reporting, lively writing and audience empathy, for starters—corporate journalism enables business communicators to connect with key stakeholders in a way that builds credibility, engagement and brand awareness.

We wrote more extensively on this topic in our recent *State of Digital and Content Marketing Survey* and its accompanying analysis. We hope you'll read that and give it some thought.

But in the meantime, please dig into the data and analysis contained in our *Disrupting the Press Release* report. We'd love to hear your feedback, and we're excited to see some disruptive press releases on the wires.



CORPORATE JOURNALISM ENABLES MARKETERS

to connect with key stakeholders in a way that builds credibility, engagement and brand awareness.

— John Corey



FOR A REFRESHINGLY EASY TO READ RELEASE, LOOK NO FURTHER THAN THE COPS.

To write a press release that gives reporters what they want, you could do a lot worse than copying the cops.

Police departments, it turns out, tend to crank out releases that are concise, unadorned and refreshingly easy to read. That is exactly what reporters and editors are looking for, according to a new Greentarget study aimed at uncovering what really works in a press release—and what our profession could be doing better.



News releases should follow the three-second rule: **YOU'VE GOT THREE SECONDS TO GET MY ATTENTION.** Please don't make me wade through a bunch of boilerplate, taglines and patting-ourselves-on-the-back quotes to find out if the news release is relevant.



Give us the news and other vital information as quickly as possible, the journalists told us. No unnecessary verbiage or industry jargon. Minimal boilerplate. Fewer sentences. Substantive quotes that sound like a human spoke them.

Those are the core findings from our *2014 Disrupting the Press Release* study, which was based on a survey of 100 journalists and a series of focus groups with reporters and editors in Chicago and New York.





I dislike press releases that have “spin.” I **JUST WANT THE FACTS. NOT A SALES PITCH**, not canned quotes about how fantastic the person/company/event is.



We learned that reporters' time is more precious than ever thanks to years of media downsizing and the ever-increasing demands on journalists to produce digital content. It is increasingly difficult for any press release to grab a reporter's attention—but no less vital.

The good news is that most of the journalists told us they still value press releases. In fact we were heartened to learn how much importance reporters continue to place in releases, and how much respect they maintain for the people who produce them. **More than one-third of the journalists we surveyed get story ideas from press releases, and a full 88 percent find them valuable.**

But in a world where 45 percent of our survey respondents get 50 or more releases per week—and 21 percent of the group get at least 100 per week—standing out from the group requires useful, smart, direct content. And a touch of creativity. The journalists surveyed provided valuable critiques and a wealth of helpful guidance for creating releases that can be more effective in today's world.

COPY THE COPS?



It's no wonder reporters and editors crave brevity: Nearly 70 percent of the journalists we surveyed spend less than a minute reading new press releases. That's why they want releases they can read at a glance. An effective release, the journalists told us, should quickly tell them who is involved, what is new, why it matters and how to reach the principal spokespeople.

When we asked whose releases they particularly appreciated, several respondents pointed to a surprising place: police departments. Law enforcement releases, they said, are unfailingly brief, efficiently organized and dependably unadorned. Just the facts, ma'am.

“I can usually tell within seconds if the release is relevant, can extract the info I want, and easily find the contact information for anyone I might need to reach for follow-up,” one respondent wrote in our survey. “They don't waste time with puffery or extraneous thoughts.”

Do the goals and priorities of law enforcement communicators apply to those in the business world? Absolutely. Still, you don't need a badge and gun to write a succinct press release. To see what the journalists in our survey were talking about, take a look at a recent release from the Chicago Police Department.

News Release
Mediaville Police Department

For Immediate Release
April 1, 2014

Contact: Office of News Affairs
312-252-4100

Man Charged in Traffic Crash

Name: Ted Bear, 49
Residence: 1432 Nicolas Drive
Mediaville, IL

Charges: 2 Felony Counts of Aggravated Fleeing
1 Misdemeanor Count of Driving Under the Influence of Alcohol
1 Misdemeanor Count of Driving on a Suspended License
1 Misdemeanor Count of Criminal Damage to Property – Knowing Damage
Property Less than \$300
Various Traffic Citations

Court: Central Bond Court, Spooner and Evergreen – April 1, 2014

Narrative: Bear was the driver of a vehicle that Mediaville Police attempted to curb for a minor traffic violation on March 31 at approximately 8:40 p.m. Bear fled and committed several traffic violations until striking a vehicle and four pedestrians at the 120 block of 81st Street. Bear was placed in custody and charged accordingly.

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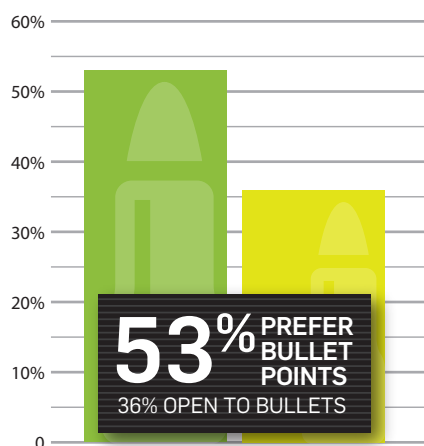


68% OF JOURNALISTS JUST WANT THE FACTS

AND YOU'VE GOT **LESS**
THAN A MINUTE TO DELIVER.



Who (Name). What (Charges). When, where and how (Narrative). Most of this information is delivered with bullet points. Even in the Narrative section, the police stick to simple, declarative sentences—laying out the facts without “puffery or extraneous thoughts.” There are no florid adjectives, none of the self-serving interpretation that often leads journalists to suspect they’re being spun. Mr. Pugh’s defense attorney might dispute the facts, but there’s not much room to argue with how they’re presented.



And while it may be hard to imagine your painstakingly crafted two-page release boiled down to bullet points, the reality is that journalists would probably prefer it that way. In our survey, 53 percent of the journalists said they’d find it helpful if the key facts in a release were presented in a bulleted format. Another 36 percent said they were at least open to the idea.



The easiest releases to navigate are those that are direct, not attempting to be cute or clever. I’m not an end consumer, so **I DON’T NEED TO BE HOOKED. I JUST NEED TO FIND THE MAIN POINT QUICKLY** so that I am free to move on.





In general, as I am so busy, and to be honest, **MY INBOX IS GETTING SO OUT OF CONTROL,** I want to know exactly what the news is from the subject line of the email and be able to determine whether it is relevant to me in the first paragraph of the press release.



In both our survey and our focus groups, journalists expressed deep frustration that they're too often forced to hunt through long strings of text to find the news. And much of that text, they complained, is loaded with industry jargon, elaborate language and corporate spin—when what they need first and foremost is to quickly ascertain what's happening and whether it's relevant to their audience.

Making those judgments has always been a key part of a reporter's job. What's changed is how quickly they must be made in today's rapid-fire news cycle. News organizations are producing more content with fewer journalists, putting intense pressure on reporters and editors. Meanwhile the releases continue to pour in.

Given that deluge, it's easy to see why so many reporters grow perturbed when they receive releases that clearly don't apply to their beats or their publications—disappointingly common occurrences, nearly all of them say. And it's understandable when they say the most important parts of a release are the first things they set eyes on, starting with the subject line.

Fully 79 percent of journalists we surveyed said the subject line affects their interest in reading a press release. In focus groups, journalists told us that releases with words like “exclusive,” or that give them a taste of the news inside, get opened. Those that fail to catch their eye, or don't hint at new and relevant information, get deleted.



A GOOD SUBJECT LINE GETS YOUR PRESS RELEASE OPENED, 79% SAY

If you do manage to survive a reporter's daily inbox purge and you've got them reading your release, it becomes crucial to deliver the information they need as efficiently as possible. This isn't just professional courtesy—this is where you can help shape the coverage, because the basic facts are the information most likely to find their way into a resulting story. Nearly 70 percent of the journalists we surveyed say this basic information is the part of the press release they most often use in subsequent coverage. (Another 23 percent say the relevant contact information is the most useful—another reason to admire the Chicago Police Department release, which presents a phone number at top right.)

None of this is to say that reporters don't read beyond the first few lines of a press release. In fact, they often do. In our focus groups, journalists told us they frequently pour over releases thoroughly to gain context and understanding. And they regularly use press releases for reference—checking spelling, titles and other facts, for instance—and on rare occasions even for quotes, such as when they're on deadline and can't reach a source. But what's clear is that you can't expect them to use any of that info if you don't hook them from the start.



REPORTERS SAY THEY VALUE THE PRESS RELEASE AS A STORY-GENERATING TOOL.

While the journalists used our survey and focus groups largely to tell us all the things they don't like about press releases, to vent their exasperation and even to take our profession to task (quite colorfully, in a few cases), it wasn't a total bloodbath. As we mentioned earlier, reporters say they value the release as a story-generating tool.

Further, in survey comments and focus groups, the journalists we heard from were constructive in their criticism, expressing hope that they could help improve upon what most of them consider an important resource.

This is a two-way street. Just as journalists know they have to work with publicists, we must also value and nourish those relationships. While our clients will always be our most vital constituency, our success will also rely on fostering mutually beneficial relationships with reporters and editors.

We believe writing better press releases will deliver immediate results in the form of increased response and coverage. But by showing journalists that we respect their time, are mindful of their obligations and want to help them do their jobs, we also believe that writing releases as we've described could pay immense long-term dividends in the form of more respectful and productive relationships between business and the press.



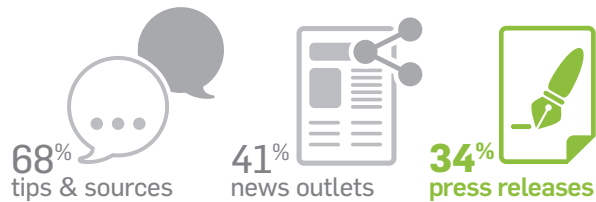
SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS



PRESS RELEASES MATTER

88% find value

We asked journalists how valuable they find press releases in their jobs. Encouragingly, 41 percent said they're "sometimes valuable," 25 percent said "valuable" and 22 percent said "very valuable." That means 88 percent get some value from press releases.



Where stories come from

Most story ideas come from the same place they've always come from: tips and other information imparted by sources. Sixty-eight percent of the journalists we surveyed told us that's where they get story ideas. Another 41 percent say they get ideas from other news outlets, and 34 percent get them from press releases.



Thought leadership reigns

Journalists find releases that contain thought leadership—surveys, report results, etc.—most valuable. Product and service launches come in second. **The least valuable: personnel announcements.**





80%
prefer email
press releases



11%
prefer newswire
releases



0%
prefer a
phone call

... as does email

Nearly 80 percent of respondents prefer to receive press releases via email. No other medium comes close. Distribution services like PRNewswire were a distant second, with 11 percent saying they prefer to get releases that way. Exactly zero out of 100 journalists said they prefer a phone call.

OF PRESS RELEASES RECEIVED EACH WEEK



Inboxes are overflowing

As mentioned above, nearly half of the journalists we surveyed get at least 50 releases per week — 24 percent say they get 50 to 100, and 21 percent say they get 100-plus. Another 40 percent peg the number at 10 to 50 releases per week.



44%
prefer an early morning release

Early release gets the worm

Forty-four percent of respondents told us they prefer to get press releases in the morning — probably because they are more likely to be on deadline in the afternoon. But don't worry too much about beating the clock — 48 percent said the time of day doesn't matter.

69%
spend less than a minute

30% spend one to five minutes reading



Gone in 60 seconds

A full 69 percent of journalists spend less than a minute reading press releases, on average. Another 30 percent spend one to five minutes.

46% think a tweet release could work

Tweet release? It could work

Forty-six percent of our respondents said they'd consult Twitter for press releases if the releases were adapted for that social network. No other social platform really registered on this question; 40 percent of the journalists said they wouldn't consult any social network for releases.

68% want

THE
FACTS

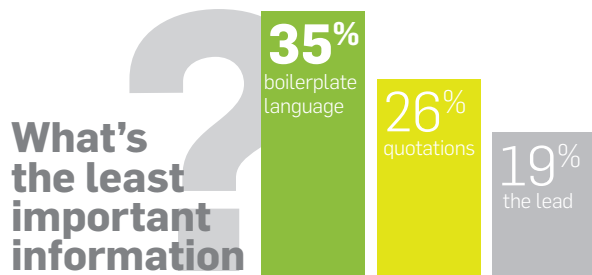
23% want

CONTACT
INFO

What really matters: The facts

In case we weren't clear the first dozen times we said it: The basic facts are the most important element of a press release. And 68 percent of the journalists in our survey say those facts are the aspect of the press release they use most in producing stories. For 23 percent, it's the contact information.





What matters a lot less: Everything else

Conversely, when we asked what element of a release they are least likely to use in stories, 35 percent said the boilerplate language at the bottom, 26 percent said the quotes and 19 percent said the lead. Those top three categories constitute 80 percent of the group.



Quotes have some value

When asked whether they use quotes from press releases in their stories, and if so under what circumstances, 31 percent said "rarely." Another 28 percent said they use quotes only when they're on deadline and can't get an interview. But 28 percent said they use quotes "regularly," and only 13 percent of the journalists said they "never" use quotes. Our analysis follows this related point ...

“ 34% say quotes are stilted, unnatural and lack substance. ”

But not if those quotes are hollow or stilted

Half of the journalists say their biggest complaint about press release quotes is that the language doesn't sound natural. Thirty-four percent say the quotes aren't substantive enough. Only nine percent have no complaints about quotes. Taken with the preceding data on usage, we believe this shows that journalists are willing to use quotes and would do so more often if the language were more substantive and genuine.

Pet peeves: The simple stuff

It's no surprise that journalists' biggest pet peeves are releases that don't pertain to their beats or aren't relevant to the audiences they serve. What is perhaps surprising is that they still get those releases. The good news is that it's not difficult to simply make sure your releases are going to the right places, and that alone will separate your work from much of the garbage out there. The third- and fourth-most common complaints are that releases are poorly written and too long.



DEFINING THE SURVEY METHODOLOGY



To garner these results, Greentarget conducted both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of responses from various members of the media, including editors, reporters, producers and other staff members via an online survey.

Additionally, Greentarget interviewed journalists through two in-person focus groups — in Chicago and New York — and one phone focus group to gather opinions regarding press releases and information flow between PR professionals and members of the media. Of the 100 respondents to the online survey, 41 percent identified themselves as reporters, 51 percent as editors and 8 percent as producers or other reporting staff.

Fifty-eight percent of respondents said they worked in print media — either newspapers or magazines — whereas 37 percent worked at an online media outlet and the remainder were in broadcast. Respondents work for a mix of regional (42 percent), national (24 percent) and industry (34 percent) media. More than half of the respondents (54 percent) have worked in the journalism industry for more than 11 years. Seventeen percent of respondents have worked in the industry from six to 10 years and 28 percent are newcomers, with one to five years of experience.



TO LEARN MORE, CONTACT US AT

312.252.4100

www.greentarget.com