

Build a Press Kit That Works

How to make sure your company's news doesn't end up in an editor's trash can.

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Every business wants to ensure that its news ends up in the headlines and not in a journalist's trash pail. So how do you make sure that your press kit makes it across the transom?

Press kits are sent to the media to promote company happenings – new products, expanded service or a new location. Companies may also issue press kits to ride the coattails of a cultural phenomenon (e.g., a workout clothing manufacturer looking to target Wii Fit users or a promotional products company looking to ring up big sales during the corporate gift-giving season). Sending an entire kit is standard marketing practice to launch a new company that's completely "unexposed" to the press and needing a full introduction.

A press kit should not be confused with a press release. A press or news release is a stand-alone sheet that announces new developments concerning a company or individual to the press, or it can be part of a press kit. The kit usually contains the news release plus a company backgrounder, bios of key individuals and photos. A more extensive kit can also contain FAQs and a lifestyle release relating the company's news to what is going on in the marketplace or with the target audience. Most often, an established company needs to issue a news release only when there is a significant event.

From doorstep to e-blast.

Twenty years ago, Polaroid introduced its latest model with a grand press kit. The kit was referred to as the "doorstop," and that was a compliment. Weighing in at about three pounds, the kit contained a four-page announcement release; biographies of no fewer than eight executives and engineers involved with the product; a hefty company history; specs of the new camera in excruciating detail; and five press-ready photos. The press kit that might have been unique in 1988 may appear as nothing more than unnecessary, wasteful and irrelevant in 2008. Journalists are pressed for time and concerned with immediacy, especially as news is now delivered in real time via websites and blogs.

By 2001, online press kits had become essential marketing tools, and now there is "virtually" no other way to break through. Journalists expect to receive newsworthy information from companies in a concise, user-friendly, immediate way. A journalist wants to be able to easily download all necessary information or review it in a digestible e-mail.

So, what constitutes "pertinent information in a compelling package"? You must tell your story in the established format the media expect – a to-the-point cover letter with up-to-date background materials, but with a hook that makes your information newsworthy. A press kit that evokes shock, surprise and humor (backed by facts) is a sure-fire way to reach any audience, including jaded editors.

Also note that one way to irritate a media professional right out of reading your press kit is to clog his inbox by attaching huge files. Online press kits should be just that – online. Send e-mail links to your press kit to save bandwidth for you and your target. Be timely.

Be credible. Be knowledgeable. Be relevant.

The established format starts with a press release announcing your news. The headline of your press release can make it more seem relevant and riveting than the myriad other releases a journalist receives on any given day. Try to tie your company news to a current trend, statistic, or time of year or recent occurrence. For example, one of our clients (a cosmetic dentist) started using a new device to identify oral cancer. We found a recent medical study about a link between HPV and oral cancer in women, a hot-button topic in the media these days. The press release about the dentist's news tied these powerful statistics to the dentist's new capabilities and helped interest local media in his story.

The online kit should also include a company backgrounder – basic facts about what your business does, its history, who the principals are and contact information. Bios can also be included as part of your backgrounder, but don't tell your life story. Less than one page will do just fine. Make your company come alive in your

backgrounder, but do not include irrelevant details, such as detailed family information (if you're not a family business) or a long list of products not related to the news story. If your product or service lends itself to a visual, include photos or diagrams. For example, a display company launched a "green" division and introduced a line of sustainable trade-show booth elements. The company included a picture in its press kit, captioning each new display element with its value to the environment. Post high resolution images to your online press kit that can be easily downloaded and incorporated in live graphics or print layouts.

As important as (or perhaps more important than) the contents of the press kit itself is the cover note you send. The pitch letter should be brief, compelling and well-crafted. Less is more, but don't be overly cryptic. In some instances, we don't send out complete press kits to the media. We will send a personalized pitch – no "dear sir or madam" allowed – and follow up with the details only when we have established interest. The pitch letter should be the body of the e-mail.

Choose your e-mail subject line wisely when you send a pitch to a journalist. For some, a "just the facts" approach is fine (e.g., "Acme Foods introduces chewing gum that lasts 10 hours"). Others may appreciate your pithiness and sense of humor ("Got Flabby Arms?"), and still others respond best when the subject line is personalized ("Mary Sue thought you might be interested in this story angle").

Above all, make life easier for the journalists you are approaching. They are all pressed for time and may move on to other sources if you make them search for information (like relevant statistics or even your URL or phone number). Put yourself in the mind-set of a journalist and reread your kit. Think, "I'm on deadline. I am looking for stories that will engage my readers/viewers. I have hundreds of e-mails to pore through. What is the story angle here? Who will care? What makes this news interesting? What makes this company unique? Can I easily write my story without doing a lot more research?" The journalist should be able to literally take the words from your kit and place them into his or her story without concern for veracity or accuracy.

Even if you create great press materials, send them to the right people and have a terrific story to tell, do not expect results overnight. Professional public relations involves a process of targeted communication, the right kind (and frequency) of follow-up and, quite frankly, a little bit of luck at times.

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