

TIP SHEET: PR master class for aid agencies

How can aid agencies get better media exposure? What makes a press release sing? What kind of headlines grab editors' attention?

Those are just a few of the questions answered in the following tip sheet aimed at helping charities improve their media relations.

Aid agencies can do a lot to boost the media exposure of humanitarian emergencies through effective communications. It's not rocket science. It means thinking like a journalist and getting to grips with the realities of the newsroom.

Here are practical suggestions from senior Reuters journalists and PR experts on how NGOs can increase their chances of getting humanitarian stories into the news.



1. What editors want

When a disaster breaks, relief workers are often on the scene well before reporters arrive. That means they have something editors want - firsthand information.

Good quotes from the scene of a crisis are worth their weight in gold, says Howard Goller, European deputy editor of Reuters' political and general news operations.

Quotes help journalists add immediacy and colour to their stories. And they can help get your organisation's activities on the front page.

"We need to tell a story people want to read," Goller says. "That's a fact of life."

Here are Goller's other tips for dealing with busy press folk.



Be truthful and be quick

If you don't know the answer to a journalist's question, write it down and get back to them promptly.

Forge good press contacts

Return calls. Follow up emails with personal calls.

Find ways to make your story human

Nothing sells like human interest. Tell the bigger story through the eyes of individuals.

Be a news buff

Follow the news agenda closely and find ways to fit what you're doing into it.

Know your market

If you're dealing with local press, look for local angles.

Study bylines

Identify and approach reporters who seem interested in your subject or something similar. Say you read their story about X. Journalists have big egos and they love compliments!

Celebrity connection

Celebrities can spur coverage, especially in pictures and on TV, but be aware that not all editors like them.

Never give up

Persistence pays off.

2. Writing snappy headlines

Journalist Andrew Dobbie has been writing headlines for Reuters for more than 20 years. "There is only one immutable rule," he says. "A headline must make you read the story. Every other rule is made to be broken. Some of the best actually do break the rules."

These pointers should help you write headlines that grab editors by the throat.



Tell the news

An obvious point, but often forgotten. Headlines tell readers what the story is about.

Use short words and active verbs. Avoid labels and be specific

Compare: *High street accident: three hurt*
Bus hits tree: three kids hurt

There are exceptions. Even a label can work if it's well done:

The heart that beat apartheid (Daily Express after the first heart transplant)

Stick to proper sentence construction (subject, verb, object)

Compare: *Resign call by Tory leader*
Tory leader urges Blair to quit

Avoid 'was' (un-newsy and historical)

Compare: *Body in wood was ex-priest*
Ex-priest named as body in wood

Avoid punctuation marks

Especially question and exclamation marks. A story should inform readers rather than ask them something. Exclamations are confessions that you have failed to be witty or sensational.

It's better to write "and" than use a comma. Shun quote marks unless unavoidable.

Compare: *Bush, Blair plan June summit to discuss widgets*
Bush and Blair plan widget summit in June

Avoid information overload

Pick the main point and stick to it. If in doubt, try reading it aloud.

Compare: *Unemployed delegates to meet PM for talks on jobs, industry*
Blair to meet delegation of jobless

Avoid abbreviations

Abbreviations are generally not elegant or intelligible. Never use an acronym if there's an ordinary English word that will do the job.

Compare: *Teachers threaten strike*
NUT threatens strike

Avoid the past tense

Use the present indicative.

Never use a verb without a subject

This poses the question "who?" and sounds unnatural.

Compare: *Demands Iraqi withdrawal*
Iraqi withdrawal urged
Or even: *Call for Iraqi withdrawal*

Beware multi-line headlines

Remember that headlines are read line by line. Don't end a line with a word that is ineffective by itself, such as a preposition or an article.

Plumber attacks wife
With spanner

Not

Plumber's wife hurt in
Attack with spanner

Blair is a king
Among men

Not

Tony Blair is a
Splendid chap

Avoid headline-ese

It's tempting to use certain words because they are short, pithy and do the job. But they are overused.

bid
probe
move
plea
cut
ban
dash
quiz

Avoid professional jargon

Know your reader. Journalists are generalists and therefore represent the average reader. They will often know little or nothing about your specialist area.

Avoid stilted language

This includes clichés and tired puns. How many times have you seen *Rail scheme on track?*

But a cliché with a twist can make a headline zing:

Parkhurst duo break out in song

Use humour with care

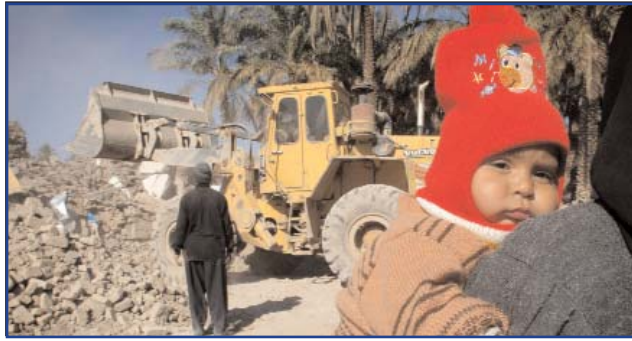
Humour or clever wordplay can draw readers in but there's always the temptation to be too clever and put them off. Serious stories need headlines that are serious and straightforward. Save the wordplay for the lighter things in life.

Poultry in motion

3. Working PR magic

Simon Walker, Reuters' director of corporate communications, believes relationships are key to the PR business - a lesson learned running election campaigns in New Zealand and dealing with a frequently hostile press as communications chief for British Airways and Buckingham Palace.

Here are his golden rules for dealing with the media.



Nurture fortuity

A lot of luck is engineered. Create opportunities. Involve people even when there is no immediate payback.

Be at the heart of your organisation

Know what's happening so you never get caught out.

Keep spilling the message out over and over

When people get sick of hearing it, you know it's getting through.

Send letters of redress when papers get things wrong

But make them short and to the point. If necessary, take the matter to a press watchdog.

Educate journalists

Consider holding events to help reporters get a grasp of your subject. The lazy or ignorant journalist can actually be your best friend. Don't be shy about spoon-feeding them.

Presentation matters

Don't underestimate the power of the packaging.

Don't lie

It's all about credibility. But in sensitive situations you can avoid giving answers.

Put forward the best person to represent your organisation

This may not always be the CEO or president.

4. Press releases that sing

Reuters PR Manager Yasmeen Khan knows that in the world of communications you are only as good as your last press release. Here she delves into the art of getting it right.



Be hard on yourself

Before you write, ask yourself some tough questions. Is this news? Is there an angle? What's different? Why is this relevant to the outside world? Would this be better pitched as a feature?

Be practical

When are you going to send your press release? Is it pegged to an event? If it's not timely, try to send it during a quiet news period. If you want to make tomorrow's paper, be sure to send it in the morning when news agendas are set.

Go easy on journalists

Don't make them have to work to get your message. Keep releases as short as possible - no more than two pages with 1-1/2 line spacing. Make it simple and easy to understand. Choose a font that is easy on the eye.

Put the whole story in the first few lines

Answer the five Ws: Who? What? Where? When? Why? Test yourself by asking: If I didn't know anything about this subject, would I get my intended message from the first few lines?

Mark clearly

Papers get lost in fax machines. Include page numbers and mark "end" at the end.

Use end-notes

Put contact details and extra notes at the end. Make these notes practical. Include the names and numbers of people available for interviews.

Make sure contacts are contactable

Journalists will rarely call twice. Make sure contacts are on hand to take calls. Have back-ups in place.

Include simple 'boilerplates'

A boilerplate is a paragraph that describes who you are, what you do and where you do it. Keep it simple and put it in the end-notes. Also come up with a one-clause boilerplate to describe yourself in text. E.g. "Reuters, the world's biggest news and information company..."

Exclusivity means exclusivity

If you promise an exclusive, keep your word.

Don't send attachments

Paste your press release into the body of an email. In this day of computer viruses, many attachments go unopened.