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Small Business Publicity: Writing Effective Press Releases

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Professional publicists recommend press releases to deliver business news to the media for broadcast to potential customers. Publicity of this kind is free and can often be done by a business owner or someone who works for her company. If the media publish the story, the business stands to gain the goodwill of existing customers and attract new ones. The result can be increased sales at a cost of only the time it takes to write and distribute the release.

But the average newsroom receives hundreds of emails and faxes every day, only a fraction of which are published. Competition for print space and airtime means press releases need to be creative, factual and informative. They must provide content the media believe its readers, viewers and listeners want.

Front page or trash bin

The difference between a well-written press release and one that is poorly researched and badly written can mean a story landing on the front page or one that goes into the recycle bin. Good research is essential to obtain accurate information, as well as insight into what editors prefer.

Topics or themes a particular editor finds interesting can be gleaned by reading business or consumer stories the newspaper recently published. Articles may demonstrate the editor's interest in human rights, animal welfare or environmental issues. An editor or reporter who already knows something about business or consumer topics will be able to rapidly judge the importance of the information.

If background is part of the press release, it should be researched and checked for accuracy. Editors don't appreciate receiving information that is too general, incorrect or impossible to verify.

It's about the story

If a press release is about a business, product or service, it should focus on benefits to the reader rather than make a sales pitch. The release should make obvious the reason people should be interested in the story. The old adage, "it's not about you," rings true when seeking media attention.

Be creative. Is there a customer with an unusual history that reflects the heart or mission of the business? Focus on the human perspective when telling the story.

Stay current. Does the nature of the business intersect with national trends or current developments in a similar industry? Identify a niche angle in a national story and demonstrate how it is being enacted locally.

Include quality photos. Will visual material add interest and tell the story quickly? If photos will be submitted, make sure they are clear with appropriate background, lighting and resolution. Photos that depict action or people are preferred.

Remember the Web site. Where can a journalist obtain more information? Include a Web site address or another source of background information.

Be a Reporter's Expert

Above all, reporters want sources or experts they can trust. Be informed and stay on top of industry trends. Become the primary source of industry information in the local business community by adding background knowledge to related news.

Reporters call when they want local perspective, and they often have an imminent deadline. Respond as quickly as possible with concise, easy-to-quote answers.

For workshops on publicity and marketing, visit www.nmsbdc.org.

Finance New Mexico is an initiative of the New Mexico Small Business Investment Corporation (NMSBIC) and its partners to assist individuals and businesses in obtaining skills and funding-resources for their business or idea. To learn more, go to www.FinanceNewMexico.org.

