

10 Commandments of a Press Release

In baseball, it's said that you know an umpire is top-notch when you never notice his presence. If he's doing his job, he won't call attention to himself in any way.

It's much the same for the writer of a press release. When the recipient of a release focuses only on its content—and not on its creation—the writer has succeeded. With that in mind, here's The 10 Commandments of Press Releases:

- 1. Thou Shalt Be Professional.** No goofy fonts, rainbow paper or silly gimmicks. Even lighthearted press releases represent a communication between one professional and another.
- 2. Thou Shalt Not Be Promotional.** If you can't get enough objective distance from your company to write a press release that's not filled with hype and puffery, hire someone to write it for you.
- 3. Thou Shalt Not Be Boring.** Even the driest subject matter allows for some sparks of creativity. Journalists like knowing that there's a human being communicating with them, not some corporate robot.
- 4. Thou Shalt Be Brief.** Learn to cut out extraneous words. Keep your sentences short. Include only the points necessary to sell the story. The well-crafted one page press release is a thing of beauty.
- 5. Thou Shalt Know Thy Recipient.** A features or lifestyle editor is a very different creature from a city desk editor. If you're promoting the opening of a new winery, the food and wine editor may be interested in all the details about what kind of aging process and wine press you're using. The city desk editor just wants to know when the grand opening is and what's going to happen there.
- 6. Thou Shalt Use The Proper Tense.** When writing a hard news release—a contract signing, a stock split, a major announcement, etc.) use the past tense (e.g., Acme Industries has changed its name to AcmeCo, the company announced today...). When writing a soft news release—a trend story, a personal profile, etc.—use the present tense (e.g., Jane Smith is one of the best marathon runners over 40. She's also blind. Thanks to new technology from AcmeCo, Jane is able to...).
- 7. Thou Shalt Think Visually.** A press release is more than words—it's a visual document that will first be assessed by how it looks.
- 8. Thou Shalt Tell A Story.** How to arrange the facts of a hard news release is pretty much cut and dried. The old “who, what, when, where and how” lede and “inverted pyramid” concepts still hold.
- 9. Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness.** This may seem an obvious point, but it always

bears repeating. Tell the truth. Don't inflate, don't confabulate, don't exaggerate. Don't twist facts, don't make up numbers, don't make unsubstantiated claims. Any decent journalist will be able to see right through this. If you're lucky, your release will just get tossed out. If you're unlucky, you'll be exposed.

10. Thou Shalt Know Thy Limitations. Not everyone can write a press release. A good feature release, in particular, isn't an easy thing to craft. If you just don't feel like you have the chops to get the job done, hire a professional.

This article was written by Bill Stoller, the "Publicity Insider," who has spent two decades as one of America's top publicists. The original, unabridged text of this article appears on the All About Public Relations website.