

Writing press releases

Social media has not yet overtaken the old fashioned press release (PR) in the way journalists want to receive stories (though social media is an important PR tool).

How a release is written and pitched is key to its potential for take up. So here are some important dos and don'ts.

Before you write it

Familiarise yourself with the style of the media outlet you are aiming the PR at. Buy the paper, read the website, watch the programme. The EU referendum debate is complex, but most journalists and their audience want simplicity.

Ask yourself if the message/story is relevant to where and who you are pitching it at. Check what "beat" a reporter covers. Journalists hate receiving PRs that have no relevance to their publication or to their subject speciality. Look for the contacts page on the website and try to identify who best to send it to – smaller publications may just have an editor/news editor and/or reporters. Bigger ones may have specialists in, say, economics and politics. If in doubt, call first before sending a PR, briefly explain the subject, ask who to send it to and what the deadline is.

Also question why you are planning a PR at all. Does it contain new information/add anything to the debate? Sending press releases just for the sake of appearing active in the conversation might be counter-productive and risk future, stronger releases being overlooked.

Remember: reporters are trained to constantly ask, when reading press releases and thinking of stories, why would our readers care about this?

Format

Don't send a press release as an attachment only. Include the copy in the body of the email, in plain text. Many journalists will be reading their emails on the run and won't open attachments. And some media office servers block them.

Don't bother with PDFs, logos and fancy text (stick to Arial/Calibri/Verdana). Journalists are not interested in them and they can result in weird character breaks that look unprofessional.

Put something in the subject header to make it clear that it is a press release from LI, especially if you are using a personal email address that doesn't associate you with the organisation. Something like "News from Labour International Spain" (or whatever region/city or country you are in).

Headlines

While media outlets may not run with the headline used on a press release, writing a headline that will grab the attention of journalists is important.

Keep the headline short, and don't put LI in it. For example: "Labour International launches overseas voter registration campaign" should be "Overseas voter registration drive launched". The identity of the organisation can be worked into the PR early on.

Don't try to be clever with the headline – most journalists will spend just a few seconds deciding whether something looks interesting. If they don't immediately understand the story from the header, they will move to the next thing in their inbox.

Think about how the headline will work on social media such as Twitter.

Language/style

Press releases should not be more than one page, with text 11 or 12 pt. That is about 300 words max. No matter how strongly you feel that the story/message needs more information, it has to be possible to disseminate it in that number of words, or you will lose the reader. If a journalist wants more information they can ask for it.

If the first sentence doesn't grab the journalist, they may not read on. So get the "top line" (the most important bit) of your story into the first paragraph, which should be no more than 25 words.

Press releases should be written in plain English. Don't use jargon, superlatives or vague, nonsensical terms. They are likely to be fairly meaningless to anyone outside of the debate, and may antagonise.

Bear in mind that some newspapers are so short on staff that a well-written press release might get reproduced in full, or with little changed.

Some PR writers include detailed bullet points containing additional information about the issuing organisation, stats and facts etc as 'Notes for editors' at the foot of the release. These are rarely read. A single line telling the journalist who the organisation is and who its members are should be enough.

If you think more detail/stats etc are necessary and relevant, try to include a link to a website where that information can be found, rather than including them in the release itself. If you can't do this, then at least keep your bullet points short and simple (it's ok to go into a 2nd page for this).

Paragraph structure

Summarise what you are saying/selling early in the release, preferably in the first, and certainly by the end of the second, paragraph. The standard mantra of journalism is “**Who, what, where, when, why**” – make sure you don’t leave those questions unanswered as it can make all the difference.

Try to keep each paragraph to no more than two sentences.

See model PR accompanying these notes.

Quotes

Journalists want short, snappy quotes that sound like a real person has actually said it. They should be used to provide insight and opinion. A couple of paragraphs should be plenty.

Don’t quote people who are not available for interview. A journalist who is interested enough in the quote may want to hear more from the person who has said it. They won’t want a stand in, and won’t appreciate being told that the quoted person doesn’t have anything more to say.

Case studies

If you have a relevant case study ie a person affected by the debate/campaign, quote them or offer information about them, including the opportunity to speak to them, but don’t send a load of detail to a journalist unless they ask for it.

Stunts

You might want to give a campaign launch an added element of news interest by doing something to catch attention and provide a photo opportunity. This might be street stalls, banners, balloons, even a mascot (naff, but sometimes effective).

Images/pictures

Don’t send them with a press release. They fill up inboxes and will rarely “sell” the story. But if you have pictures, which are relevant and high quality, offer them in your sign off/more information line.

Contact details

Don’t send a press release without including your phone number. Journalists rarely have time to follow up press releases by email. The best way to do this is by including the line: For more information contact X on Y number.