

Read All About It! Training Session – 17th November 2012

- 1 If you undersell your story to the Press they might not think you've got a story at all. With that in mind, and considering what makes a good headline (short and snappy, puns, alliteration and word-play) – you need a strong title for a press release so that it gets noticed.
- 2 So what makes people read a story – and how much of a story do they read? What hooks real people in? The Press have to decide what will interest readers/listeners enough that they'll enjoy a story enough that they'll keep reading/listening and come back for more.
- 3 Research has shown that the majority of people spend on average 15 minutes with the paper. Ten years ago it was 20 minutes, 15 years ago 30 minutes. They have less time, so they don't read the whole paper. Stories need to be simple, explainable in six paragraphs (but preferably two) and make people sit up and take notice.
- 4 What are people interested in – scandal, animals, threats to their way of life (ie environment), someone you know (or know of – such as a celebrity), something funny or embarrassing. Images help – people will look at a photograph first, then a headline, then the first paragraph.
- 5 If you want to be noticed, send in an image that's striking – and good quality! The Press have photographers on tap – but they don't have many, so if you can help out it may win them over, particularly if it's a good image.
- 6 You don't have to think of a headline – a reporter will re-write it, then a sub-editor will re-write it again. But if you've got something there at the top that makes them think 'what's that about' then they're more likely to read on.
- 7 Story and sentence length is important – a survey for the Newspaper Industry in 2002 found you lost 5% of your readers every 25 words. So with an average story, 250 words in, you've lost 50% of your readership. So it's not worth making stories much longer than 250 words – and remember you need a quote in there, as reported speech brings some life to it, and brings in 'people'. Press releases can be longer than stories, as they'll get cut down, but remember reporters often have no greater attention span than their readers, so it's sometimes better to pull out background information as a 'Note to editor' at the end.
- 8 Carrying on with the magic '25' rule – sentences shouldn't run much longer than 25 words. Keep sentence structure simple. The most important sentence is the first one. Worst case scenario (apart from a story not being used at all) is that they only have room for one paragraph, so you need to explain what you're trying to say in a nutshell – 25 words ideally. Your second and third sentences embellish on what is said in the 'intro' and from sentence four you start again but in much more detail.
- 9 How do you keep it short? Get to the centre of the story (what you want the story to be) immediately – if you've got a set of figures or a survey that claim something (eg that Cromford Canal is chosen by most participants to be the best place for a nature walk, you don't say 'A survey has claimed' or 'Figures taken from new research show that' – just go for it: Cromford Canal has the best nature walk in the county. Explain yourself later when the readers start disappearing.
- 10 For extra points, start with a strong word, not A or The – a lot of papers emphasise the first word, so if it's a good one people are more likely to take notice.
- 11 So you've latched on to something that will interest the Press. Before it goes, make sure you're ready to respond to any tricky questions that might fly back at you. Have your answers written out, and make sure you're contactable in the day or so after the press release goes out. There's nothing worse than 'no-one was available to comment', particularly if you could have said something positive and they make it sound negative because they don't fully understand. Reporters don't know the background to stories so it's easy for them to misunderstand – we have to be ready to counter that, and field any difficult questions.