



## **Press Releases for Dummies: Rotary Press Releases Made Easy**

**Prepared for the Abbotsford Sumas Rotary Club**

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# Writing a Rotary Press Release

## Overview:

A Press release is simply a written statement distributed to the media to announce a range of news items: scheduled events, news, awards, programs or services, sales or accomplishments. They may generate a feature story as reporters are more likely to do a story if they first receive a release. It is a fundamental tool of Public Relations work, and moreover, it is one that anyone who's willing to adopt a proper format can use successfully.

The timing of the press release is very important; it must be relevant and recent news or information. If it is for immediate release, clearly indicate so by writing "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" in caps on it to the left and above the headline. If it is to be released later, clearly indicate the date you want the story released. Remember, the absence of a release date presumes immediate release.

Remember that editors are overworked and understaffed, so if you can make life easier for them, you're more likely to get coverage. Therefore, if you write a press release that's close to the way the editor would themselves, the release may see publication with minimal editing. But, if you fill the press release with 'fluff', graphics, or excessive verbiage needing severe editing, s/he may simply discard it and select a more usable press release instead.

The more newsworthy you make the press release copy, the better are the chances of it being selected. Consider what "newsworthy" means to a given paper/community and then use it to 'hook' the editor/reporter. It may be helpful to include information about your organization as they may logically mention it in the news article; you are giving journalists easy access to your background. Organizations may chose to develop a one page, bulleted fact sheet about your collective goals or achievements, highlighting why your organization is special. Include your website, and on your site you may want to feature a web media page that typically has contact information and an electronic press kit.

Generally speaking, a press release is as short as possible –one-half to one page is excellent, two pages too wordy and three pages excessive regardless of how complex the topic.

The headline and your first sentence are the two most important parts of a press release. Make sure they are compelling enough to draw the editor or reporter in. Use active verbs in headlines, making them brief and to the point.

Finally, as you and your organization is the source of this news, it is important to signify to the reporter/editor that you are credible. You may do this by referring to past press relationships with their media, to past Rotary successes, or by defining Rotary as "a global network of community volunteers" and your Rotary Club as local participants in this global international and philanthropic organization.

**Contents and Design: Just the Facts Man:** Your press release must tell a story. It should address the events, products, services, people, targets, goals, plans, or projects that you want to tell the community and public about to generate support and recognition. Provide as many concrete facts as possible to frame your informative and effective press release. Your first paragraph, and ideally your first sentence, should answer all following questions<sup>1</sup>:

- **Who** is the main focus - a person or group that is an essential element to the story?
- **What** is the event or project that your club is publicizing? That is, what is the news aspect?
- **Where** is it happening, where is the specific location of the event or organization?
- **When** is the date/time of the event or project?
- **Why** are you doing this? Why is newsworthy or significant to the general public?
- **How** was this accomplished?

**Press Release Body or Copy:** A press release is written as you want it to appear in media:

- Start with the date and city in which the press release is originated.
- The lead, or first sentence, should grab the reader and say concisely what is happening. The next one or two sentences simply expand upon the lead.
- The press release body copy should be compact. Avoid long sentences or paragraphs, repetition, esoteric or archaic language, initials and jargon.
- A first paragraph (2/3sentences) should sum up the press release and the rest should elaborate on the opening information. In our fast-paced world, no bust editor reads a long press release, nor uses a press release that does not generate high interest.
- You might want to include a "call to action" in your release. This is information on what you want the public to do with the information that you are releasing. For example, do you want them to buy a product? If so, include information on where the product is available. Do you want them to visit your Web site to enter a contest or join your organization? If so, include the Web address or a phone number.

### **Write Your Headline Last**

- Only when you have drafted and revised your release do you determine your headline.
- The headline is your chance to be noticed, but nonetheless must be concise and factual. Headlines are written in bold and are typically larger than the press release text; conventionally headlines are present-tense and exclude articles ("a" and "the") and passive verbs.
- A headline should have a "grabber" to attract readers even as a headline is meant to grab readers. It may describe the latest achievement of an organization, a recent newsworthy event, a new product or service.

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<sup>1</sup> These are often referred to as the five "W"s and an "H", that is, the who, what, where, when, why and how.

- The simplest method to arrive at the press release “grabber” headline is to extract the most important keywords from your press release. From the keywords, try to frame a logical and attention-getting statement. Using keywords will also give you better visibility in search engines, and it is simpler for journalists and readers to grasp the press release content.
- Your headline should be brief, clear and to the point: an ultra-compact version of the press release’s key point.
- The first word in the press release headline should be capitalized, as should all proper nouns, but do not capitalize every word.

**Do a Critical Review of Your Press Release:** Review/double check all facts and the information. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are the facts right?
- Have you done a spell-check?
- Are the dates correct?
- Are names spelled correctly?
- Is your headline a “grabber”?
- Is there an introduction of your actions and why it matters?
- Is there a description of your event/achievement, and a historical context?
- Are your actions/products/goals and people/communities involved/affected addressed?
- Is there a concluding summary repeating your organization’s name and affirming your headline?
- Signal the end of the press release with three ### symbols, centered directly underneath the last line of the release (this is a journalistic standard).

**Ensure That All Contact Information is Included.**

If your press release is really newsworthy, journalists would surely like more information or may want to interview key people associated with it. Therefore, you must provide the details of how to contact your spokespersons or executive members or someone who will act as a link between the media and your organization. Be sure to include all phone numbers, and email and web addresses.

**After Issuing a Press Release:**

- A follow-up call to the media outlet/specific person may subsequently develop a press release into a full story.
- Remember when appropriate to thank the outlet/individual that accommodated your organizational media needs – it goes a long way!

## Emailing a Press Release

- If you're sending a release to a television station, think of its visual needs.
- If you send your release by e-mail, you must use formatting sparingly. Giant type and multiple colors don't enhance your news, they distract from it.
- Put the release in the body of the e-mail, not as an attachment. If you must use an attachment, make it a plain text or Rich Text Format file. Word documents are acceptable at most outlets. Use PDF files only if you are sending a full media kit with lots of graphics.
- Do not type a release on letterhead, scan it, and e-mail a jpeg of the scan. That's a waste of your time and the editor's. Rather, type the release into the e-mail message.
- When e-mailing a press release, do not make the subject line of your e-mail "press release." You will only blend into the crowd. Get the editor's attention by making the subject line your "grabber" headline, e.g. "The Little Rotary Berry Club that could ....does it again!"
- Suggest good video footage opportunities, such as unusual events, colourful scenes, smiling children, or celebrity appearances.

## Visual Media

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## Note to Committee Chairs: How to Generate a Press Release for Your Committee

Please take note of the timelines and other considerations required to generate a press release, and especially note both PR Committee responsibilities and your Committees' responsibilities.

The PR Committee **DOES**

- Assume responsibility for turning information supplied by Committees into press releases
- Distributes the press release to appropriate media and other parties.
- Produce a policy/practical PR manual for reference
- Establish positive working relationships with the press

The PR Committee specifically does **NOT** Include:

- Interviewing Committee Chairs members to generate PR material
- Seeking information from Committees wanting PR (they simply receive PR information)
- Make special arrangements for events
- Invite dignitaries or guests
- Host events or plan the programs. Rather, their function is solely to act as a press liaison.
- Arranging additional photo coverage beyond that assigned by media outlets themselves.

Committee Responsibilities for Press Releases Include:

- Initiating press releases by filing with PR Chair a completed press release data sheet,
- Filing data sheets a minimum 2 weeks prior to event/desired media attention/article.
- Appointing a primary & secondary person for each press release/event.
- Chairs of Committees wanting the publicity must supervise -and even fill in- when the appointed Committee contact persons are unavailable or fail in their duties,

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