

Set Your Press Kit Apart...

from the Other 350 the Editor Received That Day

By Shel Horowitz

Because editors get literally hundreds of press releases and press kits every day, the majority go straight into the recycle bin—or simply get lost in the deluge.

In part, that's because most press materials are just plain terrible. They make it too hard to answer the journalist's first and most important questions: why is this important, and why should my readers care? They're poorly written. They make it too hard to find the key information.

So set yours apart from the crowd—do it right! That, along with proper follow-up, will boost your odds significantly. Learn to think like a reporter, and give reporters what they're looking for. Remember that reporters are overloaded and overworked; if you make their job easier, you'll get results.

The crucial part is not so much in the structure of the release, but in the ingredients. Just as when you bake a cake, it needs flour, eggs, flavoring agents, and sweetener—but you can assemble them in thousands of different permutations within that basic "cake structure."

So here's what you should have in your computer cupboard when creating a press kit:

1) A news hook—something to pin the story on that makes people want to read past the first couple of lines. You are competing with a huge number of inputs so yours has to be memorable. You can tie this to current events, trends, or human interest stories; the important thing is to write copy that's fresh and exciting, and that grabs the reader.

Even very plain-Jane topics can be made exciting and newsworthy. For instance, I once had the assignment to write a press release for a new book on computer privacy issues.

Sure, I could have used a headline like "Electronic Privacy Expert Releases New Book" — but that's not NEWS! Reporters would have given a big yawn, tossed it away, and turned to the next submission.

Instead, here's the headline and lead I used (name and city disguised):

It's 10 O'Clock – Do You Know Where Your Credit History Is?

HIBBING, MN: It's 10 o'clock -- Do you know where your credit history is? How about your employment records? Your confidential medical information?

How would you feel if you found out this sensitive and should-be-private material is "vacationing" in computer databanks around the world -- accessible to corporate interests who can afford to track down and purchase it, but not necessarily open to your own inspection.

According to electronic privacy journalist and technology consultant Mortimer Gaines, this scenario is all-too-common. Gaines, author of the just-released book....

2) An understanding of who's reading the press kit and what they're looking for, i.e., one size definitely does *not* fit all. This is why I always ask my clients, "who will be reading the materials I create?" Some audiences want something sexy or overdramatic, others want just the facts, others want a local or niche angle.

3) The right list to send it to, preferably with individual journalists' names, recently verified.

4) Superior writing. Your sentences should flow smoothly, your release should make logical sense, and

you should provide copy that can be lifted straight out of your press kit and plopped into a story with no editing required. *Trick:* Have someone unfamiliar with what you've written read it out loud to you before you send it out; you'll instantly notice the places that need smoothing out.

5) Full contact and product info! The best release in the world is useless if the reporter doesn't have the tools to follow up. Telephone, e-mail, World Wide Web, and fax contacts are essential, as well as some basic information about the product or service. If your press kit is about a book, every page should include the author's name, book title (and subtitle, if appropriate), price, format (e.g., clothbound, 6" x 9"), ISBN, and distribution channels. If it's a frontlist book, include the publication date as well—but leave that off if you're seeking publicity for an older title. Mention that the author is available for interviews, too.

I'm also a big believer in filling a press kit with third-party validation: quotes and testimonials from the press and from readers, backgrounders that establish the author's expertise in the subject (or, sometimes, his or her colorful life history), tearsheets of previous articles, and so on.

Eventually, it becomes second nature. The news hooks pop out at you automatically—and your submissions find their way into print!

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