

Press Releases: Best Practices and Tips

Authors:

Qilan Lee, PhD

Margot W. Beukers, PhD, MBA

Science Business Support

www.sbsupport.nl



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Summary:

Press releases are useful to increase public awareness about recent developments and results. To gain insight in best practices and tips in the preparation of press releases in the life sciences, communication officers from various organizations were asked to fill-in a questionnaire. Based on the responses and literature and internet searches, best practices and tips were formulated for instance on how to increase the attractiveness and effectiveness of your press release.

Introduction:

Press releases are used to increase public awareness about recent developments and results. Studies confirm that issuing press releases increases the visibility of published research. Science correspondents considered press releases an important source of ideas and indicated that availability of press releases increases the likelihood of publication [1]. They considered professional medical journals the most important sources for ideas, followed by press releases from universities and university hospitals. Less important sources of ideas were items from news agencies, other newspapers and press releases from pharmaceutical companies [1]. In instances where the journal itself issued a press release, the journalists indicated that they would not rely on the information from the press releases alone. Access to the full text of the journal was regarded essential to get adequate information for a news article. In addition, access to the full text journal ensured that journalists would not miss potential stories for which no press release was issued by the journal. Thus press releases are used to generate ideas for topics of newspaper articles, but content is more often derived from medical journals.

In line with these findings, the influence of a press release was also substantial according to a publication by Schwartz et al. [2]. A total of 100 research papers that contained a quantifiable outcome and received newspaper coverage were analyzed. The majority, 71%, of the newspaper articles reported on journal articles for which a press release was issued. High quality press releases are releases that contain information on absolute risks, harms or limitations. Newspaper articles based on such high quality press releases contained more information on these risks, harms and limitations. On the other hand, the newspaper article provided more often quantified main results and a highlight of the limitations in the absence of a press release than when a low quality press release lacking this information was available. Press releases had a greater influence on the quality of newspaper stories than journal abstracts [2]. In short, a high quality press release increased the chance of newspapers reporting quantified outcomes and limitations.

Preparation of a press release requires collaboration between a series of people. Figure 1 presents the flow of information from the conception till the use of press releases.

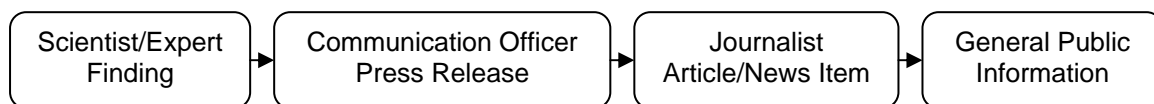


Figure 1. Flow of information from the conception till the use of press releases.

The shared aim of the scientist, communication officer and journalist is to disseminate the latest findings accurately and comprehensibly to the general public.

Peer review of manuscripts by independent experts is one way to assess the quality of a finding.

Around 45% of meeting reports did result in a full publication most of which appeared within 3 years succeeding publication of the abstract [3]. For methodological research studies, around two-thirds remained unpublished after 5 years [4]. Full publications are biased however towards positive findings (i.e. statistically significant results or definite preference for one treatment over the other) [3], and publication of positive results has increased [5]. Negative findings are still hard to publish despite the existence of dedicated journals [5, 6].

In this paper, communication officers from organizations were contacted by phone and/or email and asked to share their experiences by filling in a questionnaire (see supplementary information A). The results were compared and supplemented with data from literature and internet sources. The aim of this paper is to share best practices and tips with anyone with an interest in press releases. The focus was on press releases for public private partnerships in the life sciences sector. Representatives from academia, industrial companies and health foundations collaborating in these partnerships were consulted as each might have their own best practice for public disclosure of information.

Method:

Communication officers from companies, universities, university hospitals and other organizations active in the life sciences sector were asked by phone and/or email to fill in a questionnaire on press releases for public-private partnerships (supplementary information A). In total 10 organizations (15% of the approached organizations) filled in the questionnaire. Interestingly more than half of the Dutch universities did respond (54%), whereas around 10% of the small companies, Dutch Health foundations and Dutch institutes did fill in a questionnaire. None of the large companies (7) or international organizations (6) filled in the questionnaire.

The results from the questionnaires were compared with literature information and internet sources.

Results and Discussion:

The respondents shared their best practices and tips based on a questionnaire of 10 questions (see supplementary information A). The low number of responses does not allow statistical analysis of the answers hence the answers are presented and discussed in a qualitative manner.

Question 1: Does the audience for your press release consist of scientists, lay people, or both?

Response: In addition to scientists and lay people, press was mentioned as an audience (Figure 2). Lay people were considered to be the audience by most respondents. All respondents indicated that either lay people or the press were among the audience. Two respondents indicated only the press to be their audience.

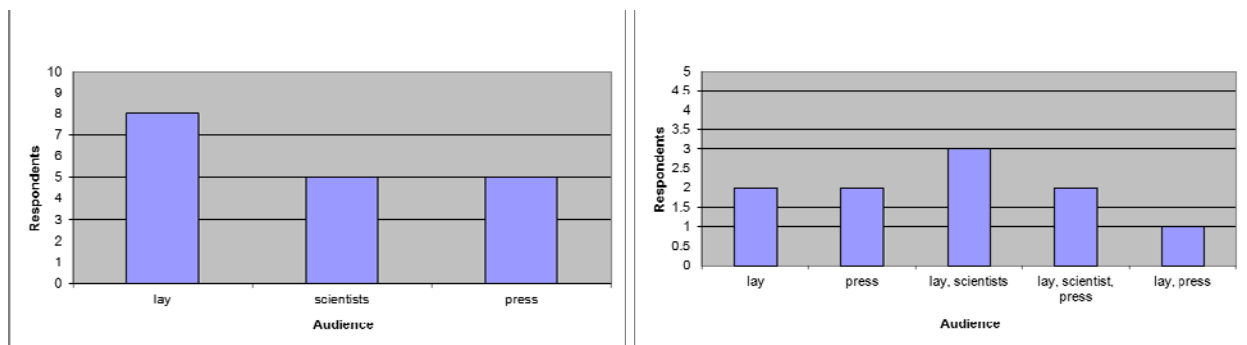


Figure 2. Number of responses mentioning either lay people, scientists or press as the audience of their press release (left). Number of responses mentioning either lay, press, lay and scientists or lay, scientists and press as the audience of their press releases (right).

Discussion: All respondents indicated that either lay people or press was at least part of the audience they were targeting. See also the answers to question 5 on the format used to make a press release a complete and attractive story.

Question 2: Do you have a standard procedure for a press release in your organization?

If so, would you be willing to share this procedure or highlight the main ingredients?

Response: Standard procedures were used by 80% of the respondents.

All of the respondents (60%) that did indicate who were involved in the preparation of a press release, mentioned that this was a joint effort between scientists and communication officers.

Discussion: Recommendations issued in Cap Journal indicate that the main scientist should be involved in the procedure [7]. An overview of all recommendations is listed below:

- 1) Scientific results should be peer-reviewed prior to public dissemination
- 2) Press releases should be validated by main scientist
- 3) Press releases should be validated by an internal institutional refereeing body
- 4) Substantial work by others in the field should be acknowledged
- 5) Incremental nature of scientific process should be mentioned if at all possible
- 6) If science or press release turns out to be incorrect; correction of the web version should be posted or if the release contains significant mistakes a correction release should be issued

- 7) The level of communication effort should fit the level of importance of the science as determined by the involved scientists, public information officer (PIO) and the internal refereeing board of the organization
- 8) The wording of the release text should match the level of importance of the science and include the relevant qualifiers
- 9) A press release should not be intentionally timed to counteract press releases from competing organizations

Question 3: Do you use a certain structure or fixed format (template) for a press release? If so, would you be willing to share this with me?

Response: A fixed format was used by 60% of the correspondents and details on these formats were shared by all but one of the correspondents.

Discussion: A recent publication in Br Med J indicates that a standardized press release does help journalists to find key information and recommends the use of structured tables quantifying benefits and harms [2]. None of the press releases of our respondents did contain such a structured table. Instead, the fixed format used by our respondents consisted of a consistent lay-out, use of logo's and provision of contact details.

Question 4: Do you use criteria to determine when a topic is suitable for a press release, for instance the kind of topic, the impact or the newsworthiness?

Response: All respondents used criteria to determine whether a topic was suitable for a press release. For more than half of them newsworthiness was important. Other criteria that were mentioned were:

Societal: Social impact, link with day to day life, practical relevance, "hot" topic in society, part of national debate, interest for target groups, for example relevance to the patients was an important criterion for a respondent from a health foundation

Content: Outstanding results, impact

Organizational: Corporate social responsibility, good news for the organization

Discussion: Visibility in newspapers is predicted by the newsworthiness of medical journal articles in particular when influences on lifestyle, or demographic risk stratifiers were mentioned [8]. According to the journalists, medically worthy information is not necessarily newsworthy [9]. Journalists said they were more likely to cover currently topical subjects, common and fatal diseases, rare but interesting or quirky diseases, those with a sexual connection, new or improved treatments, and controversial subject matter or results.

Question 5: Do you have an opinion or suggestions on how to make a press release a complete and attractive story?

Response: All but one correspondent did share suggestions to make a press release a complete and attractive story. The suggestions concerned content and format.

Content: • Include something everybody knows and recognizes, preferably with societal value

- Link with/meaning for day-to-day life; concrete example with effect on health/economy/fun
- Citation from expert or director; quote or positive comment
- Link to more information where applicable

Format: • Minimal or no scientific jargon; not too complicated, brief and clear

- Readable/understandable to large audience/to 14-year old
- Attractive headline

Discussion: In agreement with the above results, eighth-grade (13-14 year olds) reading level is considered the target for press releases according to Walters et al. [10]. In addition, the following success elements for press releases for elite and popular newspapers have been identified [11]:

- 1) news importance
- 2) novelty and usefulness
- 3) writing quality and timely transmission to the paper
- 4) Press release source i.e. agency/manager/practitioner experience, reputation, educational level, and mutual trust relationship with journalists/editors.

Question 6: How do you handle the timing of a press release?

Response: The following approaches were mentioned to handle the timing of a press release.

Timeline: Shortly before event, for instance a conference, takes place
Not during summer holiday

On certain days of the week, or moments of the day

Criteria: Dependent on story, topic or supplier of the news
When facts have been officially established

Execution: Fast, strict timing

Try to give scoop to big medium and wait with broad publication

For embargoed stories, trustworthy key journalists are informed a few days in advance.

Discussion: In line with the respondents, caution should be taken to issue a press release on unpublished scientific meeting presentations as findings may substantially change or fail to hold up. In fact, 40% of unpublished scientific meeting presentations are never subsequently published [12]. As mentioned before at question 2, the timing of a press release should not be dictated by unscientific factors e.g. intentionally timed to counteract press releases from competing organizations as this would affect the credibility of the press release [7].

Question 7: In your opinion, what is the most efficient way of collaboration between the author (the provider of the content of the press release) and the person responsible for the creation of the press release for instance a communication manager?

Response: The respondents shared several best practices on an efficient collaboration.

Contact: In person, or via interview, phone, or email

Initiative: Two correspondents mentioned that some scientists could write well and would provide the draft version and the press officer would help with the polishing. Others (3) indicated that it was a joint effort. In 2 cases the draft would be created by the communication manager.

Execution: Intensive and regular contact from awareness of newsworthy item till all questions of journalists have been answered

Discussion: Different modes of operation were mentioned by the interviewees. In line with the recommendation by Nielsen et al. [7], in all instances the scientists or experts were involved in the process.

Question 8: How do you evaluate a press release from your organization and or from other source(s)?

Response: The following means were used to evaluate a press release:

Follow-up: By media, journalists, appearance in national newspaper (5)
Appearance of publication (2)

Tools: Google Search

Service providers providing scans of printed media and internet

LexisNexis, providing online information via its Lexis® and Nexis® services

Discussion: Several checklists have been published to assist press officers with press releases [2,7]. These checklist reminds one of the basic facts, numbers and cautions that should be taken into account and which factors might affect the credibility of a press release [7]:

- 1) too high level of communication effort for level of scientific importance
- 2) wording that does not correspond to level of scientific importance
- 3) timing of publication of press release dictated by unscientific factors
- 4) omission of references to other scientists' work
- 5) unjust comparison with other facilities

Question 9: How do you determine the readability of a press release?

Response: A great majority, 80%, of the respondents indicated that an internal double check was performed for readability by a colleague(s). In addition, 40% mentioned that experience was used to determine readability.

Discussion: The following measures were suggested to increase readability to improve press releases [10]:

- 1) keep it brief and simple

- 2) use short paragraphs, sentences and words
- 3) eliminate passive tense

In line with these recommendations, newspapers do simplify news releases in the following ways [10]:

- 1) Releases are shortened drastically.
- 2) Number of words, paragraphs, and sentences are approximately halved
- 3) Remaining wordage is simplified by reducing the average length of words and the number of syllables per word.
- 4) Sentence length is homogenized. The number of long and short sentences is reduced and the number of “mid-range” sentences increased.

As mentioned before (question 5), the writing style should reflect the eighth-grade level of the average newspaper reader. Furthermore, newspapers want the whole story told in an average of 200 words, less than one page of typewritten copy, double-spaced, averaging less than six inches deep in a 2.5-inch-wide newspaper column. Such writing demands that words be selected with care and sentences crafted to provide the greatest amount of information in the fewest number of words” [10].

None of the respondents mentioned using free on-line software tools to determine the readability of a press release [<http://www.readability-score.com/> or http://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp]. Such tools determine for instance the grade level, based on the USA education system which is equivalent to the number of years of education a person has had. Scores over 22 should generally be taken to mean graduate level text. Furthermore, the latter tool provides statistics on the number of characters, words and sentences, the average number of characters and syllables per word, and the average number of words per sentence. In addition, this tool indicates which sentences should be rewritten to improve text readability.

Question 10: Are there any limitations (size, etc) for the press release?

Response: All respondents indicated that a press release should be concise. A large majority, 70% indicated that the size of a press release should be up to 1A4. Two respondents indicated that up to 1.5 A4 could be acceptable and one respondent indicated that the maximum size was 2 A4.

Discussion: Newspapers want to tell the whole story in an average of 200 words, thus less than one page of typewritten copy, double-spaced which translates to less than six inches deep in a 2.5 inch-wide newspaper column [10].

Similarly, according to Woloshin et al., press releases are typically 1 A4 or fewer in length [12].

In addition to the best practices and tips from the respondents, two sets of checklists for the preparation of press releases, one for journalists and one for scientists and health professionals are provided as supplementary information B and C, respectively.

Conclusion:

The aim of this research was to identify best practices and tips for the generation of a press release. Based on the responses, a qualitative overview of these best practices and tips was made and compared with literature findings. With this overview we hope to have provided insight in the best practices and tips of communication managers from a variety of organizations. We hope that dissemination of research findings via press releases will benefit from these best practices and tips and will further increase public awareness about recent developments and results in the life sciences sector.

Acknowledgement:

We would like to thank the respondents to the questionnaire for sharing their best practices and tips on the preparation of press releases. With this overview of the results we hope to contribute to dissemination of research findings via press releases.

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Supplementary Information A: Questionnaire

Questionnaire press releases public-private partnerships.

All information will be anonymized.

- 1) Does the audience for your press release consist of scientists, lay people, or both?
- 2) Do you have a standard procedure for a press release in your organization?
If so, would you be willing to share this procedure or highlight the main ingredients?
- 3) Do you use a certain structure or fixed format (template) for a press release?
If so, would you be willing to share this with me?
- 4) Do you have criteria to determine when a topic is suitable for a press release, for instance the kind of topic, the impact or the newsworthiness?
- 5) Do you have an opinion or suggestions on how to make a press release a complete and attractive story?
- 6) How do you handle the timing of a press release?
- 7) In your opinion, what is the most efficient way of collaboration between the author (the provider of the content of the press release) and the person responsible for the creation of the press release for instance a communication manager?
- 8) How do you evaluate a press release from your organization and other source?
- 9) How do you determine the readability of a press release?
- 10) Are there any limitations in the press release?

Supplementary Information B: Checklist for journalists

Source:

Guidelines Royal Society 2001 from the Social Issues Research Centre UK, see http://www.sirc.org/publik/revised_guidelines.shtml

Imagine you have a relative or close friend who is sensitive or vulnerable to information about a particular topic (for example, a cancer patient or a parent considering a vaccination for a child).

If the only source of information available to that relative or close friend was the interview you are about to give, or the report you are about to publish, would you feel comfortable with the way you propose to characterise and interpret the story?

Questions to be asked by journalist:

1. Credibility of sources

Have the findings been published in a peerreviewed journal?

Do the researchers have an established track record in the field and are they based at a reputable institution or organisation?

What are the affiliations of the researcher(s)?

2. Procedures and methods

Were the research methods appropriate?

What do other professionals in the field think of the methods?

3. Findings and conclusions

Is this really a 'breakthrough'?

4. The significance of findings

Are the findings preliminary or inconclusive?

Do the findings differ markedly from previous studies?

Do these findings appear to contradict mainstream scientific opinion?

Are these findings based on small or unrepresentative samples?

Do these conclusions generalise to humans from animal studies?

Have the researchers only found a statistical correlation?

5. Communicating risk

Has the risk been expressed in absolute as well as relative terms?

Can the risk be compared with anything else?

Have the researchers been asked 'how safe is it' instead of 'is it safe'?

6. Anticipating the impact

Will the report cause undue anxiety or optimism among audiences or readers?

Have important caveats been prominently included?

7. The role of specialist correspondents and editors

What do specialist journalists think about the report?

8. The role of sub-editors

Is the headline a fair reflection of the report?

Is the caption a fair reflection of the report?

9. Expert contacts

What do other professionals in the field think of the research?

Source:

Information sources in biomedical science and medical journalism: methodological approaches and assessment

Miranda GF, Vercellesi L, Bruno F.

Pharmacological Research 50 (2004) 267–272

Checklist of items and questions for journalists:

- 1) Sources: how to find the latest information
- 2) Assessment: quality and authoritativeness
- 3) Selection: analysis and filtering
- 4) Balance: dealing with too many sources, sometimes case biased by conflicting interests

Journalist must know how to make a translation to render the information accessible and useful to general public (dissemination) and how to use the information best.

Checklist to assess identified sources and their contents

General sources (persons and documents)	Features	Questions for each source used
Level of sources	Primary (science) Secondary (science) Local Global Independent Institutional	Have findings been published in a peer-reviewed journal? Has the institution a high reputation?
Authors	Individual Collective National International Spokesman Anonymous	Has the author(s) a good track record in the field? Are there any conflicts of interest? Who funded the study?
Contents	Relevance Updating Comprehension	Are findings preliminary or inconclusive? Are findings applicable to the general population (clinical or scientific significance)? Do they differ from available evidence? What do other professionals in the field think about the method? Is the information the latest in the field? Is the content easy to read or does it need specialist knowledge?

Supplementary Information C: checklist for scientists and health professionals

Source:

Guidelines Royal Society 2001 from the Social Issues Research Centre UK, see http://www.sirc.org/publik/revised_guidelines.shtml

Imagine you have a relative or close friend who is sensitive or vulnerable to information about a particular topic (for example, a cancer patient or a parent considering a vaccination for a child).

If the only source of information available to that relative or close friend was the interview you are about to give, or the report you are about to publish, would you feel comfortable with the way you propose to characterise and interpret the story?

Summary checklist for science and health professionals

1. Dealing with the media

- Should I talk to journalists about my work?
- Who can give me advice about dealing with the media?

2. Credibility

- Have I mentioned whether the study has been published yet in a peer-reviewed journal?
- Have I mentioned that the findings are preliminary or a generalisation is not warranted?
- Have I mentioned that the results have yet to be replicated?
- Have I mentioned that the results differ markedly from those of previous studies?
- Have I mentioned that the findings are derived from samples that may be too small or unrepresentative?
- Have I mentioned that the findings are based entirely on animal studies?
- Have I mentioned that the findings are based on correlation?

3. Accuracy

- Have I exaggerated the significance of the findings?
- Are there other possible interpretations of the results?
- Have I speculated based on opinions or beliefs that are not related to the study itself?

4. Communication of risk and benefits

- Have I cited absolute as well as relative risks?
- Have I warned of drawing the wrong conclusions about the risk?
- Can the risk be compared with anything else?
- Could the reporting of my work lead to undue anxiety or optimism among audiences or readers?

5. Is it safe?

- Have I explained properly why it is not possible to offer an assurance of absolute safety?

6. Should I complain?

- Researchers who believe their work has been inaccurately reported or that its significance has been distorted, should not hesitate to protest, both to the journalist concerned and to his or her editor, preferably in a letter intended (and suitable) for publication.