News has an important role in the PR agenda. Organisations and their PR practitioners need to harness the news agenda if they wish to actively manage their positioning and profile. This topic guide explores media relations as the principal tactic that links PR practitioners directly to the media and gives specific insights into news-driven PR outputs, such as the news release, a principal communication tool.

Beyond news, this topic guide also examines:
- media targeting and distribution techniques
- the role of the feature in generating more in-depth editorial coverage
- the other principal PR vehicles used in written communications.
1 Defining news

The ability to find, harness and exploit news is at the heart of successful media relations. Organisations that want to be talked about, to become opinion formers, thought leaders or market shapers, need to tap into the news agenda. Those organisations and individuals that we think of as being in the public eye are very often the same ones that seem to be on the news pages with stories, pictures and quotes, which address or reflect the issues that matter.

PR practitioners are intimately concerned with the news agenda on a daily and weekly basis, and the ability to define, process and place news stories is a skill that remains as vital to the PR professional in the digital age as it has been in the analogue.

What is news?

What, exactly, is news? Can you apply a method to the business of news that defines it as a process?

In general, news is new information of universal interest and something that we need to know. It often has a strong, time-definite context and a dynamic format, which accommodates rapid change as a situation develops. News stories are generally high-impact, compelling constructs which add to our knowledge about the people and world that directly affect us.

Within the news genre, there are different types of news:

- ‘Hard’ news tends to be reflected in TV and radio bulletins, daily newspapers and online media. It is instant, ‘universal’, and exists in a state of perpetual motion. Hard news stories develop through the hour, and through the day – the Iraq War, a General Election, a financial scandal, the credit crunch, etc. Hard news happens 24/7.

- ‘Soft’ news is less time-definite, less critical and more disposable. It can be a human interest story, a new trend, behaviour or attitude identified by researchers, or a new product or service which affects consumers. While it is important, it is often not front page material. Much of PR-driven news fits this definition.

- ‘Specialist’ or vertical sector news is particular to an industry or interest group. It includes, for example, many business-related stories printed in trade and vertical sector press – information that is interesting in its context, but has little popular appeal beyond its immediate audience.

- A photostory is simply a news story told in pictures – either through film or video, or a still photograph. With a photostory, it is the picture that does the work; the words are there to reinforce, by providing detail via a ‘caption’ or commentary.

- Fillers are news stories driven by personalities, gossip and chat. Fillers increasingly dominate our magazines, consumer websites and television. We need to know about these stories only in the context of keeping up with a social agenda.
What isn’t news?

In the PR profession, it is just as important to know what doesn’t qualify as news. The sooner you can distinguish between what is and isn’t news, the better, as you can save yourself time and effort spent developing stories that no one wants to read and thus manage the sometimes unrealistic expectations of clients.

In general, if something isn’t new, improved or exciting, it isn’t news. If it is old, past its sell-by date or doesn’t pass the ‘so what?’ test, it isn’t going to make the grade. As a rule of thumb, none of the following categories of output would make the grade:

- brochures and flyers
- any selling copy
- invitations
- letters, circulars, email
- sold information, past its sell-by date
- personal views and opinions (unless they are contextualised, e.g. response to the budget from a firm of accountants).

2 The PR and news interface

PR practitioners and journalists often work closely together in the news arena. This is because journalists rely on sources for much of their information and access to these sources is often provided by press officers and PR teams. As gatekeepers of the news content and distribution mechanism, PR practitioners often control the news flow.

A study commissioned by The Guardian’s Nick Davies to coincide with his book Flat Earth News, revealed some interesting statistics which suggest that PR professionals are successful in leading the news content of quality newspapers. Davies calls this content ‘churnulism’ and highlighted a study by Cardiff University School of Journalism, which showed that up to 60 per cent of quality-print stories consist wholly or in part of wire copy and/or PR material.

The press release

The press release remains the workhorse of most media relations programmes. This tried-and-tested way of generating column inches is still the preferred option for the PR practitioner or consultancy team intent on winning coverage for their clients.

The press release is journalistic in format, versatile and can be adapted to a variety of media relations situations. Consider the following:

- **General news story**: a ‘top line’ story written for and distributed to principal target news media.
- **Specialist news stories**: a series of stories ‘sliced and diced’ to meet more specialist needs, for example a PR team might carve up a large survey into a variety of stories according to vertical sector interest. Many business stories also fit this category.
Unit 7: Communicating effectively in public relations

7.1: The role of press releases in PR

- **A feature:** news stories are often used as the starting point for a more extended news feature, perhaps in conjunction with a backgrounder. Features editors and writers often find their stories this way.
- **Press conferences:** if you have decided to hold a press conference or media briefing – and the decision will hang on the quality of the news values* you are looking at – then the news release will underpin what is said at the event and form the basis of the story that journalists will take away and write.
  * Press conferences should only be held when the news value is high, as getting journalists to attend any event can be difficult.
- **Blogs and tweets:** used as starting points for a range of social media communications, certainly by bloggers and users of Twitter feeds, but also LinkedIn and Facebook.

### Checklist

The news release is the ‘workhorse’ of media relations. It:
- is multi-purpose
- forces you to find and exploit news
- acts as a vehicle for key messages
- helps your **sell-in**
- can be tailored to different audiences
- is low cost
- can start a dialogue
- keeps your name at the forefront
- generates coverage.

### Key terms

**Backgrounder** – a document for journalists that summarises the principal features of an organisation, for example, its core business, its geographical footprint, number of employees and financial turnover.

**Sell-in** – the process via which PR practitioners contact journalists either to follow up a news story they have already sent via email or to alert a journalist that a news story is going to be sent.

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3 Finding your news

The PR practitioner, like the journalist, will never write in a vacuum. The required output will always be researched and drafted in the context of meeting a specific brief. This will set out the parameters for the output, often including a word count, a synopsis and even elements of research that need to be included or on which the piece will be based.

Most importantly, the brief will define:
- the precise audience for the output
- who it is aimed at, e.g. the technology editor
- the format for the output.

More than anything, the audience will dictate the style of a piece alongside the depth and range of content.

No PR practitioner should ever write a news release, feature, press pack or blog without a very keen eye on the end user – the audience. The media outlet itself is just a channel to reach the target audience. The type of audience defines
the language, the style and the tone. A good tip is never to sit down and write anything without an end audience firmly fixed in your mind.

When a PR programme is defined, it will often include an element of media relations work, designed to place the organisation in front of all its key target audiences through the medium of the press. This will usually lead to a brief being drawn up to identify target media and the principal mechanisms used to reach them. Typically, part of this brief will be to find news stories, develop a programme of news releases and feed them to target media over the course of a project life or a PR retainer, thus keeping up a news presence. The more you do this, the more you will recognise and predict the types of news story that suit the news release vehicle.

Remember to bear in mind whether news stories have a limited UK context or could be used internationally; and, if so, how you should manage any associated sensitivities.

**News identification**

Look in places that are historically most fertile for news in order to identify and use news triggers. A list of news triggers is shown in Table 7.1.1 but you should note that this list is not exhaustive.

**Table 7.1.1: News triggers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business to business (B2B)</th>
<th>Business to consumer (B2C)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Contract wins (with a contract value)</td>
<td>• Surveys: behaviour, attitudes, perceptions, trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Product launches</td>
<td>• Issues: health, education, housing, finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Events (major, such as AGMs, conferences, etc.)</td>
<td>• New legislation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Major corporate announcements (restructure/merger/redundancy)</td>
<td>• New products and services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strategic alliances</td>
<td>• Human interest – people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Appointments (senior ones)</td>
<td>• Quirky happenings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial results</td>
<td>• Picture stories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your ability to identify a story and turn it into a successful news release can improve with practice. In that sense there is no magic formula to learn, but rather a proven methodology to follow. This topic guide is concerned in part with helping you to increase your hit rate and score more consistent successes with your news releases.

In order to do this, you need to adopt the right mindset – when you are looking for and thinking of news, you will ‘see’ it everywhere. Coupled with this, you must also give yourself the practical tools to do the job. When the two come together, you will be a more effective and convincing PR practitioner.

**News story structure**

You want to maximise your chances of attracting the news editor’s attention with your news release. That means writing it in a certain style which shows that you know the rules and doesn’t act as a turn-off.
Table 7.1.2 gives some broad indications of journalistic style:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Bad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short words</td>
<td>Long-winded/unfamiliar words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short sentences</td>
<td>Complex sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short paragraphs</td>
<td>Rambling paragraphs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active language</td>
<td>Passive language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plain English</td>
<td>Jargon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

News stories are top-down constructs; they seek to give the maximum amount of information as quickly as possible, answering the questions: what, who, why, when and where (known as the five Ws) – and ‘how’?

This grabs the reader’s attention quickly and at the same time enables subeditors to cut copy from the bottom up to meet changing demands for space. This means your story must appear in the headline and the first two paragraphs if it is to survive the cut.

**Classic structure**

In the world of news, everyone has limited time and limited patience. If you can make their job easier, you get one step nearer your goal. Classic news stories (and hence news releases) tend to follow the same, proven structure, as shown in Table 7.1.3:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>One short sentence carried over a maximum of two lines: subject; object; active verb: ‘MAN BITES DOG IN SUPERMARKET SHOCK’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dateline</td>
<td>Place, DD/MM/YYYY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News point</td>
<td>In a vicious attack at Markham’s this morning, 55-year-old Daniel Stewart bit a golden retriever in the leg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News point (2) – reinforcing</td>
<td>The dog, 3-year-old Jessie, was not badly injured, but Mr Stewart is now undergoing extensive psychological tests in hospital.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>This is the third such attack in as many months and is the source of growing worry among health authorities and the police.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote – brings story to life</td>
<td>‘I’ve never seen anything like it. He came at Jessie out of nowhere. It was very distressing,’ said Jessie’s owner, Bob Sturgess.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposition – detail</td>
<td>Mr Stewart’s neighbour, Alan Little, said he had observed worrying changes in his friend’s behaviour over preceding weeks, revealing that Mr Stewart had recently moved into a kennel in his garden.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exposition – second quote</td>
<td>Said local Police Chief, Norman McTaggart: ‘We are asking shoppers and the wider public to be vigilant while we try to establish a link between these incidents.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert comment – balance</td>
<td>Psychologist Martin Mindreader, an acknowledged expert in human behaviour, claimed that this type of attack might be due to growing stress levels causing certain character types to regress to an animal state.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The inverted pyramid

**Figure 7.1.1: The inverted pyramid**

Using the structure shown in **Figure 7.1.1** (the traditional journalistic presentation of news) is the most effective way of communicating your news story so that it will be readily understood, picked up and used in your target media. You could summarise the indispensable elements of this package as shown in the checklist below.

**Checklist**
- The words ‘news release’
- Dateline: place and date of issue
- A meaningful headline
- The entire story summed up in the opening paragraph
- Answers to who, what, when, where, why and how
- Relevant, useable quote(s)
- Ends with the word ‘ends’
- How and where to find further information
- **Boilerplate**
  - Perfect spelling, punctuation and grammar
  - Right number of words…
  - …in the right order

**Breaking down the news release process**

- To start the news release process, first ask the question: what is the story about? Find the news point – what has happened? And to who – where?
- Find the reinforcing news point – when did it happen? And why? How did it happen?
- Aim to cover the five Ws and ‘how’ in your first two sentences. Your news story needs to be in the headline and the first two paragraphs.
Case study
The following fictional case study outlines the process for creating a news release.

What has happened?
Puma has developed the world’s first palm oil-powered car.

So? What’s so special about palm oil power?
An engine run on palm oil emits nothing but water vapour.

Which means?
No harmful CO₂ emissions.

Which means?
Environment benefits – CO₂ has a huge impact on climate change – plus lower taxation for drivers.

Your story
The world’s first palm oil-powered car goes on the market today, launched by Brazilian car maker Puma.
Environmentalists and motorists have welcomed the new Puma Estrella because it emits only water vapour, as opposed to harmful CO₂, and brings road tax down to just £35 per year.

More news points – how was the breakthrough achieved; how does the technology work?
Context: where is this development in a scale of importance? (Often your ‘angle’)
Quote: your opportunity to put across a key message about the product, or the company or the technology: For example, ‘This vehicle has the potential to make a major impact on carbon emissions,’ said Puma CEO Emilio Vasquez.

Exposition
Detail that adds colour and information, perhaps cost or availability
‘Quote(2)’ Another qualified comment adding insight and third-party endorsement: For example, ‘This technology is revolutionary and the science behind it is world class,’ said Dave Tomkins, Chairman of the UK Royal Society of Engineers.

Headlines that work
When your headline has a subject, active verb and object, then it works. This convention creates headlines that say ‘Somebody does something new, interesting, surprising, controversial’, for example:
• Man bites dog
• XYZ signs £5m contract with ABC
• Chocolicous to launch world’s first non-fattening chocolate
• ABC appoints former head of XYZ.

Headlines that don’t work
There are many examples but one thing they all share is that none of them follow the basic rule:
• Press release from XYZ Ltd
• Cricket crazy
• Be afraid. Be very afraid
• Customers love Epson B230 printer
• John Doe celebrates 10 years in business
Company Name (that nobody has ever heard of) opens new site
Sales higher than last year.

4 Tailoring news

Embedding key messages, quotes
The principal PR purpose behind drafting and distributing news releases is to tell your audience what your organisation is doing. It is also an opportunity to get a key message across to your audience. The best place to embed this key message is in the quote that you ascribe to the spokesperson flagged in the news release.

For example: ‘This development will make us the market leader in mobile computing,’ said Derek Draper, CEO of John Doe Laptops Ltd.

Finding news angles
The term ‘news angle’ is sometimes misunderstood but, in essence, it means the skill of associating your news story with an issue that is current, or on the news agenda. An example of this is a car that runs on palm oil and makes a contribution to the cutting of carbon emissions on the roads.

Boilerplates
A boilerplate is usually no longer than two sentences and is attached to every news release that goes out. An example would be: ‘The NHS Newborn Hearing Screening Programme aims to identify moderate, severe and profound hearing impairment in newborn babies. The programme offers all parents in England the opportunity to have their baby’s hearing tested shortly after birth.’

Using pictures
Illustrations are often overlooked by PR practitioners, but any journalist will confirm that a news release accompanied by a high-quality image massively increases the chances of take-up. Alongside photography, images also include charts, graphs, cartoons and screen grabs.

Grammar and punctuation
It is part of the PR professional’s job to make sure that all copy released conforms to house style, uses accurate grammar and is spell checked and fact checked for accuracy.
Case study

News release

The press offices of government departments offer a good source of best practice in news release writing. They usually follow a consistent method and journalistic style, as in this example below:

**NHS screens two millionth baby for hearing problems**

From today, two million babies in England will have had their hearing screened thanks to the NHS Newborn Hearing Screening Programme. The programme, which has been rolling out across England since 2001, screens 1700 babies each day, and marks one of the biggest achievements in children’s audiology and services for deaf children and their families in the last 40 years.

Recognised as the most advanced hearing screening programme in the world, more than 3,400 babies have now been identified as having permanent hearing impairment or deafness (that’s moderate, severe or profound hearing loss) as a result of the programme. The programme, which replaced the Infant Distraction Test, offers parents the opportunity to have their baby’s hearing screened shortly after birth – over 99% of parents offered this invitation accept it. ‘It is widely acknowledged that early identification of hearing impairment or deafness is important for the development of the baby.

Health Minister Ivan Lewis said:

‘I am delighted that the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme has reached the significant milestone of two million babies screened. The programme has made a huge impact with babies being identified with a hearing loss on average one, if not sometimes, two years earlier than before, providing the potential to bring about an incredible change for these children and their families.’

Dr Anne Mackie, Screening Programmes Director of the UK National Screening Committee, said:

‘This is a major achievement and reinforces how the Newborn Hearing Screening Programme sets the standard for others around the world. Knowing early whether their baby has deafness or hearing impairment is hugely important for many parents. It enables them to make important informed decisions for them and their child’s future and improves their life chances.’

The major problem with late identification is the effect on the development of language, speech and communication. A delay in identification means a delay in establishing effective communication with the child. This in turn can have a long term impact on their social, emotional and educational development. The impact on the family is also substantial.

Ends

Notes to Editors:

1. For further information, interviews, case studies and please contact: NHS Newborn Hearing Screening Programme press office, tel: 07974 000 000; email: email@taddress.com
2. A trained hearing screener tests a baby’s hearing using two quick and simple tests to see if there is a need for further investigation. These are called the Automated OtoAcoustic Emissions test (AOAE), which is used for all babies, and then the Automated Auditory Brainstem Response test (AABR), which is a conditional test. Both tests are painless for the baby and can be done while the baby is sleeping.
3. The NHS Newborn Hearing Screening Programme aims to identify moderate, severe and profound hearing impairment in newborn babies. The programme offers all parents in England the opportunity to have their baby’s hearing tested shortly after birth.
4. A child with moderate hearing loss will: struggle to hear clearly the bedtime story they are being read; not be able to hear the television if there is background noise; not be able to hear birds singing. A child with severe hearing loss will not be able to hear: a car horn being sounded as they cross the road; a dog barking nearby; the teacher instructing pupils in a classroom.
5. The hearing screening programme in England is the largest integrated programme of universal newborn hearing screening in the world and is considered a beacon programme in terms of service quality and innovation and for involving health, education and early support.

GNN ref 151586P

Department of Health (National)

Friday 14 September 2007
5 Targeting the audience

To communicate effectively in public relations, you must define your target audience and use effective channels through which to push and pull information. Traditional methods ‘push’ information out to interested parties whereas newer technologies allow interested parties to subscribe and ‘pull’ information to them.

Take it further

Look up the Media Spamming Charter by following the link:
www.cipr.co.uk/sites/default/files/Media spamming charter_0.pdf

Getting the best result from your media relations programme requires you to produce the right content, in the right format and then make sure it gets to the right person, on the right media title, at the right time. Thus, intelligent research and construction of media lists means deciding what kind of publication and correspondent your story will interest. Remember that all publications or broadcast outlets are gatekeepers to their audience – they know what types of news, features, case studies or interviews and profiles will hook their readers.

To build media lists, begin by dissecting your audience. Who are they, where do you find them, and how do they like to get their information – in magazines, on TV or online – or through all of these? Use directories and online resources such as Mediadisk to build your list. Larger agencies also use the directory Gorkana. At all costs, be sure the names, titles and contact details are up to date – nothing annoys journalists more than information being sent to someone who left the publication two years ago. Remember, too, that you can optimise digital news distribution so that search engines can find key words quickly and easily, through search engine optimisation (SEO).

Through this process, you can build a media matrix that is fully customised for the purpose. Your options might include a mix of:
- horizontal press: nationals; regionals; broadcast media; online, read by everyone
- vertical sector press: trade; special interest; business; management
- blogs: personal online sites
- news agencies
- picture agencies
- editors
- news editors
- special correspondents
- feature writers
- freelancers
- researchers.

Key terms

Media list – comprises the media outlets and relevant correspondents you have selected to receive your news release or other output.

Media matrix – an output of the process via which you develop a mix of printed and online media to maximise the number of times you place a message in front of your target audience. For example, if you wanted to reach IT Directors, you would do so by targeting national newspapers, national and regional broadcast media, dedicated computing-based publications and some selected bloggers.
Activity
Media mapping
Read the publication, listen to the programme and take note of the style and remit of your target media:
- **Nationals**: deal in hard news, with a fast turnaround, strong stories, national significance: tragedies, failures, successes, comedies involving people
- **Regionals**: stories need to have a strong and clear regional or local angle
- **Trade**: have detailed insider knowledge about your client industry and company
- **Broadcast**: something to film or record, along with effective spokespeople to talk on the subject, giving high visual and audio values.

Take it further
There is a variety of proprietary systems to help you ramp up the effectiveness of your news and feature delivery and hit rate. Visit:
- Response Source ([www.responsesource.com](http://www.responsesource.com))
- Gorkana ([www.gorkana.com](http://www.gorkana.com)), which has developed a series of products for the PR industry including alerts, a smart journalist database and a contact management system.

Portfolio activity 1.1, 1.2, 1.3
For at least three situations you encounter as part of your role, or in a simulated workplace environment agreed in advance with your tutor, carry out the following tasks.
1. Identify the criteria for press releases from briefs you have been given.
2. Using the criteria you identified, create a press release for each of the scenarios which meets industry standards.
3. Evaluate the success of your press releases – how much coverage did they get? Did they reach the right channels? Did they meet the requirements of the brief? Make recommendations for the improvements you would make if you were presented with the same briefs again.
Further reading

Books

Websites
CIPR media spamming charter
www.cipr.co.uk/sites/default/files/Media spamming charter_0.pdf
Mediadisk www.cision.com/uk/products-and-services/mediadisk/
Response Source www.responsesource.com
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