

News Releases Key to PR Program

Good public relations begin with a Post commander who establishes policies and practices that are ethical, honest, and in keeping with the public interest. Then the PR Officer can take those policies and practices to the public for notice.

The most useful tool in your efforts to reach the public is the news release. There are two basic release formats: One for the print media and one for broadcasters. However, it is common practice to send print oriented releases to all media outlets. It is important to use the correct format, no matter how strange it looks. Using the correct format increases your chances of success because it decreases the recipient's work load.

There are several basic rules to follow:

First, your release must be accurate, with the facts straight and names and places spelled correctly.

Next, it should include all the basic facts in the first two paragraphs; who, what, why, when, where, and how of the story.

The most important sentence is the first one, called the "lead." Decide what is the most important and interesting, and then boil it down to one lead sentence.

Leads should be compact and to the point. Avoid trying to pack who, what, why, when, where, and how into the lead sentence.

Select the most important of these elements for the lead and then go on to answer the rest. Place the most important and newsworthy item early in the lead.

If at all possible, tie your release to a current event or condition already in the news that relates to your announcement. This can be done in the lead or the first paragraph or two with just a few words - perhaps a connection with a current controversy or bill going through Congress or the state legislature.

Keep sentences and paragraphs short. Arrange paragraphs in descending order of importance, so the release can be cut from the bottom, if necessary.

Stick to the facts. Don't editorialize or present opinions unless they are attributed to responsible authorities. If you misuse facts you will lose credibility.

Exaggerations and misstatements are remembered and likely will send subsequent releases from you directly to the wastebasket. The most certain way to establish credibility is to refuse to color or alter the facts.

It is important to recognize how important the news media are, and to serve as a conduit between your post or department and the media.

Be sure that a contact person is available to the media when they receive your news release. If there is no answer at the phone number listed on the release you could be ensuring that your event or story will not be covered.

Type all releases on 8 1/2 x 11 white paper using only one side of each sheet. Across the top of the first page include the word "NEWS RELEASE" in large type; the words "THE AMERICAN LEGION" and the name and address of your post headquarters.

In the upper right hand corner, below the top line described in the previous paragraph, list your name and telephone number. This should be preceded by "For More Information." In the upper left hand corner, opposite the date, indicate the specific time or date the story may be used. If the release date is not a factor simply type "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE."

Begin the first sentence of the release about a third of the way down the page, leaving room for the editor to write instructions for handling or a headline. Do not carry paragraphs over from one page to the next; end each page with a complete paragraph.

Double space the release and leave wide margins on both sides. Staple the upper left corner when there is more than one page.

Most important of all, be sure it gets into the mail or is delivered by hand in plenty of time to meet news deadlines.

Target your mailings to specific publications that either have shown interest in the past or are likely to be interested in your message. If you have developed a relationship with a reporter or editor make sure he or she is on your mailing list. This is not to say that new angle or pegs for your message should not be developed.

For example, if you are promoting your Boys State Program you might consider contacting a publication that covers local business. Your "hook" here could be the number of Boys State graduates with businesses in the community. You might be surprised at the number of reporters who are graduates of Boys or Girls State or have played American Legion Baseball. Of course, this requires research, but this type of information can carry over to all your public relations efforts.

Often when a reporter sees a mention of an American Legion program, he or she will recall a past association with that program. Your release could trigger that person to do the story.

Many times editorial, space, and time consideration seem to work against your efforts. But a persistent effort by the Public Relations Officer, the Post Commander, as well as all members of the post will result in recognition and added prestige in the community.