Failures and successes of press releases sent to suburban Melbourne press

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Abstract

The purpose of this report was to examine why many of the press releases sent to suburban Melbourne newspapers are not used to produce stories. A technique using two closely matched sets of questions was designed. One set of questions was used to reveal what journalists and editors like and dislike and the other was used to reveal what public relations practitioners are currently providing. The methodology involved a fifteen minute phone interview comprised of 41 questions. Five were open ended questions. Respondents were asked to rank on a Likert scale of one to five whether they agreed strongly to strongly disagreed with each statement. Eighteen journalists and editors (50% journalists and 50% editors) and eighteen public relations practitioners were interviewed. For the journalists/editors systematic random sampling (every third) from a suburban list in Margaret Gee’s Media Guide were selected. Public relations practitioners were purposively chosen from each of the sub-groups of Government (3), Non-Profit Organisations (3), Small Public Relations Organisations (3), Large Public Relations Organisations (3), Public Relations Departments from Large Organisations (3), and Public Relations Departments from Small Organisations (3). Journalists/editors do not believe that public relations practitioners understand what is newsworthy, while public relations practitioners believed that they are usually quite aware of what is newsworthy for each individual newspaper. Editors said that public relations practitioners do not observe newspaper deadlines, while public relations practitioners believed they are definitely aware of deadlines. Editors believed that embargoes make a press release more difficult to use while public relations practitioners gave a neutral to negative response. Of editors and journalists editors most strongly disliked consumer product/services style press releases, however public relations practitioners were neutral as to whether they would usually send these types of press releases. Announcements of Events and Human Interest style press releases were both very popular for journalists/editors, which was understood by public relations practitioners. From
comments it appears that public relations practitioners are sending too many generic press releases and they are using too much hype in the language. Public relations practitioners also saw themselves as very ethical and usually very factually accurate, however journalists/editors believed that only about one half of practitioners were.

Key words: media releases, press releases

Introduction

In this research project public relations practitioners all believed that they excel in being both ethical and factually accurate. Journalists and editors, however, were far less supportive: only ‘about one half’ was the repeated comment. Another comment: ‘Some are extremely good and some are quite hopeless’—and many also believed there was not a great deal of middle ground. Following on from this same sentiment, ‘About one half are communication professionals like journalists and about one half are not’.

Another surprising result: Journalists and editors ‘disagree’ that most public relations practitioners understand what is newsworthy, while public relations practitioners themselves gave a restrained ‘agree’, rather than an ‘agree strongly’ response. Editors were highly critical with regards to public relations practitioners’ understanding of what is ‘newsworthy’ and they were scathing about public relations practitioners’ appreciation of ‘newspaper deadlines’. They also said that from a few basic types of press releases they truly dislike the ‘consumer products and services’ style press release.

The problem with press releases

Public relations practitioners have historically been criticised by journalists for not upholding any recognised professional standards. Most public relations practitioners are now members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) and are well educated. They understand their professional role is to assist organisations to be responsible members of the broader community, and yet there is still antagonism between journalists and public relations practitioners. Public relations practitioners write stories which have an agenda and are unlikely to be balanced, however with the general streamlining of newspaper staff contemporary newspapers have increasingly been relying upon public relations practitioners to source their stories.

With greater emphasis now on the quality of public relations activity from the PRIA and Melbourne’s universities, combined with complaints from newspaper personnel about the huge volumes of irrelevant, time wasting press releases, this research project intended to uncover some of the problems. Many press releases fail to be used by suburban Melbourne newspapers.
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Research question:

What are some of the recurring problems that can be isolated as causes of the failure of press releases to be used by suburban Melbourne newspapers?

Research design

This was a qualitative study carried out over a period of two weeks in 2005. It incorporated the general themes of public relations writing techniques and the relationships existing between journalists/editors and public relations practitioners. A technique using two closely matched sets of questions was designed. There was a strong reference to the comparison techniques of Jeffers research. One set of questions was used to reveal what journalists and editors like and dislike and the other was used to reveal what public relations practitioners are actually providing. This enabled a ‘demand and supply’ style comparison. The methodology involved a fifteen minute phone interview comprised of 41 questions in total (completed in October 2005). Five of these were very general open ended questions, while two were ranking questions for questionnaire variety and to confirm some important aspects (such as most popular and least popular basic types of press releases and most and least important attributes of a public relations practitioner conducive to a successful press release). The remainder were in the form of statements. Respondents were asked to rank on a Likert scale of one to five whether they agreed strongly to strongly disagreed with each statement. Neutral responses prompted a request for an explanation. The information was keyed into a table with a 0 score for strongly disagree, a 50 for neutral and a 100 for each agree strongly response.

A) Phone questionnaire for journalists/editors, October 2005 (*PR Practitioner questions 1–6 commence with ‘When writing press releases I am always…’ and from 7 onwards ‘When writing press release I usually…’):

   Can you confirm the current circulation?
   Can you confirm the current readership?
   Can you describe your target market?

Likert type response of Agree Strongly to Strongly Disagree:

1. Most PR practitioners are communication professionals like journalists.
2. Most PR practitioners have an ethical approach to press releases.
3. Most PR practitioners understand what is newsworthy.
4. Most PR practitioners are aware of newspaper deadlines.
5. Most PR practitioners are factually accurate.
6. Most PR practitioners are helpful.
7. I prefer to use press releases which reveal the information sources (authority).
8. I prefer to use press releases with very local information.
9. I prefer to use press releases which have information relevant to the newspapers’ target audience.
10. I prefer to use press releases with current/timely news.
11. I prefer to use press releases announcing an event.
12. I prefer to use press releases that get to the point quickly.
13. I prefer to use press releases that include a lot of factual information (including backgrounders).
14. I prefer to use press releases that have human interest.
15. I prefer to use press releases that have impact.
16. I prefer to use press releases on consumer products/services.
17. I prefer to use press releases on celebrities.
18. I prefer to use press releases sent in a larger package of information.
19. I prefer to use press releases with charts or graphics.
20. I prefer to use press releases with photos.
21. I prefer to use press releases announcing an event.

*For Journalists/Editors: - 20A & 20B

20A I prefer to use press releases which are assisting a non-profit organization.
20B I prefer to use press releases from larger, rather than smaller organisations.
21. I prefer to use press releases which entertain me.
22. I prefer to use press releases which include supporting statistics.
23. I prefer to use press releases which have highly technical/scientific information.
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16. I prefer to use press releases on consumer products/services.

24. I prefer to use press releases which include quotes from authority figures.

(To double check above results.)

(Insert 1). Please rank the following from Most to Least Important (1–4) for a press release:

- announcing an event
- highly technical/scientific information
- consumer products/services information
- human interest.

(Insert 2). Please rank by importance from Most to Least Important (1–4) to you the helpful attributes of a PR practitioner:

- ethical
- helpful and organised
- are aware of deadlines
- understand what is newsworthy
- you can relate well personally to them.

Again Likert type response of Agree Strongly to Strongly Disagree:

14. I prefer to use press releases that have human interest.

23. I prefer to use press releases which have highly technical/scientific information.

Generally …


26. The journalist shows the editor the original press release before preparing a story from it.

27. The journalist, rather than the editor, decides if the story looks good enough to use verbatim.

28. I prefer to use a ‘very good’ press release verbatim/word for word.

29. I prefer to contact people named in the press release myself.
30. I prefer to use press releases when I am very rushed.
31. I prefer to use press releases when there are fewer than usual sources of news available.
32. Embargoes make press releases more difficult to use.
33. I prefer to use press releases with stories exclusive to our publication.

*For Journalists/Editors:- 34. I prefer to read press releases sent directly to me email address.

*For PR Practitioners:- 35. I frequently check the internet for false or misleading information about a client.

*For PR Practitioners:- 36. I frequently will send a ‘tip off’ style press release advising a newspaper if there is false or misleading information about a client on the internet.

Four open ended questions:

1. Why do you think some press releases fail?
2. Why do you think some succeed?
3. What is special about the needs of local (or community) newspapers with regards to press releases.
4. Is there anything special about the way press releases are handled, or processed, by local (community) press?
5. Is there anything special about press release requirements for use on the internet.

Could you please provide demographic information on yourself: What is your name? What is your educational background? Are you male/female? Are you 21–25 yrs, 26–30 yrs, 31–35 yrs, 36–40 yrs, 41–45 yrs, 46–50 yrs, 51–55 yrs, 56–60 yrs, 61–65 yrs? Approximately how long have you been a journalist? Approximately how long have you been an editor, and how long have you worked in newspapers?

Charts were produced based on total amounts collected (to eliminate skewing). In the analysis of the Likert questions mean (x), median (MDN), mode, standard deviation (s), Range percentages of each ‘population’ and also relationships between answers were examined. The ranking questions were also assigned a value of four for first position to one for last position for each respondent. Response to each answer could then be expressed as a percentage of the total value (100%) for that group/population. Open ended answers were noted. There
was also an attempt to identify how different the responses of journalists were to editors, as they have been isolated in the past by researcher, Morton, and others, as fairly distinct types of ‘gatekeepers’.

Research theory

In the analysis the possibility of ‘Social Identity Theory’ existing was considered. Self concept can be influenced by the attitudes of the group. It is common for individuals within one group to display a preference for attitudes of their own members, but show a negative bias towards those of external groups. The theory states that the weaker the external group, or in this case the more ‘dependent’ public relations practitioners, the stronger is this unfavourable bias. The public relations practitioner seeks a more ‘cooperative’ win-win outcome, whereas a journalist might be satisfied with a more ‘competitive’ style win-lose outcome.

Also considered was ‘Reactance Theory’ where repeatedly pushy public relations practitioners could be having the opposite effect. Another general consideration was the impact of the entire environment, or ‘corporate culture’ of the newsroom, as influencing story and press release selection.

Behind all the theory: What actions of public relations activity and public relations writing techniques are likely to lead to not simply a successful ‘output’, or story, but also a successful ‘outcome’ from the point of view of the public relations practitioner? (Is the ‘key message’ likely to be transmitted ‘positively’ and is the organisation ensuring a strong voice in relation to competitors?) Macnamara repeatedly reminds the public relations industry that relying too heavily upon counting press clippings is actually a flawed technique for public relations evaluation.

Another underlying question: What official newsroom procedures have been adopted to reduce information flow problems and have any relationship problems been tackled from this far more procedural approach?

Methodology

The sample size used was 18 journalists/editors (at a ratio of 1:1) selected in a systematic random method. This aim was for every third newspaper from the total list derived from Margaret Gee’s Australian Media Guide (November 2004) of 68 local newspapers. This is suitable as the larger newspaper organisations have many more outlets available to the public relations practitioner and this was represented in the selection.

Eighteen public relations practitioners were selected using convenience method. Three from each of private business small—under 20 employees, large—over 20 employees, public relations organisations small—under ten employees and large—over ten employees, government and non-profit organisations. This sample size would be too small for a detailed analysis of each of the types of public relations organisations, however it was adequate to achieve a more general
conclusions about public relations practitioners, having included representatives from all of the general types of organisations.

Content validity based upon opinion and judgement was the preferred method for this research. (The pilot test also contributed to this.) Software for construct validity was unavailable.

Reliability techniques are quite difficult to apply to attitudinal type testing due to the subjectivity of the content, but this was attempted. The answers were expressed as a correlation coefficient from unacceptable of 0.0 to perfect or 1.00 using a simple internal consistency check with four questions which were repeated. (The effectiveness of this was also analysed in the pilot test.)

Results

With regards to the professionalism of public relations practitioners editors were slightly more negative, with a below neutral response, than the journalists on the concept of public relations practitioners being communications professionals like journalists (Question 1, for journalists x 61, editors x 44) and also having an ethical approach to press releases (Question 2, for journalists x 64, editors x 44). Public relations practitioners gave themselves the maximum positive result possible for having an ethical approach to press releases (Question 2, mode 9 X 100).

Public relations practitioners also believed they were always factually accurate (Question 5, x 97). Editors on the other hand gave a neutral response, with answers ranging from disagree 25 to agree 75 (s 23). Editors gave very low overall responses to six answers and one of these was for, ‘Most public relations practitioners understand what is newsworthy’ (Question 3, x 28). In sharp contrast public relations practitioners gave the result, x 78. Journalists/editors complained of self-promoting hype, which was not ‘news’.

The lowest answer of all responses from editors was, ‘Most public relations practitioners are aware of deadlines’ (Question 4), resulting in an extremely low x 19.- Four editors disagreed strongly, three disagreed and two each gave a neutral response. Both journalists and public relations practitioners themselves were widely divided on public relations practitioners’ awareness of deadlines’ (Journalists Range 0–100, s 37 and public relations practitioners Range 0–100, s 32, MDN 50–75). Another one of the ‘low’ overall responses from editors was, ‘I prefer to use press releases on consumer products/services’ (Question 16, Range 25–100, s 24). Journalists also gave a very low overall response (x 28). Public relations practitioners gave a highly consistent ‘neutral’ response (neutral mode 9, strongly disagree mode 1, disagree mode 4, agree mode 2, strongly agree mode 2.) This was supported by the results of ranking question 1:
Another outcome which was significant was the difference in responses between editors and journalists on the topic of, ‘Embargoes make press releases more difficult to use’ (Question 32, editors x 72, journalists x 28). Public relations practitioners gave a negative-to-neutral response as to whether they often set embargoes (MDN 50, Range 0–100, s 33). Both journalists and editors overall strongly agreed in terms of information source and information targets.

Additional findings

Both journalists and editors showed a strong preference for press releases which ‘reveal the information source’ (Question 7, x 94), but a few public relations practitioners themselves believe they do not always do this. (Neutral mode 3, strongly disagree mode 2, MDN 75.) This is due to the generic press release. ‘Editors’ also said (in strongly agreeing to Questions 12, x 100, and 33, x 100) that they ‘prefer releases to get to the point quickly’ and that they prefer ‘exclusive’ stories. Public relations practitioners overall said that they strongly agreed that they do usually (Question 10, x 96) write ‘current and timely news’ and they do usually (Question 12, x 97) ‘get to the point quickly’ in their press releases.
Public relations practitioners were less positive with regards to always knowing who is ‘the target market for each individual newspaper’ (Questions 9, MDN 50), and that they ‘frequently prepare press releases exclusively for one newspaper’ (Question 33, MDN 75). Journalists did not especially prefer photos in press releases (Question 20, Range 25–75, s 23), however editors were quite varied, but held a few stronger opinions on this topic (Range 0–100, s 33). Editors did not want a poor quality photo, or possibly the same photo as a competitor may be receiving. Public relations practitioners were also quite divided as to whether they would usually include photos (MDN 50, Range 0–100, s 33).

Both journalists and editors strongly supported a preference for ‘press releases from non-profit organisations’ (Question 20A, journalists/editors x 78). Neither journalists, nor editors, ‘prefer to use press releases from larger, rather than smaller, organisations’ (Question 20B, journalists/editors x 39). Despite the quite consistently above neutral responses of journalists/editors to the desire for more ‘technical/scientific type information’ (Question 22, strongly agree mode 6, agree mode 5, neutral mode 2, and disagree mode 1, x 78)—which for some stories is not even appropriate—33% of public relations practitioners showed a fairly infrequent, or strongly disagree mode 4 and disagree mode 2, (MDN 75), use of this within their press releases. All groups gave a low/disagree response to the preference for and use of ‘celebrities’ in press releases (Question 17, journalists/editors x 25, public relations practitioners x 14).

Journalists and editors were unanimous (100%) in strongly disagreeing to, ‘They prefer to use a very good press release verbatim’ (Question 28), however general comments from public relations practitioners suggest that suburban press, more than the larger dailies, will sometimes use a press release verbatim, especially for a brief article. Public relations practitioners disagreed that they ‘frequently send a tip-off style press release advising of false or misleading information’ (Question 36, MDN 0, strongly disagree mode 12, disagree mode 3, Range 0–100). Given the time they preferred to phone or visit in person after consulting with their legal experts. Of all editors interviewed only one systematically checks all press releases first.

Conclusion

Attitudes of journalists/editors to public relations professionals

The editors gave three disagree responses to the first Likert question which suggested that public relations practitioners are communication professionals like journalists. The journalists were more neutral. This only partially reinforces ideas in older research by Aronoff (1975) from the United States which actually placed the public relations profession at the bottom below a whole range of professions.

Suburban press are continually being briefed, often weekly, at council offices, by communications personnel. These practitioners are focussed upon
Failures and successes of press releases sent to suburban Melbourne press council issues and are generally well educated. One public relations practitioner interviewed for the sub-government of government was completing a PhD in Media Law. It appears as though Melbourne suburban newspaper personnel are exposed to a diverse range of public relations practitioners.

The public education system in Australia has only concentrated on the field of public relations for the past ten or so years, which may have significantly improved some of the perceptions of public relations as being a profession in its own right. In contrast to the research of Jeffers in 1977 public relations practitioners in Melbourne today ‘do’ rate themselves as equals with journalists. Formerly nearly all practitioners came from a journalism background and were viewed as ‘selling out’, or moving to ‘the dark side’, as one editor commented. There are also some editors and journalists who were interviewed who shift over time between both professions.

Social identity theory, where group members band together against another group, may be existing to a limited extent, particularly for the subgroup of editors (who are also slightly older than some of the journalists), but it is not as apparent as in the past where journalists were collectively extremely negative towards the opposing, more dependent, profession. In more recent writings Aronoff also states that ‘At one level an adversarial relationship is normal’.

The PRIA is determined to improve standards and is planning to implement on-line training for all members to improve cohesiveness of the profession according to an email to members on the 19th of October, 2005. Improving the ‘credibility’ of practitioners could also improve persuasiveness. Question 2 mentions the ‘ethics’ of a press release. The term ‘ethics’ is a very broad term. It appears that the over use of this word may even be divisive. Journalists and editors have difficulty describing any biased story as ethical. They are striving for the contemporary journalism goal which is ‘balance’, whereas public relations practitioners themselves seem quite satisfied that they are performing their task ethically, in accordance with their representative body, the PRIA.

Product samples/gifts were still a common practice according to one of the journalists interviewed. Denton stresses that this can quickly move into unethical territory. It is better to build a longer term reliable relationship with journalists than to undermine the reputation of public relations practitioners as a whole for the sake of one or two stories. Baskin, Aronoff and Lattimore (1997) suggest the ideal goal should be for mutual trust. The relationship between the public relations practitioner and a journalist should never be abused.

Question 6 which asks whether public relations practitioners are helpful resulted in a quite consistent agree (for journalists/editors x 71, Range 50–100), however this is not a close match to some of the problem areas also mentioned in answers to other questions, therefore it is presumed that this is a reference more to the ‘style’ of personal communication of public relations practitioners generally, rather than on anything concrete. One open ended response and
some Likert results suggest that editors might not have any involvement in the communication process with public relations practitioners when older, more experienced (eight years and above) journalists are selecting the press releases.

Perceived knowledge/skill of public relations practitioners

Editors are more critical of some public relations practitioners’ abilities to be factually accurate (Question 5) than journalists. They also frequently complain of ‘sloppy writing’ which is unhelpful and which causes time wasting. It also creates doubt about the content of the release. Adhering to the newspapers stylebook is about both making written pieces more useable and simply, according to Newsom and Haynes (2005), more impressive.

Editors are also significantly more critical of public relations practitioners’ knowledge of deadlines. In the ranking questions the editors placed this of equal importance to understanding what is newsworthy. It seems that journalists know of some public relations practitioners who observe the deadlines and others who totally disregard them. Both journalists and editors do not have confidence generally in the abilities of public relations practitioners to know what is newsworthy. These are all basic requirements for a successful press release and failure to deliver could only have an adverse effect upon the reputation of public relations practitioners as a whole.

Public relations practitioners are often unconcerned by deadlines due to a ‘hit and miss’ approach with generic releases. This was not ranked highly by them in either the Likert question or the ranking question. They expect these releases to trigger off story ideas, however journalists and editors describe wanting far more of the work and thinking done for them. Such as: ‘How specifically does this relate to our local community?’. The minimum requirement seems to be for a reference to specific suburbs or local people, or the inclusion of local statistics.
Communication theories such as ‘Agenda Setting’ (via repeat contact with audiences and journalists) can only be successful for public relations practitioners where the editors and journalists’ needs are being met. Unwittingly applying advertising style repetitions theories, by the overuse of press releases is clearly having an adverse effect. Saturation results in the blocking of some emails or the immediate deletion of others, especially for emails from repeat offenders. In keeping with ‘Reactance Theory’ the overload of press releases and pushy public relations practitioners, who restrict the freedom of journalists, are clearly resulting in journalists doing the opposite to what is requested of them. This is in an attempt to re-establish personal control.

Newspaper personnel complain that public relations practitioners ‘do not research their newspaper’ adequately and, also, do not understand what their umbrella organisation is all about. Some ‘suburbs’ have a leaning towards sport, others towards cultural issues, some are young and progressive and others wish to view local life as more traditional. Newspaper ‘groups’ can also have their preferences/style. The Star Newspaper Group, for example, is often viewed as generally youthful and entrepreneurial.

The photographer at a newspaper might also have a unique style which should be known. For example, Knox Leader shows a strong preference for bold repetitious, or mirrored, shapes in photos, for strong graphic impact. A broader issue often debated, (particularly for the bigger ‘dailies’) is the extent that media proprietorship can influence story selection. Where a Federal politician from a particular party holds a local seat, how might this be impacting upon stories within a suburban newspaper?

One public relations practitioner commented that to place all of the newspapers on the news websites would have great benefit for public relations practitioners. The ability to research faster prior to a release and also in the follow up, could help improve the newsworthiness of releases. — Newswire ‘currency’, (or items which were locally topical) would be far easier to establish. And there would be less reliance upon expensive media monitoring services.

Within the next few months Fairfax, especially, are looking at regularly updating the first few pages of their suburban newspapers on the internet according to one of the Fairfax editors interviewed. There is currently access to some Leader Community stories by membership. Rarely a profitable exercise this is possible due to the involvement of the media giants (News Corporation’s News Limited—Leader Community Newspapers and Fairfax Holdings—Fairfax Community Newspapers). According to Leonie Wood of The Age (‘Newspapers dog days—getting on with online’, 5 November 2005) the price of advancing digital news will be a further cut in the number of jobs for journalists. This comment was also expressed by one journalist interviewed in this study. Cross promoting (including within actual news articles) will also become more common between the different formats according to Leonie Wood.
Journalists, unlike editors, placed the category of ‘being helpful and organised’—in the ranking question—above the need to know deadlines, but significantly below the need to understand what is newsworthy. In this research it was the large public relations organisations who received the most criticism, in open ended responses, for sometimes not returning phone calls for days.

Theoretically important requirements of a press release

Everyone understands the importance to ‘localise’, however this does not seem to be corroborated by other answers from public relations practitioners. There is a lack of understanding of the importance of a newspaper’s ‘local target audience’ and a disregard of specific newspaper ‘deadlines’ by many practitioners. There appears to be a difference between what is theory and what is actually being practiced. In the 1990’s a research project by Linda Morton and John Warren found that up to 45% of releases which were localised were used for stories. This is a vital requirement. There are also still public relations practitioners who do not include ‘information sources’ within releases, due to their more generic nature, however journalists and editors are strongly demanding this and some editors even complained of no basic ‘contact details’ obvious on some press releases. ‘Current/timely news’ is required and Bivins (1995) teaches that this can be reinforced by writing releases in current tense. ‘Exclusives’ were always preferred by journalists and editors and this information should be clearly stated at the top of the press release to maximise interest. Despite the informative websites of larger organisations (which can easily be accessed by journalists) there was actually a preference for press releases from ‘smaller’, rather than larger, organisations. This appears to be largely related to exclusivity.

References

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