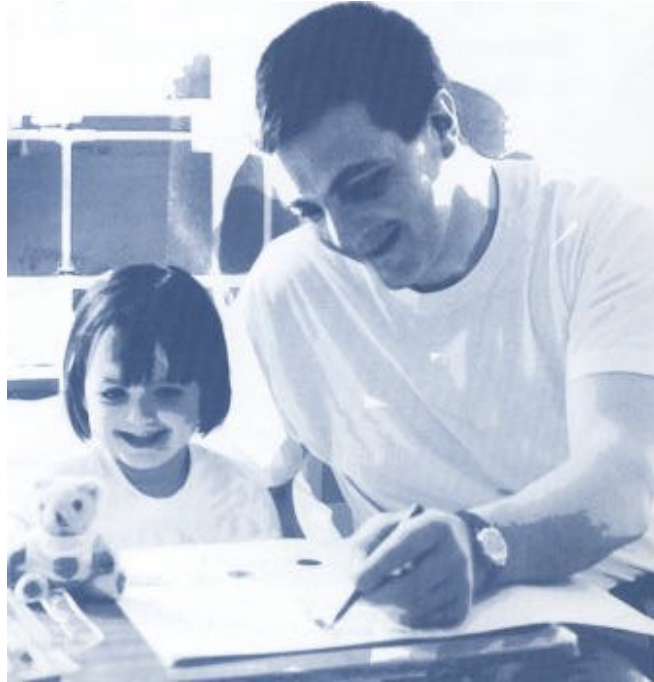




# Volunteer Centre

Sefton

*Promoting Supporting and Developing Volunteering in Sefton*



## Guidelines for Preparing & Writing Press Releases & Effective Recruitment Messages

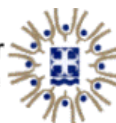
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Voluntary Service**



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### 1) INTRODUCTION

Press (news) releases are a publicity generating technique commonly used by organisations to raise awareness and interest in their products and services. As advertising costs can be prohibitive for charities and non-profit-making, this form of communication is especially popular. It is a cheap and effective way of raising public awareness, attracting volunteers and hopefully funds for a range of social concerns including illness, poverty and under-development.

However an estimated 80% of all press/news releases never get published. This is mainly due to lack of strategic thinking and poor execution on the part of the organisation seeking publicity. This being so, what can be done to increase the chances of getting the organisation's press releases published?

**Please note: Volunteer Centre Sefton has endeavoured to check the accuracy of all the information in this guide and to ensure that it is up to date. However, in the light of legislative or other changes we cannot guarantee accuracy or completeness.**

### 2) WHEN SHOULD A PRESS RELEASE BE ISSUED?

The press release is often wrongly perceived as a means of free advertising or self-promotion. This overlooks a number of strategic possibilities. The press release should seek to entice the editor or journalist to seek out more information about the story, and more importantly, to get the story published. From a strategic perspective, the release can also define the organisation's character and core values over time. This can have the effect of providing inoculation from attack in times of crisis.

In this respect press releases should be issued only if they are newsworthy and have something to say. Therefore, the release must contain fact or opinion that is new, relevant and of interest to a substantial number of the publication's readers. This is a feature borne out by research which indicates that the news stories most likely to get published include the following characteristics:

- **Timely** (Topics in the news).
- **Research Stories** (New discoveries and inventions).
- **Forthcoming events** (Announcing and/or promotion of events sponsored by the organisation).
- **Consumer Information** (To aid consumers decisions and activities).

This research also indicated that when the press release provides information and a service to newspaper readers, editors use them more frequently than those which could be categorised as:

- **Institutional News** (self-promotion, accomplishments of the organisation).

- **Features** (Articles about people associated with the organisation who have done something of interest).
- **Past Events** (Summary of events which have already occurred). Essentially, the most effective and most published releases blend reader service with organisation promotion. So, before writing press releases the following questions must be posed and answered.
- **What information do the target audience need and want?**
- **What information can the organisation provide to meet the target audience's needs and desires?**

### 3) WHY DO SOME PRESS RELEASES FAIL TO BE PUBLISHED?

All press releases are read by the recipients, but a great many end up in the bin. The usual reasons for this are that it was....

- **Too boring** - The editor decided the news contained in your press release was not of sufficient interest to the general public. Bear in mind that an event that you and your colleagues may consider to be of great importance may not capture the imagination of people who haven't your specialist involvement or interest in the issue.
- **Too late** - The news item was interesting, but out of date by the time the press release was written e.g. an editor may consider the appointment of a new managing director of an organisation newsworthy, but not if the person had already been in post for six months.
- **Poorly written** - The press release contained some interesting news, but was so confusingly written that the editor could not spare the time to rewrite it.
- **Just bad luck** - The news item was current, well written and interesting, unfortunately other press releases received at the same time were even more interesting.

Although over 80% of all press releases are rejected editors are always on the look out for interesting ones to fill their pages. Never give up. If you can develop the skills necessary for preparing and writing informative and stimulating stories then there is no reason why they will not be published.

Firstly a number of fundamental issues must be considered. These are best framed as questions which those charged with the task of gaining media attention should ask themselves.

### 4) WHICH WRITING AND FORMATTING STYLE IS MOST APPROPRIATE?

The main objectives of a Press Release are to capture and sustain the target audience's attention. When writing a Press Release, a basic news-writing style using short words, short sentences and short paragraphs is essential. Avoid the use of unnecessary jargon and seek to emphasise uses, advantages and implications to the target reader rather than features.

To achieve the desired effect the format of the Press Release is universal and always starts with the most important information before moving through a short series of paragraphs from the more important to less important details. The Editors attention must be stimulated in the first 15 to 20 lines. Therefore structure and presentation are critical. The crucial aspects are:

#### a) **The Headline of the Release**

The headline should seek to arouse the editor's interest in the story and the news angle. This is a working title and should be brief, direct and descriptive statement about the context of the release. The release date should be printed on the right hand side of the headline.

#### b) **Paragraph One**

Paragraph one is crucial as it contains the news angle which sells the story. It must catch the editor's interest and should entice them to read the remaining paragraphs. The Paragraph contains the central information (who, what, when, where and how) It must summarise the whole story and should be able to stand alone. Aim for a one thought - one sentence approach.

The remaining paragraphs should elaborate on and substantiate the rest of the story while also expanding on the news angle. Finally, the release should be written so that it can be easily cut anywhere after paragraph one and still make sense.

### **c) Length & Format**

The following points are crucial when considering length and format:

- If at all possible confine the release to one page (never more than two).
- Typing should be double spaced on one side of paper with generous margins (2.5 inch margin on the top of the first page and at least 1.5 inches on the top of the second page for editors notes).
- Never carry a sentence from one page of the release onto the next page.
- Finish a sentence or paragraph on the page it was started and type "More Follows..." to indicate a second page.
- When the main body of the release is finished, type "(-Ends-)".
- The date the release was sent, contact names/telephone numbers for further information should be placed at the bottom of the release.

## **5) SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE LAYOUT**

**\*\*\*Press Release\*\*\***

**Release Date**

**Headline**

**Paragraph 1**

*Who, what, why, when, where, how*

**Paragraph 2**

*Expand (provide context), perhaps quote*

**Paragraph 3**

*Background information*

**Paragraph 4**

*Background information and organisation's details*

*(-Ends-)*

**Today's Date:**                      **For further information contact:**

**Name:**                                **Address:**

**Tel:**                                    **Fax:**

**Email:**                                **Website:**

## **6) HOW TO TARGET THE APPROPRIATE MEDIA**

It is important to understand that the best 'News Releases' are worthless if they are sent to the wrong media, or sent to the right media at the wrong time. It is therefore crucial that you are familiar with the type of stories your target media typically print. This requires you to be aware of certain facts about the chosen media, for example, who their readers are, how often they publish, when they are printed and their latest date for copy. Each story requires its own carefully selected list of target media in order to maximise its chance of being published so target your release to the appropriate journalist, department and publication.

## 7) WRITING EFFECTIVE RECRUITMENT MESSAGES

Every day we are at the receiving end of recruitment messages encouraging us to volunteer - in the paper, on the bus, the radio, notice boards. Within your locality there are likely to be hundreds of organisations who involve volunteers and are on the lookout for more. So when it comes to finding volunteers for your own organisation, what can you do to get your own recruitment message noticed? How can you catch people's interest harness their concern and motivate them to volunteer?

Despite the competition to recruit volunteers, it's not difficult to make your recruitment message stand out. Many organisations' messages are vague or bland, largely in a misguided attempt to avoid putting people off. Ironically they do just that, because they fail to provide people with the clear and specific information they require to make an informed decision about volunteering. An effective message will put people off - the wrong people. If your message is explicit about the sort of people you are looking for, unsuitable prospective volunteers can de-select themselves out of your recruitment process before you've spent valuable time on processing applications, interviewing or even training.

Formulating a clear message also encourages organisations to be very focussed about their volunteer programmes. Using the following five point formula for writing a message will push you to be certain about what your volunteers will do and what type of person is most suitable to do that work. It will also help you to think about the voluntary work from the volunteers' perspective: Why might people be interested in doing it? What will they get out of volunteering with your organisation? By giving potential volunteers the information they need you are more likely to encourage a response.

### **a) What does your organisation do?**

Start your message by describing purpose of your organisation or group. In some cases, the name of your organisation might communicate what you are all about. If not, add a brief explanation: 'Global Partnership: We are the UK's largest Third World festival' or 'St. Cuthbert's Day Centre provides a range of services to homeless or vulnerable people'. If you have space, explain what difference your work makes, or what would happen if you weren't supported by volunteers? At all costs, avoid vague generalisations such as 'volunteers make a real difference to our service users' which are not at all informative.

### **b) What work will your volunteers do?**

Briefly describe the type or nature of the voluntary work in broad terms. Also include information about where and when the work is done, and how much time it requires: 'Chelsea Day Centre, Age concern, need help in our day centre for 1 to 2 days a week to serve lunch and chat with elderly members. Hours 10.00am - 2.00pm, Monday to Friday.'

### **c) Who are you looking for?**

One area where recruitment messages are often vague is when they describe who would make a suitable volunteer. Phrases such as 'we need caring people' or 'all you need is enthusiasm' are often untimely and counter-productive. They don't tell prospective volunteers anything specific and anyway most of us consider ourselves to be caring. The type of volunteers who are suitable for your organisation are more likely to be drawn to you if you expressly define your requirements. So if you are looking for particular skills, or have selection criteria which have been set up to protect your clients, say so! 'Do you have significant corporate experience in a sales marketing and research role? If so and you want to help with a range of tasks that require basic computer skills and a high degree of corporate sector knowledge...' or 'Wildlife project seeks keen naturalist and good communicator to help train and co-ordinate fellow volunteers in botanical surveys and simple office work.'

### **d) What makes your voluntary work attractive?**

This part of the message can be approached from two angles. The first, and most frequently used, is to explain how you will support volunteers in doing the work. This includes describing how you deal with any barriers or fears that discourage people from volunteering (e.g. by paying travel expenses,

providing training, back-up services etc.) Increase your number of applicants by mentioning the measures you've put in place to make volunteering easier.

A second approach is to address the intrinsic benefits that volunteers will get out of doing the work. This is a more neglected aspect of recruitment messages, but is one that can really tune into the motivational needs of volunteers and energise them to respond to your message. Don't simply say that the voluntary work is rewarding; describe why it is rewarding, for example learning new skills, meeting new people, being part of a team, learning about issues or other lifestyles etc. If you're not sure what volunteers get out of working with you, ask your existing ones what they find most rewarding about it.

#### **e) What do you want potential volunteers to do next?**

Explain what you want potential volunteers to do in response to your message. Whether you want people to ring, write or drop by, try and make the next step as easy as possible for them - and respond to them quickly.

There are many different ways of getting your message across - poster, leaflet, advert, giving a talk, radio appeal etc. Whatever method you use, try and incorporate the five elements mentioned. The medium will determine how much detail you can go into and how you set about catching your audience's attention, but the core message will remain the same. And when that message is clear and specific, potential volunteers can not only make informed choices, but will be attracted to those organisations whose volunteer programmes have obviously been well thought out.

## **8) PREPARING & WRITING PRESS RELEASES - DO'S & DON'TS**

### **Do**

- \* Have a well defined reason for sending the release
- \* Make sure the release is newsworthy
- \* Provide the facts and avoid superlatives
- \* Avoid unnecessary jargon
- \* Clearly mark and centre "PRESS RELEASE" on page 1
- \* Write a concise and accurate headline
- \* Paragraph one should provide a factual summary of your story
- \* Include contact names and numbers at end of release
- \* Prepare different releases for different publications
- \* Know the publications deadlines
- \* Be fanatical about spelling and presentation

### **Don't**

- \* Send to an inappropriate journalist or publication
- \* Make unsubstantiated claims
- \* Miss publication deadlines
- \* Issue releases that contain little or no news value
- \* Issue releases that are poorly written
- \* Use logo/letterhead paper on page one of release
- \* Paragraph one should provide a factual summary of your story
- \* Include contact names and numbers at end of release
- \* Prepare different releases for different publications
- \* Know the publications deadlines
- \* Be fanatical about spelling and presentation

## 9) ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Volunteer Centre Sefton provides a wide range of advice, support and guidance services in relation to volunteering and volunteer management to local voluntary and community organisations. For further details contact the Volunteer Centre.

### Sefton Volunteer Bureau Guidelines

The following documents are free to download: <http://www.volunteeringsefton.org.uk/bestpractice.html>

- Managing & Supporting Volunteers - Good Practice Guidelines
- Writing Volunteer Opportunities for the Internet
- Organising Residential Events Guidelines – 23 Points to Consider
- The Useful Websites Guide

### Useful Organisations

**do-it** Address: 2-3 Upper Street, Islington, London N1 0PH.

Tel.: 020 7226 8008 Fax: 020 7226 8118

Email: [info@do-it.org.uk](mailto:info@do-it.org.uk) Website: <http://www.do-it.org.uk>

**Timebank** Address: 3rd Floor Downstream Building, 1 London Bridge, London SE1 9BG.

Tel.: 0845 456 1668 Fax: 0845 456 1669

Email: [feedback@timebank.co.uk](mailto:feedback@timebank.co.uk) Website: <http://www.timebank.co.uk>

**Volunteering England** Address: Regents Wharf, 8 All Saints Street, London N1 9RL.

Tel.: 0845 305 6979 Fax: 020 7520 8910

Email: [information@volunteeringengland.org.uk](mailto:information@volunteeringengland.org.uk) Website: <http://www.volunteering.org.uk>

A range of free 'Managing Volunteers' Information Sheets are available to download from:

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/missions.php?id=282>

Titles include: Accreditation of voluntary work; Screening and police checking volunteers; Health and safety of volunteers; Volunteer drivers; Volunteer Expenses.

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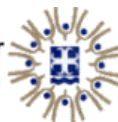
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