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Do's and don'ts when dealing with journalists

The most important thing to remember when dealing with journalists is that they are just like you; over-worked, under-resourced and up against a deadline. The majority of them are also doing the best they can under those circumstances. They want to write truthful, accurate, informative stories.

They also want to get the front-page lead, to scoop the competition, to get promoted and to get a better job on a higher-profile publication. All you have to do is harness those ambitions to make them work for you.

1. Make sure you're sending releases to relevant publications. This means reading a few issues of the magazine before sending anything in. Nothing is more insulting to an editor than someone calling to see if the magazine is going to publish a press release when they clearly have never read the magazine. Remember also that not all releases are relevant for all the magazines you want to target. NMA will not be interested in your move to a new office, but your local paper probably will be.

2. If you're sending something to a news magazine, make sure it's news. If your project went live three months ago, but your client/partner has only just signed off the press release, no one is going to care about it. You may get away with it if it's just entered the public domain, but chances are everyone in the industry knows about it already, and no magazine wants to be following the news. If it's not news, or the magazine in question isn't news-led, then you'll have to spin it a different way. That means features, opinions, letters.

3. Check the publication's deadlines to make sure you send a release in good time. This doesn't mean on deadline in the hope it'll run further up the magazine. If you do that it's more likely to get spiked as only big stories go further up. Find out when the publication starts planning its news pages and get your release in then. That also means you're giving the journalist more time to work on the story, which should result in better coverage.

4. Few magazines run press releases just as they stand; for most a press release is just the starting point for a news item. So always explain as much as you can about the story as clearly as possible. Also, make sure you have someone who can talk about the contents of the press release primed and available. The more senior the person the better.

5. Don't try and tease journalists into reading releases with a quirky intro. They won't read on. Just tell the story as directly and simply as you can.



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6. Avoid jargon and acronyms in a press release. You may know what they mean, but can you be sure the journalist receiving the release does?

7. And don't call to see if a magazine wants a press release sent - just send it.

8. Don't phone the editor of the magazine to check whether they got your release unless you've got a good reason to suppose they didn't - them not printing it does not count as a good reason. Contrary to popular belief, magazines read every press release they are sent – if they haven't run yours, it's probably because it's not relevant. Phoning the editor won't make it more relevant. If you've done your PR job properly, sending the release to relevant magazines and writing it so the story is readily apparent, then you shouldn't need to phone the magazine at all; they'll call you.

9. There are three reasons why your release wasn't published:

i) it wasn't relevant;

ii) it wasn't a big enough story;

iii) the journalist didn't understand/appreciate the story. You can call the magazine to find out which of these, but be prepared for answers i) and ii). And if you do get either of those answers, remember you may want the magazine to write about you in future. If they haven't run it this week, they're not going to run it next week (because it's old news now). All you can do is chalk it up to relationship-building and try to explain your story better next time.

10. Exclusives - every magazine and every journalist wants them. It's up to you to decide whether small stories in many magazines is better than a big story in one. But remember, if you give the same exclusive to two magazines you will go on their shit-list, no question.

11. E-mail - most journalists like to receive press releases by email, but remember there's a huge variety of email packages in use. So always put a sensible title in the subject line and never use attachments. If you decide to break that rule, at least have the decency to give the attachment a sensible title so the journalist can search for it easily, rather than using some internal company code.



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12. The best way to get coverage is still personal contact with a journalist, but it's not a substitute for being relevant. However, if you can identify a couple of key people, arrange to meet them and explain what you're doing, they'll tell you if what you're doing is relevant or not, and they'll usually be willing to take the time to take your calls about news items in future.

13. Work out who the best people are to talk to on a magazine, depending on what you want to achieve. Most companies automatically contact the editor, but it's unlikely they write much of the news, except on small magazines. Rather, a good relationship with the editor will allow you to influence the overall direction of the magazine, will help you get invited to comment in stories, features etc, and may get you involved in speaking at conferences, judging awards and so on, if the editor respects your opinions. Similarly a good relationship with the features editor should mean you get called for comment in features, and makes it more likely your features pitches will be listened to. A good relationship with a reporter means they'll fight harder for your stories to run, and will write them better because they understand them better. They'll also be more likely to ask for your comments for general industry stories.

14. It pays to be persistent, but don't badger journalists. You can't annoy someone into liking you.

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