

BEFORE YOU HIT

SEND

The Press Release Checklist



Mickie Kennedy



5024-D Campbell Blvd.
Baltimore, MD 21236
410 931 2966
PR@eReleases.org
www.eReleases.com/hello

Get Better Results from your Press Releases with this 24-Step PR Checklist

Get it right the first time. You'll learn:

- What must be included
- What must be eliminated
- Expert tips on proper form and style
- Every step explained

The checklist professionals use.

“ Your catchy title and distribution category selections got us 4 media requests in the first day, so I'll take that as a big success!”

- Michele L. Silbey, Marketing & Comm. Manager, nutpods

“I can't tell you how happy I am with the quality of the writing and customer service of eReleases. You guys are GREAT!!! RBELL would not be growing as we are today without you.”

Rebecca Bell, CEO, RBell Medical

"Thank you dear friends for your efforts. We already have a huge story in Variety thanks to you getting the press release out."

Natasha Shliapnikoff, Producer, RGI Productions

“You are simply fantastic! I am so so impressed with your service. To think... it took you 2 minutes from the start of your day to solve my biggest problem of the day. It is very appreciated!”

Douglas Lynch, Managing Partner, Lynchpin BioMedia

“I have to say that every press release written on the EZFaceplate has caught my full undivided attention. I can't begin to say how strong yet subtle the release had fully explained the EZFaceplate down to every detail. I read it twice and still the article had me drawn to wanting to actually read the entire release. I would like again to say thank you to you and your entire team for all you did.”

Eric Tonnesen, Inventor, EZFaceplate

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Greetings,

This is a friendly reminder to **SLOW DOWN**.

You've written a release; you've spell-checked, grammar-checked, and fact-checked the entire thing. So – now you're ready to hit 'send', right?

SLOW DOWN!

Below is my personal PR Checklist. This is the very same quick-check guide I use *each and every time* I send out a release.

Also knowing that every person won't be familiar with every item on the list, I've gone over the whole thing item-by-item, and written out a brief explanation for each. Are you familiar with subheads? Datelines? You soon will be.

So before you hit 'send' on that release, slow down, and avoid sanity-consuming back-and-forth with the newswire.

Let's get started on getting it right the first time.

Best of Luck,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "M. Kennedy".

Mickie Kennedy
Founder and President
eReleases Press Release Distribution
<http://www.ereleases.com/hello>

Before You Hit Send: **The Press Release Checklist**

Form

- Is your headline brief, comprehensive, and attention-grabbing?
- Is your optional subhead written concisely?
- Is your dateline written out properly?
- Does your opening paragraph summarize the most important information in your press release?
- Are your body paragraphs informative and written concisely?
- Do you list the appropriate contact information?
- Does your press release include a call to action?
- Is your release written in the third person, using the first person only for quotes, and completely omitting the second person?
- Has your release been proofread for grammar, punctuation, spelling, consistency, and usage at least twice, preferably by readers who are unfamiliar with the material?
- Are all URLs and anchor text links properly configured?
- Is your entire press release between 350 and 500 words?
- Are trademarks and company/product names represented consistently?

Style

- Is your press release written in clear, concise language?
- Is your press release newsworthy? Does it convey useful information relevant to your target audience?
- Does your press release read like an advertisement (bad) or like a news story (good)?
- Does your press release avoid sensationalism, gimmickry, and cuteness?
- Do your quotes add a human element and relevant information to your press release, or do they just restate boilerplate copy?
- Does your press release avoid outrageous claims?
- Can everything in your release be documented or substantiated?
- Does your release contain anything that would be offensive to your audience?
- Is it clear who is issuing the press release?
- Does your release stay focused, avoiding irrelevant details?
- If your press release references legal issues, public companies, or celebrities, have you checked that it complies with the newswire's standards?
- Is your press release written for journalists and your target audience?

The Press Release Checklist– *Explained!*



FORM

Is your headline brief, comprehensive, and attention-grabbing?

Your headline is your chance to make a winning first impression, and never doubt that a lackluster headline can make you feel like you are in a Jane Austen novel – thwarted and misunderstood by the hero or heroine (in this case a journalist) because you failed to impress on first acquaintance. The sad reality of headlines is that they are not rocket science, yet most are severely overwritten or underwritten. A headline should be a complete sentence that encapsulates the purpose of your release so that the first paragraph is not a disorienting experience for the reader. It should avoid sensationalism and outrageous claims – and please, no exclamation points. It should also strive not to be vague. Include your company name (or your name if, for example, you are the author of a book) and your brand or product. Use an active verb and make clear why you are issuing the release. That is where the “attention-grabbing” element comes into play. If you read your headline out loud and find yourself out of breath – or that you stumble over words – there is a problem. Try to limit the length to no more than 90-120 characters, and make sure your message is clear.

Is your optional subhead written concisely?

Remember how your high school English teacher taught you that the conclusion of your essays should restate your thesis? Let us state for the record now that a subhead is not a conclusion. It should not restate your headline. Too many press release subheads do this – and thus waste an opportunity to make their small space in the press release universe really count. A subhead should add something new. Simply put, a subhead gives you space for what you could not fit into the headline but wish you could have. For example, imagine you are holding an awards ceremony. You want the media to know right away that your organization is giving out important awards to important people, but you also want the media to know when and where. You cannot possibly fit all of that into a plausible headline. Your headline can take care of the concept of the event, while a subhead can provide the when and where.

Is your dateline written out properly?

A dateline is one of the fun antiquities that make a press release a press release. There is something authoritative about a newscaster saying “Dateline NEW YORK” before reporting breaking news. However, the geographical location in a dateline does not necessarily tie a release to that place; it simply gives the media a sense of the release’s origins. It does not matter if you believe no one else has heard of the city. If your company’s headquarters are in Downingtown, PA, then show your pride in your location and position it in the dateline. To write out your dateline properly, place the city in ALL CAPS and use the Associated Press (AP) abbreviation for the state. Some metropolitan centers like New York stand alone in a dateline without the state, and a separate set of AP rules applies to countries outside of the United States. Spring for an Associated Press Stylebook and keep it close at hand as your definitive dateline resource. After the geographic location, add the date your release will be distributed: DOWNINGTON, Pa., Aug. 31, 2020. The dateline appears at the beginning of the first full paragraph of a press release – after the headline and any subheads – and a dash separates the dateline and the first sentence of your first paragraph.

Does your opening paragraph summarize the most important information in your press release?

An elaborate build-up to a shocking finish is the hallmark of a good mystery novel – but not a press release. A good press release puts the goods up front. Imagine you receive an email from your significant other. The subject line reads “Stranded – need help urgently,” then the email text spends four or five paragraphs explaining why your loved one is stranded before arriving at one sentence at the bottom that says, “I’m at 2nd and D Streets waiting for you on the sidewalk.” Wouldn’t you go bananas wading through the text to learn how you are needed? A member of the media also does not have the luxury of explanations that may or may not be relevant when deadlines are pressing. Give the media the 5W’s – Who, What, When, Where, Why – in the first paragraph, and make those points sharp. If they strike a chord, chances are the media will keep reading.

Are your body paragraphs informative and written concisely?

Your body paragraphs are your opportunity to expand on the 5W’s you’ve already delineated – not exhaustively but with enough depth to ensure you have established your product or topic’s credibility. If possible, devote one paragraph to a succinct and lively quote from a company principal to reassure readers that human beings are somewhere behind the scenes if people are not the topic of the release. Be careful about not going overboard with “Why,” and by extension, “How.” If you need to explain why or how a product works, keep it short and zippy so that your release language will not become mechanical. An interested member of the media will ask you for a product spec sheet or other information if he or she is serious about following up on the news lead.

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Do you list the appropriate contact information?

You have made a worthy effort to bring your news to the world, so ensure that the love comes back to you. Every press release should conclude with a person's name, telephone number and email address. This shows that you are willing and able to start an open dialogue with the media. No one will be able to ask you for an interview without this essential information. So you are afraid that your cell phone number will be sucked into evil call lists and your email address will be phished for nefarious purposes? The simple solution is not to list your cell phone or primary email address. Buy a temporary burner or obtain a cheap VoIP number, and create an email address exclusively for your PR efforts that can be shut down when the spam gets out of hand. The most important point, however, is that you actually need to answer the phone and check your email after you issue a release. A member of the media on deadline is not likely to give you a second chance if you fail to return a time-sensitive message.

Does your press release include a call to action?

With your press release, you have given the world a good handshake; now the next step is to draw them deeper into your world in hopes of forming a long-term relationship. The call to action is probably the easiest and most active feature of a press release. All you have to do is issue a simple invitation, e.g.: "For more information, visit the company's website"; "To download the white paper, go to this page on the website"; "For a product sample, call this number": "To attend the event, RSVP." With a call to action, your release keeps working long after the # # #.

Is your release written in third person, using the first person only for quotes, and completely omitting the second person?

Press releases are for the press, or to split hairs, the media – reporters, editors, broadcasters, journalists, bloggers, etc. Would you try to sell a newspaper reporter or a radio broadcaster your software that tracks heads of cattle? You would not, but you would certainly want to educate a writer at *Steers to Glory* about why that software is the shining star of a dimly lit industry. In other words, your press release is not ad copy but news you hope the media can use. This is why your release should lay out the facts in third person voice ("The company did this"; "He did that") rather than in editorial first person ("I think we are the best") or second person ("You need this product"), which is the great red flag of the sales pitch. The bottom line is that no one is particularly concerned about your gushing opinion about your product or service; rather, a press release reader wants the facts. He or she does not want to be on the pew end of a misdirected sermon. Moreover, any reputable newswire will not accept an editorial or ad copy – both of which are perfectly acceptable in their proper environments, just not in front of journalists looking for news leads. This is not a free speech issue but the policy of a press release distribution company with which you elect to do business.

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- Has your release been proofread for grammar, punctuation, spelling, consistency and usage at least twice, preferably by readers who are unfamiliar with the material?**

There are employers who will reject a job application at the sight of a single typo. Journalists may not penalize you so harshly, especially if your story is good, but errors in a release are inevitably distracting. Precise writing says something about the care you take with the message you are transmitting to the world. Do not underestimate the capacity of people who work closely with language day in and day out to pass judgment on sloppiness. Spelling and grammar checks are available in most word processing programs, and most everyone knows someone who is an adequate proofreader. Make use of these resources.

- Are all URLs and anchor text links properly configured?**

Your website may be your most valuable asset if you engage in ecommerce or are building an online community. Make it easy for people who read your press release to visit you. Double-check your URLs to ensure they are spelled correctly and display the http:// prefix, which helps ensure click-through on sites that post your release and enable links. If you are posting last-minute pages for the purpose of your press release, test the page links in your release before the release goes live. One of the most common oversights in press releases is the specter of dead links, usually the result of hastily posted pages that do not correspond precisely to the URL positioned in a release in advance. If you are embedding links behind highlighted keywords, known as “anchor text,” make sure those hidden links are correct. Take care also not to overdo it with links in general. Two or three should do the trick and save your release from being blackballed as link spam.

- Is your entire press release between 350 and 500 words?**

This is not a sacred commandment; indeed, 1000-word releases run over the newswire every day, and the issuers of such releases pay dearly for that amount of precious real estate on the newswire. It is unlikely, however, that the same company is issuing 1000-word releases every day. A release of such length is an anomaly and usually deployed only when it is necessary for a company to make a large volume of information public. The average release can do its work in much less space. A 350-word release would be comparable to roughly two-thirds of a typewritten page. That is plenty to ask someone who is reviewing 10-100 releases in one morning to absorb in one sitting. Be kind to your reader and yourself by streamlining your news. If you absolutely feel the media cannot live without some data or supporting information that would tip your release over the 500 mark, then post that information on your website and link to it in your release, or create a PDF and invite readers to request the information by email. Not only will you make the extra information available, you will also be enhancing your release with a value-add call to action – and possibly helping yourself gauge interest in your release.

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Are trademarks and company/product names represented consistently?

You would be amazed by the number of releases that suggest the writer had temporary amnesia over his or her own company/product. Is your company an Inc. or an LLC? Is there or isn't there a comma between the company name and the Inc.? Is your product V1.0 or V1.0.2? Does the product carry a service mark, trademark or registered trademark? (Don't you dare say copyright because that's not possible; a copyright does not apply to trade names.) The idea here is to denote a company or product correctly the first time it is mentioned then denote it with consistency in each subsequent instance. Why is this such a big deal? Journalists who do not know your company intimately may very well go by what they copy from your release. If they write a widely published article containing that information, then whatever may be incorrect is out of the bag for all to see. You can't fix that retroactively. Also, press releases have a long shelf-life online. Cached copies survive for years and years. You are culpable for the inaccurate information for the life of your release.

Is your press release written in clear, concise language?

Most media who cover your industry will understand a fair amount of your industry's jargon, but why would you take the risk of alienating anyone who may get their hands on your release with esoteric shorthand or the "-speak" or "-ese" of your trade? Some terms may also have different meanings for different people. For example, "blue sky" may mean free and open brainstorming to some companies, and securities law to others, and if you use "blue sky" as a verb, many people may think you are speaking a foreign language. Strike from your release anything that risks confusing a reader. Write crisp sentences and quotes that do not drag on too long. Read your release out loud and redraft areas where you trip over your own words.

The Press Release Checklist– *Explained!*



STYLE

- Is your press release newsworthy? Does it convey useful information relevant to your target audience?**

Before you send your release out into the world, take a hard look at your release and ask this one simple question: Will anyone except my company and me care about this? That might sound harsh, but for companies that need to maximize their PR budgets, every press release needs to count. Put yourself in the shoes of a journalist. If your press release crosses his or her desk, will it pass the sniff test? Will it be worthy of the tight timeframe in which a journalist works? Is the topic important in that moment of time, considering what else might be going on in the world?

- Does your press release read like an advertisement (bad) or a news story (good)?**

It's this simple: Is your release trying to make a sale, or trying to inform? In the world of making a buck, press releases take the high road. They are an ongoing process of branding and building credibility. They build a rapport with the media and, in turn, cultivate consumer trust. Direct marketing can produce instant gratification, but press releases are in the game for the long haul. Do you put more faith in a company that tells you its product is going to cut your energy bills in half, or in a journalist at a respected media outlet who has tested the product and published his findings on resulting energy savings? Educating the media about your product or service pays off in consumer confidence.

- Does your release avoid sensationalism, gimmickry and cuteness?**

Every year around Christmas, the releases written from the perspective of Santa come rolling in, and every year on April 1, the tricksters pull out the big guns with parody releases. Santa releases are harmless; they're just not newsworthy. April Fool's releases, on the other hand, have a tendency to backfire. Every time you issue a release, you are putting your reputation on the line. Take care never to be in the position of your audience responding with, "Why are you wasting my valuable time?"

Do your quotes add a human element and relevant information to your press release, or do they just restate boilerplate copy?

Quotes are your opportunity to reveal the human voice behind a product or service. They are a break from the 5W's and add charisma to a release. That is why you do not want quotes to restate what has already been said. If you are announcing a new staff member, for example, a quote from the CEO should not simply say how excited he is to have the new person at the company. It should convey something about his vision and outlook or tip the media off to a new project in the works. Make your quotes truly smart – that is, quotable.

Does your press release avoid outrageous claims?

Whenever anything in your release even slightly resembles a line you would read in the back of the *Enquirer*, it's time to debug your release. It may be true that your new exercise regimen will turn back the hands of time, but until you have hard evidence backing that up, do not make that claim in a press release. There are an awful lot of releases flooding the wires each day that claim to have harnessed the fountain of youth, or cured this or that – and an equal number of release issuers who wonder why their releases failed. If you have a superior product that you know will benefit people, pets, the environment, etc., you can convey that message in a release without going over the top. Discuss possible benefits, point to anecdotal evidence, maintain a position of humility, cite ongoing research and avoid words like “revolutionary.” There is nothing more heartbreaking than a fly-by-night outfit claiming to have the cure for cancer. Don't taint your name by being lumped into the camp of the absurd.

Can everything in your release be documented or substantiated?

This is not relevant to all releases. Most releases are straightforward; their job is done after stating the facts of a product, service, event or concept. Some releases, however, such as certain ones dealing with legal or political issues or alternative medicine, do pull information from the greater world, where legal precedents have been set, policy has been enacted and experiments conducted. If your release makes any allegations or cites historical data, make sure you get it right. In releases, you are not required to document your writing as if you were writing a research paper. It can't hurt, however, to think of your release as such. Highlight any information that you may consider to be common knowledge but does not come from your own sources. If any of that information is questionable, chuck it. Bad information weakens your case – and could possibly be libel.

Does your release contain anything that could be offensive to your audience?

The best checkup for your release's sensitivity is to have members of your target audience actually read it and help you get it right. A release that offers a memory training tool, for example, is not going to rate highly if it states that the tool is for "senior citizens, who have a high incidence of memory problems." Or a release that announces a dating site for "men who have flunked the bar scene" cannot expect an influx of members. No one wants to be segregated into a stigmatized category. Construct your message with positives: "active seniors who want to retain their sharp memories"; "experienced men seeking a diverse, sophisticated dating scene."

Is it clear who is issuing the press release?

Every release has a "source." Without one, the release is disembodied information no one can trust. The source is usually clear from the start: "Company ABC Announces" If a journalist has to work to discern the source, a credibility issue arises. Many people are sheepish about being the source of their own releases. Sure, if a feature writer is publishing an article about your company, your company would not be the source of that article, but in press releases, you are sharing your company's news with the world. The news comes from your company – and what better source of a company's news than the company itself? Members of the media understand this and want the story from the horse's mouth.

Does your release stay focused, avoiding irrelevant details?

If you should ever find yourself in the situation of having a release that's just too long, one of the best ways to make a dent in that overage is the "Who Cares?" test. Pull out your fine-tooth comb and break the release down sentence by sentence. Read each sentence and ask, "Who Cares?" Is it the media, your target audience, your boss, or just you? If it's either of the last two, you may have a possible candidate for a cut.

If your press release references legal issues, public companies or celebrities, have you checked that it complies with the newswire's standards?

You may have friends in high places, but that's not enough to allow you to mention those friends in a press release. A public company may approve its stock ticker symbol in your release, yet you should not be surprised when the newswire wipes it from your release. Certain newswire policies governing references to legal issues, public companies and celebrities are not designed to punish or stifle you but rather to protect all parties involved. The newswire has already done the work for you of deciphering SEC guidance and researching legal precedents, and the policies are in place to prevent you from being in trouble with parties that may have more clout and money than you. Know the policies before you write a release that could raise concerns.



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Is your press release written for journalists and your target audience?

If your release hits the mark, journalists may write about your product, service, business or idea, and your target audience may purchase or appreciate it. Do all you can to make this happen by ensuring that your release is written for them. One of the most common mistakes in press release writing is to write as if sharing information with peers and colleagues rather than people on the outside. People on the outside like to have an insider's view. Make them feel like you are "breaking" the news to them. Give them points they can take away and remember. Don't just repurpose language already posted on your website, and don't send them an iteration of the same release issued previously. Keep them engaged with the fresh, forward-thinking and new.