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How to Make Your Press Releases Shine

A photograph of a typewriter and a newspaper. In the foreground, four wooden blocks spell out the word 'news'. The typewriter is white with a purple carriage return key. The newspaper is open, showing some text and a red stamp. The background is a solid blue color.

n e w s



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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Pellowe". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rev. John Pellowe, MBA, DMin
CEO

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HOW TO MAKE YOUR PRESS RELEASES SHINE



KAREN STILLER, PARTNER, CANADIAN CHRISTIAN NEWS SERVICE

Timing, they say, is everything. In the world of press releases that is almost true. Timing matters a lot. But so, of course, does the story.

The timing was perfect. When the Canadian Christian News Service (CCNS) released author Jennifer Graham's press release about her memoir *An Immoral Proposal* (a story of forbidden, cross-racial love in Apartheid-South Africa) it was just days before Nelson Mandela's funeral. The release went out to 254 Christian media across the country.

The release immediately caught the eye of Steve Lazarus, a writer and researcher with the weekly, national current affairs television show *Context* with Lorna Dueck. "That was perfect timing," says Lazarus. "We were working on a Mandela show the morning it came. There were other things about her story that made her a natural guest. They have a very unique and courageous and beautiful story."

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Timing and story came together for the Christian Medical and Dental Society (CMDS) of Canada when CCNS released their announcement of a short film called "The Gift," to educate Canadians about physician-assisted suicide in Canada.

Rob Horsely is managing editor for *Christian Week* newspaper: "A press release that goes along with the news of the day, like the CMDS release about the euthanasia film, is a good one. It's an issue that is in the news a lot and has been for a while. Taking an individual project that focuses on this thing that people are talking about already, it's timely and eye-catching."

Elizabeth Holland is an editor with



the *Toronto Star*, Canada's largest daily newspaper. The *Toronto Star* ran a story about Christian author Tim Huff's new book on bullying. CCNS had distributed that release to the Christian and mainstream media in Canada, including the *Star*.

"The choosing of the story often just boils down to that section editor's interest," says Holland. "It's very subjective. If the bullying story had been picked up by an editor sick of hearing about bullying and felt that issue had been covered enough.... It also depends on what's been covered before. And timeliness is a given."

Holland stresses that major newsroom editors receive "hundreds and hundreds of releases every day." Short and sweet: that sums up her advice to Christian non-profits vying for the attention of the mainstream – or any stream – of media.

"You have to cover the five w's (who, what, where, why, when)," says Holland.

"Write it as you would a story, with a human angle hook, especially for non-profits. Have real people who are willing to be interviewed and photographed. That's a big one for a journalist."

Holland advises non-profits to consider *not using* a spokesperson from the organization in the press release whenever possible. "I think it's more important to have the 'human interest' person. It's about the person they are serving, that's what's interesting. That's who the journalists are interested in and that's what the writer will do, so that's how the press release should be written. The voice of a real person is better hands down every time than the voice of the administrator. I think you have to inspire the media right off the bat."

And the media it seems, are not often inspired by a press release that is mostly about extolling the virtues and accomplishments of the charity, no matter

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how noble the organization and its mission. Rob Horsely of *Christian Week* pulls no punches on this topic: "Something that turns me off in terms of a press release is something that is really kind-of obviously self-serving," he says. "Something that doesn't even try to make it about helping other people. When it gets into navel-gazing and 'here is all this great stuff about us,' it rubs me the wrong way."

Horsely acknowledges that press releases are by nature, "controlled information," but "when it's of a very self-promotional nature, although I know that is the job of the press release to spin it a certain way, but when it's clear that it serves no purpose other than to highlight an organization and how great it is, it loses my interest."

Even if a release is short, sweet, well written, and crafted as carefully as possible while avoiding all semblance of navel-gazing, it still may not be picked up by a publication or show. The editors, publishers, or producers have the birds-eye view of their overall story selection and line-ups, and that particular story may not be a fit at that time. But take heart. Steve Lazarus from Context says, "If it's not the right time, I'm keeping it in a file, so when the news returns to that issue of child trafficking, for example, I'm reminded that there's a campaign they are doing on that issue. A lot of times its driven by headlines, but other times there are issues with a long shelf life."

Horsely points to the mission of the publication as well, as a necessary filter through which all press releases flow: "Our mandate is to tell the stories of what God is doing in Canada and around the world today." If a press release does catch Horsely's eye, "I discuss it with my fellow editors, we pass the ideas back and forth to make sure

More Great Advice from the Media about Press Releases

- Make sure the sources listed are actually available to be interviewed.
- Make it very easy to find contact numbers.
- Avoid bells and whistles in the release. "[P]eople like to put everything in caps, or underline, or bold. I would tell people to pick up a newspaper and see how it's presented—that's how the release should be presented." – Elizabeth Holland, *Toronto Star*.
- Use your organization's logo in the release.
- Keep the release to 500 words.
- Bulleted sidebars are a good idea.
- Although he hesitates to admit it, Rob Horsely of *Christian Week* says that a follow up call from the organization directly to the editors can nudge a story from barely noticed to the front and center of attention.

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Stephen Lazarus
CONTEXT with Lorna Dueck

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we are all in agreement and that I'm not the only one interested. Then, I pass it along to the writer and tell them the angle we have in mind. The press releases always contain the crucial information as to who to interview and contact information. Press releases, to me, contain the 'need to know' information for stuff we're interested in pursuing."

Horsely also keeps his eye on an organization's newsletters and websites for

story ideas (so an organization should be aware that everything they print or post is fodder for the press). But nothing can take the place of a properly written and widely distributed press release for alerting the media to a relevant story – and making it as easy as possible for them to get that story. For smaller groups especially, says *Toronto Star's* Holland, "I don't know if they realize how important marketing is, and that press releases are an important part of that."

When it comes to the media in general, Christian organizations should know that religion still tells an important story. "Within minutes of Pope Benedict announcing his

resignation, that totally changed the news cycle," reminds Lazarus. "And that was before Pope Frances. That means that religion still has the ability in a very secular society to change the news cycle." And when it comes to press releases in general, and CCNS releases in particular, Lazarus says: "It excites me for what it means to build the capacity of Christian non-profits in Canada."

Karen Stiller is a partner with the Canadian Christian News Service, a press release distribution service designed especially for faith-based organizations in Canada. www.canadianchristiannewsservice.com

The Life Cycle of a Press Release

- When CCNS (or a service like it) receives a press release from a client, it is formatted, and a test-run is made so the charity can see it in its final form – exactly as it will appear to the media.
- A time of release and distribution list is confirmed (CCNS, for example, releases to a constantly updated list of Christian media, bloggers, freelance journalists, mainstream media and American Christian media, or any combination thereof that the client chooses).
- The release is distributed and lands in inboxes across the country.
- In the case of CCNS, the release is also posted at www.canadianchristiannewsservice.com (extra resources like photos for the media can also be posted on the CCNS page for the ease of the media); on the CCNS Twitter feed and Facebook page where it will remain and reach yet a further audience.
- If an editor likes the story, they will assign it to a journalist, often advising them of their preferred angle and sending them the press release as a starting point.
- OR, the press release itself, if crafted well enough, can be used as the story itself. This is rare, as most news sources want their own original quotes for their publication. "Very rarely do we publish a press release 'as is,'" says Rob Horsely from *Christian Week*. "It's not that those releases aren't good things, but I would hesitate, in the same way that it's not good to eat a vegetable right out of a can, I'd rather make it into a full dish."
- If the press release is not used immediately for a story, a well-organized editor who sees some potential may file it away for future reference.

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