

A beginner's guide to the art of PR

By Rebecca Smith-Dawkins, a digital PR account executive at [Impression](#). Rebecca previously worked as business correspondent for a daily regional newspaper.

Once you've got the wheels in motion and started your own business, it's time to shout about it! The mere fact that you've decided to become an entrepreneur is a story in itself - you may not think it but lots of people are interested in reading about other people's journey to self-employment and what new products or services they're going to bring to the market. Why? Because, on a very basic level, we love being nosy and we love feeling inspired (hands up who else enjoys a good rags-to-riches story?) And the more unique your story is, the more likely it will be picked up by the press and read by potential customers that will help turn your venture into a success.

How do I get started?

If the thought of picking up the phone to a journalist sounds scary, then you'll be glad to hear that I don't recommend that method. It may have worked well in the past, but today's newsrooms are far shorter on staff than they were five years ago, meaning that journalists are less able to get out of the office and speak to people as much as they'd like. The same can be said for phone calls, which are often seen as disruptive and time-consuming - especially when a journalist is trying to file five, ten or even 15 stories a day! Emails are far less intrusive as they can be read whenever a reporter has a spare moment (usually at the start of the day or in between writing). Of course, I can't speak for all publications - some have daily deadlines, some weekly and some monthly - but the general consensus seems to be that *email works best*.

What do I need to do to create a good press release?

Creating a well-crafted press release can be likened to a form of art. Here are a few tips you may find useful:

- **Take time over the headline and intro**

It goes without saying that the headline and intro are the first things a journalist will see so it's worth taking the time to get these right. Make them snappy and enticing - a headline should be no more than ten words (ideally) and an intro no more than 30. The intro needs to be **the angle of the story in a nutshell** - but without giving too much away so the reader loses interest immediately. It sounds tricky, and it is, but with time you'll get a real 'nose for news'. Here are a few examples to inspire you:

["Best friends launch new detective business worthy of examination"](#)

["Sisters embrace redundancy with launch of new business Sky Blue Pink Parties"](#)

["Harrogate mums launch company to tackle taboos on childbirth"](#)

- **Make the most of quotes**

Journalist and PR coach [Janet Murray](#) gives some great advice on quotes in her book [Your Press Release is Breaking My Heart](#). She says: “Quotes can be helpful to journalists...but a common beginner’s mistake is to use quotes to provide information (which has often been mentioned elsewhere in the press release anyway) and include jargon and/or technical language.” She adds that quotes should provide insight and opinion and sound like a *real* person said them! Try to think outside the box a little too – journalists don’t appreciate reading “I’m delighted” or “I’m thrilled” time and time again.

Where possible, try and include two or three quotes in your press release. These could be from a business partner or business organisation or charity that may have provided support along the way, such as the Prince’s Trust.

- **Remove the jargon**

This relates to the previous point about quotes. Journalists are super busy people and as such they only have a couple of seconds to scan a press release to decide whether it’s worthy or not. If they can’t get past the jargon then you’re jeopardising your own chances to be featured. If need be ask a family member or friend to give your press release a read - do they understand it? If not, you’ll need to revise. It’s also worth having someone check for any glaring spelling or grammatical errors.

- **Make it a smooth process**

It’s always worth having a ‘Notes to Editors’ section at the bottom of a press release, to give journalists any additional information you think they might need, plus a way of contacting you if they need anything else (email/phone number). These are also called ‘Boilerplates’ - see a few examples [here](#).

- **Supplement with images and video**

Journalists love multimedia, and they’re unlikely to publish any story if it comes without an image. Smart phones take good quality pictures so get the family member or friend you asked to proofread your press release to take a picture of you sat at your desk or outside your new shop/office if you have one. Revisit the business stories mentioned earlier in this article to get an indication of what journalists are looking for. Videos are a bonus!

How do I 'sell it in'?

Now you've got a sound press release, you're ready to choose your targets. For a new business launch I'd keep it local. Make a list of publications in your town or city, and the most relevant journalist to contact, be that the editor or someone on the business desk. If you can't find an individual, go with the general news@ or info@ email address.

My advice is to **use the headline of your press release as the subject line of your email**. Subject lines should never be underestimated; journalists get hundreds of emails a day and therefore have to decide in a split second whether to click on the email and read more, or send it straight to the bin. If the subject line doesn't catch their eye then it's unlikely that they'll find your press release engaging enough to feature.

Keep your 'pitch' relatively short - introduce yourself and tell them a little bit about your business but without giving too much away. Say that you've included full details in a press release, attached, along with a couple of high-res images. If they want anymore information, or to set up an interview, they should call you on X number.

I always end my pitches with a question, as this invites/encourages a journalist to respond. Here are a few of my favourites:

- Would this be of interest?
- I think this could be of interest to your readers - what do you think?
- Let me know what you think?
- Would you be able to give this a mention in your publication?

Top tip: NEVER send out a blanket email to journalists. You'll stand a much better chance if you personalise it as much as possible - even if it's just a mention of their name and the publication they write for.

What if I don't hear anything back, or they say no?

Check whether your story has been used by doing a [site:search](#) a couple of days later (or by checking on their website directly). It's often the case that a journalist will use a press release without responding to the sender - this goes back to the fact that they just don't have the time to! If they haven't used your press release then send a follow-up email along these lines:

Hi (X),

I recently sent you a press release with details on my new business (name business). Was this of interest at all?

Please let me know if you need any more information.

*Kind regards,
(your name)*

The key is not to be disheartened if you don't hear anything back and don't let it put you off contacting that publication again in the future. It may just be that your press release wasn't 'newsworthy' enough to be considered *this time*.

If a journalist has used your story then send them a quick thank you email and say that you'll get in touch with any other (relevant) news in the future. Not a necessity, but one which will be appreciated and keep you on their mind.

Have I missed the boat if I've been running my business for a while?

Not at all! If your business has been going for a while ask yourself: "*Is there anything going on in my company at the moment that a journalist may find interesting?*" There are many different examples of 'good news stories', including:

- Turnover/profit growth
- Growth into new sectors/countries
- Staff growth (either looking to take on a number of new staff or recently taking on a number of new staff)
- Award wins
- Grant awards
- Big contract wins
- Big milestones (i.e. 5th, 10th or 25th anniversary)
- New *innovative* products
- Premise moves
- Mergers and acquisitions

PR: A beginner's checklist

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Finding target publications and contacts

Do a general Google search for the type of publication(s) you'd like to get featured in (i.e. local, business, trade)

Search for your chosen topic in Google News to see who else is talking about it - with the Advanced Search function you can filter searches by 'last update' (up to one year ago)

Make the most of [advanced Google search shortcuts](#)

Check #journorequest, #prrequest and #bloggerrequest on Twitter to find people who are talking about your industry/chosen topic

Validate each publication by checking their 'media packs' or 'advertising guides' for circulation and demographic information

Visit the 'contact us' page to find details for the most relevant journalist (individuals are always better to target, as opposed to the general newsdesk)

Writing a press release

Create a catchy headline of no more than ten words

Tell the angle of the story in a nutshell - up to 30 words

Follow the ['Inverted Pyramid'](#) to help structure the rest of the release

Make the most of quotes - aim for two to three - and ensure they sound like a real person said them!

Remove any technical language/jargon

Include a 'Notes to Editors' section at the bottom with any additional information, including contact details

Check, check and check again, and get someone else to proofread too

Supplement with images and/or video

Writing a 'pitch' email

Use the headline of your press release as your subject line - and keep it under the length of a Tweet (140 characters)

Introduce yourself and explain why you are emailing - max 1-2 sentences

If relevant, tell the journalist why they should cover your news and where it could sit on their website/in their newspaper

Remember to make it as personal as possible, even if you just address the journalist and the publication they write for by name

Finish with a question such as *"do you think this could be of interest?"* or *"what do you think?"*

Paste your press release into the bottom of the email - and don't forget to attach any multimedia!

Send a short follow up email if you haven't heard anything in four or five days (don't get disheartened if you receive a 'no', or nothing at all)

Thank a journalist if they have covered your news story - and keep in touch