



How to get your press release released immediately

A few tricks of the trade can get your news out where you want it.



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The press release is to publicity what the motion is to law. Both are integral to achieving your goals and both have standardized formats and rules for submission. They are each tools in their user's hands, and, like all tools, the more adept you are at wielding them, the better the results.

You use a press release to alert the media of news. If you have a case that would be of interest to the press, you received an award, or you have a local angle on a national issue, then you use a press release to get out the news.

What makes news

News is the key word here. As one journalism professor said, "What are the first three letters of the word?" That's what news is . . . *new*. The press wants to talk to you the day you file the case, not a month later (unless there is more *news* on the case). Therefore, when you are considering putting out a release, ask yourself, "Is it *news*?"

As you evaluate the news value of your story, consider who would be interested in the story. Get to know the news outlets – newspaper, magazine, radio, TV, Web site – where you plan to send the release. Ask yourself: Do they run this kind of story? Who is their audience? Your release is most likely to be published if it fits the particular medium's readership. Not every story belongs in a general news outlet such as a newspaper. While a million dollar verdict in an auto accident case may be of general interest, a lawsuit over employment may be more on point in a regional business magazine.

Your prominence in the community may matter. When former President Bill Clinton went jogging, it was news. When you go jogging . . . well, you get the point.

You certainly know that sensational cases make news, but don't forget that unusual cases can also make news. Filing an auto accident case is not usually news worthy, but suing a local funeral home for mishandling remains could make the Ten O'clock News.

Firsts are news. If you are the *first* medical malpractice attorney in your town to get a multi-million dollar settlement from a local hospital, your local media will care. A warning: Be very careful about how you position news releases on large verdicts and settlements – don't play into the hands of tort reformers. Your news release should concentrate on the public good such a case brought to your community rather than on the money. For example, "This case puts the medical center on notice to increase the number of ER physicians on duty to avoid future delays in treatment."

If you received a local or regional award, you would send the release to your local or regional print or online media. Television and radio rarely have interest in such awards, but if you live in a very small town or if the award is for something you did to support an important community goal, you might be able to tweak it to interest the electronic media. Do not forget to send the release to your college or law school alumni publications; they are usually interested in the achievements of their alumni.

Can early publicity help your case?

I do case publicity for one of the top elder and nursing home abuse attorneys. He invests anywhere from \$500 to \$1,200 in having me do his case publicity for two reasons: 1) the media coverage puts pressure on the defendant, which can lead to an earlier than planned settlement at a higher price, and 2) if a nursing home is being accused of one case of abuse, there are probably more. I know the media coverage he has received has brought him similar million dollar cases.

When I distribute a press release about one of his cases against a nursing home chain, I Google the chain, make a list of every city in California where the chain has a nursing home and add the media in that city to my media list. Next, I find out the location of their corporate headquarters, and I add the local media in that city. I tweak the headline and sometimes



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the first paragraph to reflect the local angle. The list of all their nursing homes is included at the end of the press release. This technique does not always work to get him coverage everywhere, but it often is effective based on the argument that if there is trouble at one facility, there is typically trouble at others.

Formatting the press release

Now that you have your media list compiled at least by area (and don't forget online outlets), it is time to write the press release. Here are some basic format rules:

- **Fonts:** Use no smaller than an 11-point font; 12 point is even better. Don't get fancy with your font. Old, reliable Times Roman is perfect, but if you stray, make sure you use a font with serifs (versus sans serif), as a font with serifs is easier to read both on the screen and on paper.

- **Spacing:** Double spacing is considered the norm, but most publicists use one-and-one-half spacing. Use an extra line between paragraphs without any indentation, and margins should be generous, one-inch on the sides and half-inch on top and bottom. White space makes your release readable.

- **Contact Info:** Typically put on the right side of the top of the page. The contact is the person who will be easily available to the press and who will coordinate their requests. It may also be the person who can be interviewed. The contact person's title (such as Attorney-at-Law), is put under the name. Next is the daytime phone number, followed by the cell phone number (with an indication that it is a cell). Lastly, the contact person's e-mail is listed. Journalists do not work nine-to-five, so make sure they can reach you 24/7. Here is a contact information example:

Contact: Geri Wilson
The Jonathan Group
626.403.6741
626.487.2235 (cell 24/7)
gerij9@yahoo.com

- **Pages:** More and more often media prefer to receive their press releases by e-mail as opposed to snail mail or facsimile. When you send an e-mail release, do not use manual or automatic page numbering as it has to be removed by the editor. When a release is sent in hard-copy format, “- more -” is added in the center of the bottom of each page to indicate that there are additional pages of the release. On the top left corner of each successive page, write an abbreviated form of the headline and under that “page 2 of 2, 3 of 3, etc.” Should the release get scattered, the reporter is able to figure out if she has all the pages. At the end of the article, centered on a line, are three pound symbols “# # #” indicating the end of the release. This last convention is used even on electronically distributed releases so that the editor can be certain it is the end of the release.

- **Conclusion:** The final paragraph is almost always the same in every release: “For more information, contact John Smith of The ABC Law Offices at (415) 555-5555 or johnsmith@ABCLaw.com.” The person listed is the *public* contact, which is not necessarily the same as the *media* contact listed at the top of the page. The information on this public contact will be listed in print articles and, even more likely, online.

- **Headlines:** Now you are ready to write the headline. Considering that editors get hundreds of releases a day, the headline may be the only part of the release that is read. In approximately five to 10 words, the headline must jump off the page, grab the editor around the neck, and make him *see* your story. In other words, a headline reflects the essence, the very heart, of a story. A headline is written in a somewhat larger font (14 pt) and in boldface. Write in present tense and omit the verb “to be.”

Writing the story

The body of the release should always begin with no indentation at the

left margin with a dateline that contains the city name, in capital letters, where the story originates. The name of the state is not necessary to include when the story comes from San Francisco, otherwise, add “Calif.” Next comes the date, also bolded and in parenthesis. Your dateline should look like this:

SAN FRANCISCO (Nov. 3, 2007) –

A medical malpractice case was filed. . .

NAPA, CALIF. (Nov. 3, 2007) – A medical malpractice case was filed . . .

Press releases mirror newspaper articles in that they must be written using the story form of the inverted pyramid, commonly used by newspapers since the turn of the last century. In the inverted pyramid, the information is arranged in paragraphs in descending order of importance, with the most important information, almost a summation of the story, in the first paragraph, which is called the lead (sometimes “lede”).

This format was developed in the days when type was set by hand; if a story was too long, it was chopped from the bottom. And it still works that way today. Therefore, you want your most important information at the top of the story. The design blends well with newspapers where readers may only read part of a story. In fact, the format of *USA Today* is completely built around the inverted pyramid.

Your lead is typically one sentence that includes who, what, when and where, why and how. A great journalist can orchestrate these elements to capture your attention and seduce you into reading the next paragraph. Here's a sample lead:

MODESTO, CALIF. (August 14, 2006) – A civil suit (Case #12CC22222), was filed today in Stanislaus County Superior Court by the family of John Jones, a seventy-one-year-old Korean War veteran suffering from Alzheimer's dementia who, while pushing a wheelchair, walked out of a locked Alzheimer's



Care facility at Nursing Home Gardens, operated by Nursing Home Management (see listing of California facilities at end) last June, never to be seen again.

The second paragraph should contain the most important information that did not go in the lead. It might be information that supports the facts in the lead or elaboration on that information. It could be a quote from you. Remember that quotes should not reiterate what has already been said, but should move the story along. Continue introducing new information in the order you have ranked it in importance and flesh out your ideas in that same order. Typically, in a news story, there is one idea per paragraph.

The two inviolate laws

If you remember nothing else from this treatise, commit the following two points to memory:

- A press release does not tell the entire story; it is a summation. You want to find a balance between a press release that stands alone and one that encourages the media to contact you for a longer feature or a news story. The standard press release should be no longer than two pages in length. Why? Because good reporters want to make the story their own, and good editors will not run the exact same story as their competitors.
- Write simply. There is a reason that the average newspaper is written on a fifth grade reading level. Remember,

the ultimate crime is not to engage your audience; that is a guarantee of no press.

Next month: Distributing and following up on your press release.

Geri Wilson is the director of The Jonathan Group, a boutique marketing communications agency that assists law firms in meeting their marketing communications goals. Services include publicity, Web site creation and maintenance, search engine optimization, collateral materials development, promotions and integrated marketing communications programs. For more information, e-mail gerij9@yahoo.com.

