

# Releases: Impressing the Press

Here are seven steps to writing and distributing effective press releases.

By Gene Rose



Look at today's newspaper. How many stories do you think were the result of a press release? Probably lots. Many reporters use press releases as a starting point in writing the stories that appear in your local newspapers, magazines, radio and television news shows. A press release can be one of the most cost effective ways to send a message to a large number of people.

## WHEN TO WRITE A PRESS RELEASE

For a legislator, the primary purpose of a press release is to raise public awareness and influence decision making through the media. As a lawmaker, the nature of your position allows you, to an extent, to create news. Take advantage of this by developing a publicity plan. Don't miss an opportunity to announce a newsworthy event or action. Those notices will become part of your public record.

Examples include announcements of town meetings, recognition of achievements or resolutions, announcements of local projects, commemorative events, viewpoints on

national holidays or your participation in NCSL's back-to-school event.

If you know that the governor is considering signing or vetoing legislation, you can issue a release with your reaction to the new law—or its failure. Be creative, but always thoughtful, about what the public would want or need to know. And remember, the media will soon tire of releases that are not considered "news," so give them only material that you honestly believe will be useful.

The luxury of planning a news release, however, is not always an option. Often a good reason to write a news release is as an immediate response to an event that occurred that morning or afternoon. Unplanned events that are newsworthy could be anything from a natural disaster in your district to the unexpected introduction or passage of legislation you strongly support or oppose.

## HOW TO DO IT

A release is most effective when it results in a story printed or broadcast to the public. The competition for media attention is intense. Major electronic distributors of

releases, US Newswire and PR Newswire, transmit hundreds of releases a day. Many releases, though, are never used by the media because reporters see little news value to the general public. Fortunately, your chances of a media outlet using or publishing your release can increase dramatically by following a simple set of guidelines on format, content and distribution.



### Use a standardized format.

Develop a standard format for every release that conforms to the Associated Press (AP) style. (Buy a copy of *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*.) Unless you are distributing your release electronically, use double-spacing since the extra space allows editors room to make notes. Standard margins are two inches from the top and 1.5 inches on each side and the bottom. Write "more" at the end of each continuing page and "end" or "###" at the end of your press release.

A press release is a highly structured form of communication. The content should include contact information on the top, a bold and catchy headline, a date and an interesting lead paragraph followed by the main body and a recap. Be sure to answer the five Ws—who, what, when, where and why.

## GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR PRESS RELEASES

- ◆ Prepare a monthly or yearly publicity plan with planned press releases.
- ◆ Prepare a crisis communication plan for unplanned events.
- ◆ When writing your press release:
  1. Use a standardized format.
  2. Always include a current press contact name, phone number and e-mail.
  3. Sum up your key points in the first one or two sentences.
  4. Proofread your release for spelling, grammar and punctuation errors.
  5. Always double check that the date printed on the release is correct.
  6. Avoid excessive "hype."
  7. Use quotes from yourself, local constituents and issue specialists.
  8. Follow up with a phone call to key reporters to ensure that they received your release and inquire if they have any questions.

*Gene Rose is NCSL's Public Affairs director.*

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**The first sentences need to grab the reader.**

The lead sentence should arouse interest and make the reader want to know more. Use it to sum up the key announcement or news. A lead has four basic functions: to attract attention, establish the subject, set the tone and guide the reader into the story. Don't feel that you have to put your name in the lead paragraph of every release. Let the "news" lead the release.

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**Make your release well-written, concise and accurate.**

This saves journalists writing and research time, which increases the chance they will run your story. Use correct spelling, grammar and punctuation. Use the active rather than passive voice. Avoid wordiness by using an "inverted pyramid" style that places the most important facts first. Avoid jargon. Quote yourself, but give your words credibility with an attached fact sheet or include viewpoints from independent experts or local constituents.

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**Avoid excessive "hype."**

This undermines your credibility. Gain credibility through facts, not flowery adjectives and hyperbole.

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**Make your releases newsworthy and timely.**

As the saying goes: old news is no news. Typically, news releases should be distributed the same day or the day after a newsworthy event.

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**Localize your release.**

Successful news releases emphasize the local angle.

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**Target the distribution of your release.**

Don't send your releases to all media outlets. Compile lists of local newspapers, magazine, radio and television stations. If possible, group reporters by the topic that they cover (e.g., education, health, politics) and

develop personal relationships with them. Follow up with a phone call to confirm that reporters received the release and inquire if they have any questions.

You can distribute your release by fax, e-mail, distribution services or hand delivery. Any of these can be effective if targeted to the right reporter. Monitor the amount of coverage you receive with on-line clipping services, on-line search engines or a simple daily read of the local newspapers.

Finally, remember that by making it as easy as possible for the media to do their job, you increase your chances of waking up with a favorable story.

If a reporter or editor decides not to use your news release, you have not failed. At the least, you initiated awareness or nurtured your relationship with the media simply by writing and distributing the release. By improving relationships with your capitol press corps and hometown reporters, you achieve credibility. The relationship between the reporter and the legislator is a complex one, but definitely one that can be mutually beneficial.

**NEWS.**  
**WE CAN'T READ IT FOR YOU.  
 BUT WE'VE DONE THE NEXT BEST THING.**

The day's top state and national policy news clippings are now in one place:  
**WWW.NCSL.ORG/GRASSCATCHER**

Grasscatcher a service of NCSL's *State Legislatures* magazine.

The illustration shows a person in a red shirt and purple pants using a lawnmower to cut through a field of newspaper clippings. The clippings are labeled with various newspaper names: The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Los Angeles Times, The Chicago Tribune, The Christian Science Monitor, USA Today, and The Washington Post.

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