

The Press Release Is Dead

It's time to wean colleagues from this overused and underwhelming tactic

By ERIN HENNESSY

Put yourself in the reporter's or producer's shoes: Would a press release win your attention?

How do I tell people I don't have time for this?" A campus communications director asked this question about press releases at a recent conference. Almost instantly, you could hear attendees gasp and hiss "yes" like they were sitting in the audience at the *Dr. Phil* show. I'd bet that most communicators feel the same frustration about the relentless requests they receive for this overused, outdated tactic. The better question is: Should we be doing press releases? Most of the time, the answer is no.

For the uninitiated, the request—generally an email—goes something like this:

Hey, [overworked, underappreciated, but so-darn-dedicated campus P.R. person], I'd love to talk to you about putting out a press release for [my upcoming paper, talk, grant, promotion, new summer camp, event, etc.]. I know you're super busy, but let me know what info you need and when you think you can get this done. I assume we'll send it to the local papers as well as *The New York Times*. Thanks!

I don't mean to mock our cross-campus colleagues. I'm not implying that their news isn't important. But to shift from a reactive role to a more strategic one, we need to face reality: The press release is dead.

ARE YOU SURE IT'S NOT JUST SLEEPING?

Need proof that the press release is obsolete? Search for "Is the press release dead" on Google—the ultimate arbiter of whether a concept is legitimate these days—and you'll get more than 20 million hits. According to a 2014 study by the international communications firm Greentarget, most journalists spend less than 60 seconds reading the releases they receive—if they look at them at all. Coca-Cola has transitioned away from press releases in favor of brand journalism and plans to eliminate them entirely next year.

I'm not suggesting that you should never issue another release. The tactic warrants a place in the communicator's toolbox. But that specific and narrow



usage should be for documenting an institution's historical record. Your communications plans for milestones such as naming a new president or receiving a record-breaking gift will include—as part of a much broader media strategy—a press release. To tell your institution's story, you need to embrace creative strategies that engage audiences and interest reporters. For example, instead of offering just a quote from your new leader next to a headshot, consider sending a video package with professionally filmed footage as well as clips crowdsourced from students eager to meet their new president.

Journalists rely on campus communicators to identify the "so what?" factor that steers them to produce a story. Communicators who don't do this are not viewed as useful, trusted sources. Even worse, they're missing opportunities to build relationships with reporters—the kind that lead to the prime story placements institutional leaders crave. Communicators must think about how to help journalists tell compelling stories about their campuses. As newsrooms get smaller and leaner, reporters are covering more beats in addition to higher education. They're often required to enhance their reporting with photos and video. Providing the press with multimedia materials requires more planning, preparation, and flexibility on the front end, but the potential payoff is greater than a brief blurb in

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the local paper or a quick turn on a news aggregation site. To compete, you need to perfect your pitching skills.

PITCH CRAFT

A solid pitch is the antithesis of a press release. It offers reporters a short, well-grounded, and well-sourced overview of a newsworthy story. Instead of emailing 25 reporters the same material, you're crafting a personalized note to a journalist—and demonstrating that you've done your homework. Put yourself in the reporter's or producer's shoes: Which approach would win your attention?

The foundation of any good pitch is research. Internally, look for on-campus stories worth telling, such as events that offer a great news hook or people or projects that present a new or surprising take on an ongoing issue. Externally, identify the right reporter and news outlet to target. How? Go beyond the information in your media database. Dig into people's past reporting, Twitter feeds,

and Facebook posts to find the journalists and publications that are most likely to be interested in your proposal. Confirm the reporter's preferred contact method for receiving pitches.

Your pitch should be clear, active, and concise—every word counts. Offer strong supporting material. High-resolution photos or b-roll, raw data or infographics, subject-matter experts, and other relevant interview sources can elevate your pitch from a maybe to a must. But make sure you can provide what you've proposed. Nothing is worse than enticing a reporter and then having your expert refuse to participate.

GIVE PEOPLE A HAND

Let's revisit the beleaguered communications colleague with the burning question that started this discussion. Upon reading this far, I bet she would respond: "That's all well and good, but how do I explain all this to the anthropology department or the dean's office?"

Creating buy-in for a different, more strategic approach isn't easy, but here's some advice that might help. The next time you get an email requesting a press release, ask the following questions:


What's the end goal? Does your campus colleague want to drive attendance for an event? Fulfill a grant requirement? Boost visibility for a program or initiative? Knowing the goal will help you determine a better way forward and give your discussions with colleagues a strategic context.

Are there other ways to accomplish the objective? Local and online event calendars can help promote a lecture or exhibit. (Don't forget about the institution's website and department calendars.) Social media channels may spread the word among certain audiences more effectively. Listings in trade publications (such as Inside Higher Ed's "New Programs" and "Newly Tenured" lists or *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* "Transitions" section) announce new initiatives, professional achievements, promotions, and retirements.

Can you help them help themselves? Consider providing templates for recurring requests such as event announcements, grants, awards, publications, and speaking engagements.

Can you package the story differently? Think about all the communications channels at your disposal—the institution's website, social media platforms, alumni magazine, faculty/staff newsletters, presidential speeches and updates, annual reports, and other admissions or advancement publications. Communicators have more storytelling options than ever before.

Answering these questions can start a productive dialogue that helps cross-campus colleagues feel that you've heard their concerns and expectations and that you value their contributions to the institution. In turn, communicators can emphasize the importance of a strategic approach to attracting media attention and position themselves as resourceful partners.

Let's resist the urge to rejoice over the death of the press release and instead use its demise as an opportunity for more effective and meaningful communication. Our institutions' stories deserve nothing less. 

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