Best Practices in Public Relations:
What Works Best in a Press Release

By Jim DeLorenzo, CEO, JHD Enterprises Public Relations

The most important thing to remember about a Press Release is that it is one tool in a successful Public Relations campaign. Some believe the words "Public Relations" and "Press Release" are one and the same in meaning; others realize that a press release is a very useful tool in the overall public relations arsenal.

In my 20+ years of working as an active public relations professional, with experience in a variety of industries, one of the things I enjoy the most is writing a press release. A press release should convey, in a concise manner, a message that is accessible to a wide variety of audiences. The press release in its best form can be read by a reporter or editor who then wants to write or broadcast about the subject to their audience, which then becomes your audience when it is published.

As an example, consider a press release I recently created for a software company. The software package they had created had a very specific purpose, and therefore a "niche" audience. In order to best convey their message, and create a press release that would build awareness of their product, I interviewed the company's principles extensively, and also researched the media that served their intended audience. I then wrote a press release that targeted that audience through very specific media outlets.

Here's a "checklist" that comes from my experiences – again, I've been writing press releases on an almost daily basis since I was a sophomore in college, so I believe I have it down to a science. But I am also actively researching new ideas, and new approaches, as the press release continues to evolve in use and purpose.

- ✍ Why would the media be interested in this story? If it's not of interest, it probably should be released. There are organizations that send out press releases about everything and the media no longer takes them seriously.

- ✍ Research your subject – know everything you can learn about the product, the company, the spokesperson (or the person you may be quoting in the press release).

- ✍ Research your audience – know which media outlets would be best for you to "pitch" to most effectively. Don't write a press release about a sports event and send it to a Business writer!

- ✍ Write, edit, revise – Put the ideas on paper (or on screen). Write a draft that expresses what you have learned about your subject; don't worry about spelling or grammar at first. Be certain you have the message correct – don't be afraid to ask your client or your subject follow-up questions. Edit for spelling and grammar, and share with your client or subject for additional input. Revise your draft accordingly, use your computer's spell check program (it is your friend), keep a dictionary and a thesaurus near you at your desk, and be certain you understand fully what you are writing about – you may get a call from a reporter with a question based on what you wrote, and you don't want to get caught unprepared.

- ✍ In this phase of the writing, double-space your copy. It gives you greater room for editing (and writing in the margins).

- ✍ Err on the side of being brief rather than verbose. The media are usually very busy, and they have a short attention span. Write a good headline, and a great first paragraph (or lead).

- ✍ Your headline should be concise and compelling – remember, people scan quickly.

- ✍ To find out what style is most acceptable to the media, consult a "Style Book." I have used the *"Associated Press Style Manual"* since 1981; it's available in most book stores. I also recommend *"The Wall Street Journal Guide to Business Style and Usage."*

- ✍ Always include a contact person's name, e-mail address, telephone and/or cell phone number at either the top or the bottom of the press release.

- ✍ Use a Press Release distribution service. Choose the distribution circuits most appropriate for your news. Business Wire (my personal preference) and PR Newswire are the two main distribution services for press releases. Visit their web sites, see what is being sent out over their wire services, and understand where your press release might fit. They are very reasonable price wise (for example, Business Wire charges for the first 400 words a flat rate based upon your selected distribution circuit, and then a rate for every 100 words over and above 400 words). You will be able to select distribution circuits – by geographic location, by industry or sector, and by specific trade groups or industry groups (i.e. Philadelphia – Health Wire – Advertising, Marketing, Professional Services, Consulting, Senior Citizens, and Software trades). With both, you will get optimal search engine placement, as well as free inclusion of your company logo and links to all appropriate web sites (i.e. corporate web page). Additional fees are involved for inclusion of photos and charts, but in many cases, it is worth the expense.

✍ Avoid issuing a press release exactly on the hour or half-hour – you'll be able to avoid a crowd of competing news.

✍ Business Wire and PR Newswire require that you open an account (or membership) with them prior to sending out a press release through their service. I will use Business Wire as my example, as I am most familiar with them. For my clients, I have set up individual accounts, with a logo on file, a URL for their corporate web site, and a brief background (CEO's name, company address, public or private, number of employees) that can be linked to each press release from that client. Using their Business Wire Connect web site, I am able to upload press releases from my PC to the Business Wire newsroom, and select the distribution channels through a click list on the site. Once the press release is submitted through Business Wire connect, I have a receipt on screen, as well as a receipt that is sent to me via e-mail. Once the press release has cleared the wire (in other words, been sent out to the distribution circuits I've selected) a second e-mail or a phone call follows letting me know what time it went out, and what code number is associated with the release for tracking. Within 24 hours of the press release distribution via Business Wire, I receive a "tracking report" from the company that lets me know who received it, who opened it, who posted it on their web site, etc.

✍ Have your Press Release posted on your web site the day you "release" it! Nothing is worse than a company sending out a press release to the media, driving people to their corporate web site, and that corporate web site is out of date! Establish an "online press room" with current press releases. I recently met with a potential customer who asked me if I knew anything about his company; I said yes, that he hadn't updated his press room on his web site since April 2002. Keep it current!

✍ Be certain that all internal constituencies at your company receive the press release too! Whether it requires posting on an Intranet, sending an internal e-mail to all employees, or tacking it to a bulletin board in the break room, it is always important to keep everybody in the loop. You don't want employees at a company to get calls from someone outside the company about a press release and have them express ignorance.

- If you do include employees in the loop, be certain they also know that there is a public relations person at the company who should field all calls from reporters. You do not want the receptionist getting quoted, you want the spokesman for the company to respond or designate the "responder."

- Find the media members that cover your industry – whether locally, regionally, nationally or just in a trade publication – and send them a personal e-mail with the press release as an attachment. Let them know who you are, and why you have sent it, and give them a resource if they have further questions.

As an example, let me share the process I recently used for my software client. The software product is intended as a payroll/accounting tool for baby boomers who are hiring and employing household care givers for the elderly (live in nurses, etc.). In one particular instance, I knew that the July 2006 issue of MONEY Magazine featured a cover story on "Your Family's Wealth," and a feature on "Software that Makes Money Simple." One particular story was entitled "When your parents need a hand." I reached out to Penelope Wang, the reporter whose byline appeared on the story, by calling the phone number listed in the MONEY Magazine masthead (listing of staff at the front of the magazine). I then left her a voicemail message that I was sending her a press release about my client, and gave her my contact information. I then e-mailed her the press release, again with my contact information and alluding to the voicemail message. When I called her the next day to follow-up, she was aware of the story, and expressed interest in including my client in a future article.

Finally, don't forget to follow-up. The Press Release is only one tool – you can use it as "entry" to a relationship with a reporter, an investor, a customer – but that requires a phone call, a personal meeting, a personal letter or e-mail. A press release in a vacuum will not get you the attention you intended.

[Jim DeLorenzo started his public relations career in the early 1980s while he was still a student at Villanova University (outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania). He's worked in a variety of industries, including sports and entertainment, technology, financial services and professional services. In 1999, he opened his own strategic public relations consulting practice (operating as JHD Enterprises, LLC). He can be reached by e-mail at jim@jhdenterprises.com. Additional information is available at his web site, http://www.JHDEnterprises.com.]

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