

Public Relations

– A simple ‘how to’ guide

This simple guide is not designed to turn you into a media and public relations guru. It is intended to help libraries of all sizes and types improve the effectiveness of their public relations and to improve the quantity and quality of the stories featured in the press and other media. This guide assumes that individual libraries will not be embarking on fully formed public relations campaigns, but will be focussing on gaining positive coverage, for success stories and events, to generate interest in their library amongst their target audiences.

Rather than rattle on about the theory of media communications we'll dive straight in with a list of key pointers to successfully getting positive press coverage for your library.

1. What public relations is not

Public relations is not direct promotion or sales in the majority of cases. It does not deliver immediately measurable results. Public relations is about creating a presence in a variety of media that will change opinion over time. The exception to this is when press releases are used to encourage attendance at a particular event, a tool that could be effectively used by libraries on a local level.

2. Create a good product first, promote it second

Before trying to put any stories in the press or encourage new visitors to your library make sure that the library is as good, and as welcoming, as it can be. Visit local shops to steal display ideas and look at the ‘retail innovation manual’ for hints and tips on how to spruce up your library for little effort and no money. If your press release is about an upcoming event make sure that this is promoted, along with relevant book stock, as people enter the library.

3. The secret to success

The key thing to remember in public relations is that it is your relationship with the media that will influence how successful your press releases are. In local authorities and education institutions it is also your relationship with the corporate communications departments that will be crucial in ensuring that you regularly get support and coverage for the stories that you want to communicate. So, take a long-term view to your relationship with local media, even if you are just sending a press release to the local paper once every couple of months. A good relationship now will help you secure coverage in the future.

- Find out who the journalists are on your local paper and who might be interested in a library related story (see a list of media contacts by region here).
- Cultivate a friendly journalist on your local paper and radio station. Talk to them about upcoming events or stories that may be of interest
- Always think about stories from the journalist's point of view. Does the story and the way it is presented help them do their job?
- Always offer support material and background facts with your story. Digital photos and brief biographies of key people or places will all help to make the story more attractive to journalists.
- A quirky photograph can make the difference between a half-page spread and the bin for your story. Check out the style of photographs that your target media uses and try to create something that will stand out as interesting and different in that style.
- Find out how journalists prefer to receive press releases and send your communications in that way. Email is often the delivery mechanism of choice, but don't assume that this is the case. File formats for press releases and images can also be important in making it easy for journalists to use your stories.

4. Have a clear objective

What do you want the media to say and to whom? Are you trying to generate interest in an upcoming event, communicate change, report on a success story or publicise a new post or service. Each of these would potentially target different audiences, would need to use different media and be written in a different tone and style. Deciding upon your objectives before you start is crucial to success. Just writing a release and sending it to the local paper may not be what is required and could be a waste of your time.

The easiest way to define your objectives is to imagine what your ideal outcome from the issue of a press release would be.

Do you want:

- The public to turn up to an event
- More new users to register
- Existing users to access a new service
- Policy makers to see value in the library service
- People to view the library in a different light
- A call for increased budget for your library service

The list is potentially endless, above are just some examples, but it is crucial to understand your objectives before you begin.

5. Who is your public and what media do they read, listen to or watch?

Deciding upon your 'public' or audience for a news story is vital. Who do you want to influence with the story. This will be closely linked to the objective you decided on and will affect how the story is written and where it is published. Some examples of possible audiences for your story could be:

- The general public
- Non-users of libraries
- Library users
- Library staff
- Local councillors
- Local government organisations or departments
- The business community

Each of these audiences may be accessed through different media or a mix of media for example:

- The business section of the local paper, rather than the main news section
- The local authority magazine
- The student newspaper
- Trade publications such as Cilip Update

Make sure that you know who your audience is and what media they are likely to be influenced by.

6. Make sure your story is 'newsworthy'

Essentially, is your story any good? It is wrong to assume that the simplest of stories from a library won't be of interest to media and their readership. It is also wrong to assume that a story presented from a libraries point of view will be of any interest to a journalist. You need to create an 'angle' for your story. Look at a potential story and decide which aspect might grab the interest of a specific audience. For example, if you have a new ICT librarian or facility and want to attract new users into the library the story could be 'Free broadband access and tuition comes to town centre'.

- Look for things that are out of the ordinary, unusual projects or partnerships that might spark people's interest.
- Local and regional press will want a local angle.
- Trade magazines will want an angle specific to their readership.
- Each publication will need a version of your story that is relevant to their audience. Be prepared to tailor different versions of your story for the business community, the general public and politicians, for example.

7. Generate regular newsworthy stories

Providing the press with interesting stories on a regular basis will not only provide a consistent presence for your library in the minds of your audiences, it will also show journalists that you are a good source of material, and may help you secure coverage for really important stories in the future.

- Aim to send a newsworthy press story out at least once every two months
- Don't use the same approach or angle for each story, always keep it fresh
- Generate stories through staff and library users – place a 'suggestion box' in your library where people can submit ideas for events, stories or feedback on the service
- Use internal staff newsletters or the intranet to encourage submission of news stories

8. Make sure your release is read

Journalists, like all of us, are pressed for time. Press releases and stories can litter their desk. Make sure that yours stands out from the crowd. The headline or subject heading should act as a hook to get the reader's interest. You then have the first paragraph or three sentences to confirm their interest. In these few words it is vital that you present a story that:

- Is relevant and of interest to their readers
- Has a novel or interesting spin
- Has enough substance to productively use space in their publication or programme.

The strength of your story must be distilled into that opening paragraph to ensure that it doesn't end up in the bin. If a journalist only reads the opening paragraph it must give them enough to get started on an article. Within the body of the press release try to put across your most important point in the form of a quote from someone senior in the organisation, journalists will often use quotes to add authority to a story, so help them out and provide them as part of your press release.

9. Laying out a press release

Press releases should be set out and presented in a way that makes life easy for journalists. Here are some key pointers:

- Clearly date the press release at the top of the page – make sure it looks like current news
- If the story is for 'immediate release' then this should also be marked at the top of the page
- Clearly mark 'begins' and 'ends' at the start and finish of your story, separating supporting information from the main story
- Provide a clear bold headline that captures the angle of the story – e.g. "Teens vacate town centre to enjoy free Internet access"
- Provide an opening paragraph that encapsulates your story by including the who, what, why, when and where.
- Always write in the third person. Never say 'I' or 'We'.
- Use quotes within the story to highlight your key points.
- Use well spaced text, and a clear readable font. Use wide page margins.
- Include supporting information after the 'ends' notification on your press release, such as who to contact for further information or supporting photography.

10. Follow up your releases

Never assume that no response is a show of no interest. Always follow up press releases with a telephone call. You'll be surprised how many times they have not been noticed or picked up and a fresh copy is requested.

Always be sure to check that a journalist is not on a deadline when you call them. If they are, offer to call back at a convenient time.

Keep a set of notes on each publication the release has been sent to. Note down any action required after you contact them and the outcome of any telephone calls. In doing this you will be able to gauge interest in your story very quickly, ensure that you call people back when it is convenient for them and maintain a log of what did and didn't go well with the press release.

11. Track and evaluate your results

Even if you are just sending one story to one local paper it is still vital to track and keep a record of your results. If stories aren't used, then find out why, it may help you to tailor them better for that journalist the next time around.

Always keep copies of your successful stories and their coverage. A folder of positive press stories can help to influence policy makers and budget holders and will add weight to discussions with any potential service partners or advocates.

take a fresh look at **your**
Library



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government