



Healthcare Marketing

Writing an Effective News Release

Each day healthcare reporters at daily newspapers or major trade magazines receive an average of 150 or more press releases via mail, fax, e-mail or specialized wire service. Some contain obviously important news such as which HMOs are continuing their Medicare programs, earnings reports, or the announcement of a hospital's new CEO. Many reporters consider other news releases to be frivolous, such as a software company that introduces version 5.3 of a program or the opening of a satellite office.

News releases are important tools that allow organizations to communicate relevant information to their target audiences. They can help position a company on key issues, build awareness of a new product or service, increase brand-name awareness, and in general, ensure that an organization's marketing and communication objectives are met.

Yet reporters continue to complain about the poor quality of releases and about the time they waste on inconsequential news releases that are irrelevant to their audience. Likewise, executives often grouse that reporters ignore important news and sometimes complain about reporters' lack of ability to understand what is news for the industry. Who is right about the state of news releases today? While some truth exists on both sides, marketers and healthcare executives need to realize that ultimately, they must ensure their releases meet the needs of editors and their readers - not their own.

To ensure that your releases get the attention of busy reporters and accomplish their communications goals, consider reviewing your current news release development process and content as well as some basic news release writing tips. While these tips aren't new, they warrant revisiting to ensure that your important messages are being clearly and effectively communicated.

Know your audience

Your audience is not only the target audience you are trying to reach, but also the editors and reporters at the publication. They are the individuals who screen releases and determine which ones to use. Make sure you are familiar with the publication and its editorial guidelines. For example, many publications today do not publish news on promotions below the level of vice president or run any releases on awards or new contracts. News releases of this type will automatically go to "file 13." More importantly, they will show the editor that you are not familiar with their needs, which could affect future efforts to secure coverage.

Make sure your news is news

Our nation's healthcare system is in crisis. Costs are rising. Concern over medication errors is increasing. Uncertainty over the effects of proposed legislation (e.g., HIPAA, prescription drug cards, Medicare reimbursement, etc.) is growing. Organizations that have programs or resources to address these issues, and more specifically that have quantifiable data to support claims, will be viewed as newsworthy. Likewise, if

your announcement will have an impact on a significant segment of the publications' readers, the editors will pay more attention to your news. In short, no matter how excited upper management is about a new program, ask yourself:

- Who really cares about this information?
- Will it affect a significant portion of our industry?
- Does this release provide useful information such as background on a new program or study?
- Does it provide useful information that readers could use to change or improve the way they operate?
- Does it highlight or provide insight into an important industry trend? Is it simply a "me-too" release?

Take the process one step further

Formalize the "What Makes a Good News Release" concept. Have your organization's top leadership develop its own list of standards for what makes a good release. If your information doesn't meet those criteria, don't write a release, even if you are getting pressure from a department head or upper management. Simply point to the guidelines and let the individual know that you are simply following agreed-upon standards. This step doesn't mean you can't publicize the news - you can always send a letter to an editor. Using a checklist for news releases will ensure your releases are on target and provide a level of objectivity that ultimately everyone in the company will understand.

Write a good headline and great lead paragraph

Due to the number of releases they receive, reporters have no more than a few minutes to determine whether or not a release is worth further review. Titles that are concise, engaging and that highlight the news in the release are far better than cute titles that might mislead the editor or worse, leads that don't encourage the reader to read on or that contain more hype than facts.

Don't write by committee

While obtaining information from a broad range of sources is important to ensure accuracy, when releases are written by numerous people they often come out sounding just like that. There is little consistency in style and often repetition in messages. It's like the old analogy of what happens when a committee draws an elephant - it looks like a camel. During the review process, ask those individuals who need to review the release for accuracy to provide clarification and correction. Provide that feedback to the writer so he or she can incorporate the appropriate information and ensure the flow of the release remains appropriate and professional.

Use standard news release writing guidelines

Journalists read newsletters that are full of amusing stories about news releases perceived as silly by reporters or that contain poor writing and grammar. To many journalists, language is art, so when they see poor examples, they typically share them with their colleagues. Every organization that writes and distributes news releases should have a copy of the Associated Press stylebook or another recognized journalism style manual. Also remember that journalism rules change, but it is still best to stick to basic principles. While reporters for leading publications such as the Wall Street Journal may start their articles with anecdotes and human interest

stories, busy editors still want to see who, what, when, where and why in the lead of news releases. There is leeway with feature releases, but when writing a serious news release, it's best to stick with the basics to make sure you provide the facts the editor needs to determine their interest in your information. (Note: If you have a program or service that has affected the lives of patients or your community, make sure you have those individuals available as interview resources if the reporter wants more information. You may also use quotes from those individuals in the news release.)

Don't make claims you can't substantiate

Is your product really the "first-of-its-kind?" Is your organization truly the only one to offer a certain program? If asked to quantify results of a new program or the benefits, you must be able to substantiate those claims. Likewise, if you use facts or statistics in the news release, either note the source in the release, or make sure those stats are handy if a reporter asks for them. There is no quicker way to lose credibility than to make an unsubstantiated claim.

Avoid buzzwords

Words such as breakthrough, outside the box, unique, state-of-the-art and one-of-a-kind are like red flags to reporters. They know if they see those words, it often means hype will follow. In fact, PR legend has it that some reporters have even built in screens for their e-mail accounts that will block attachments with those words. Stick to the facts and if you are going to make a claim, be sure that it can be substantiated.

Recognize the value of the Internet

Editors make decisions on which news releases to run based on a variety of factors, including the relevancy of the release to their audience, timeliness, overall news value and space in the publication. Recognize if your news release is not used in a publication, for whatever reason, that it will often still find its way to the your audience. A growing number of physicians, executives, managers and others in the healthcare industry are turning to the Internet for their news. If your release is sent out over a wire service, chances are one of the major search engines will find it; especially if you are using key words in the release that designate it as one for the healthcare industry. Also, even if your release doesn't get immediate pick-up, often editors will keep releases they can't run simply due to space limitations and save them for another date or pass them on to reporters as resources or background for future stories. Good releases will be useful in one form or another.

These are basic tips and many organizations may already be using their own or similar guidelines. However, it is always prudent to review your procedures for developing and reviewing news releases. The result may not be more news releases, but it will likely mean better pick-up in your target publications. A growing pool of editors and reporters will respect your organization and will pay more attention when you do submit news releases.

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