

(Not) in praise of the ubiquitous, obfuscating press release

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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Second-rate trade magazines and indolent section editors in the mass media love press releases. Mainly because the former needs to fill space or entice companies sending them press releases to actually buy some advertising space and the latter just because they are lazy, unprofessional and open to lunch invitations and freebies.

As much as serious, professional journalists bitch and moan about the naive opportunism of the press release with its mandatory 10 product mentions per page and adulation of corporate CEOs, they simply do not have the time or inclination to keep telling those who inundate them with these things that they are unrequired, unnecessary and largely a huge waste of time.

I think many public relations people do know this but keep churning them out because it gives their clients a sense of egoistic comfort to know that something is happening to promote their corporate ideology.

PR people cannot be blamed for using press releases to make money. It is relatively easy money too, as long as one does not try to actually communicate the right kind of message or something that will appeal to editors. Instead, one has to stick closely to the profitable formula of including as many product mentions as possible and assuaging the ego of whomever it is on the client's side who finally signs it off.

The PR industry is appreciated, but...

I have to say that I am surprised that just about every PR company I know sends out unrequested press releases in complete defiance of the law. Surely, every press release should have an 'unsubscribe' function just like any other form of unsolicited email?

Writing back to the PR person who sent the release and requesting removal from a list because of the irrelevance of the subject tends to fall on deaf ears and the releases just keep pouring in.

From a pure marketing point of view, under almost every circumstance, a press release should be used as the last resort form of corporate communication and not a first choice or even worse, a regular occurrence. By press release, I mean a pre-written article, not an information update, which is quite acceptable.

Serious, professional journalists and editors really appreciate the PR industry. In fact, the average business magazine or newspaper relies on the PR industry for more than 60% of its content. But not in press release form.

Successful PR people are those who create a direct relationship between themselves and relevant editors and journalists and better still, a direct relationship between their clients and journalists.

The relationship is key

Every single successful PR effort since the beginning of time has been based on a firm relationship; a two-way relationship based on trust and respect.

Editors and journalists have absolutely no problem getting a phone call or email from PR people they know, offering suggestions with regard to a possible story of interest. Human beings are much better at dealing with people they know than with complete strangers. And most journalists are human beings.

Complete strangers who send out strings of press releases on subjects that are of no relevance whatsoever to whichever editor or journalist they have targeted, are top of the most annoying, most ineffectual list.

In my opinion, to make PR an effective part of a company's marketing effort, a press release should be used under very special circumstances.

The brief that I as a client would give to my PR consultants is to create relationships with relevant media people.

Not important enough

And this should be based firmly on the premise, "It is not what I want to say but what my customer wants to hear." In this case "my customer" being first the journalist and secondly and equally importantly the target market.

This is after all, basic PR #101.

And I don't mind if PR people want to try and make money out of gullible clients by producing reams of laudatory press releases. But I really do mind if I have to act as an unwilling link on this iniquitous money chain.

Unsolicited press releases are as bad as those PR people who want to you to come and meet their clients, not because there is a story in it but just because trotting out journalists in front of clients can make money. That does not create relationships, that just creates anger.

I remember 10 years ago, a PR person asking me to meet with their client. Ten minutes before I left to make the half hour trip to her client's office, I got a phone call to say the meeting had been cancelled "because something more important had come up".

To this day, that particular client has been completely obliterated from my life.

Frankly, both PR people and their clients need some serious mentoring on how they can both profit once ego and stupidity have been removed from the equation.

ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

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