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PRINTtips

Double Duty: Writing Copy for Advertising and PR



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Inside

Idea Corner
Tricks and Tips
Q&A

Consider how much writing it takes to support your company or organization's advertising materials – brochures, direct mail pieces, newsletters, sales letters. Now consider the importance of regular, ongoing public relations activities – press releases, publicity, promotions. Wouldn't it be nice if all that advertising copy could also be used for public relations support? In this issue of *Printips*, we'll discuss advertising and public relations, and how you can write effective copy for both.

The basics: defining advertising and public relations

To fully understand the similarities and differences between advertising and public relations, it is useful to have a working definition of each:

Advertising: activities that bring a product, service, business, or organization to the attention of current and potential customers.

Public relations: activities that promote public understanding of a company or organization and its products or services.

Note that while advertising is focused on selling something to current and potential customers, public relations is about promoting and protecting the company or organization's image.

Typical advertising activities are distributing sales material such as brochures and sales letters;



conducting a direct mail campaign; distributing educational material such as a newsletter or catalog; and placing media ads. Typical public relations activities are generating publicity through press releases; carrying out promotions, special events, or sponsorships; protecting or defending the company or organization's image; and shaping public opinion.

The strengths of advertising

For companies or organizations with limited marketing budgets, the focus on current and prospective customers makes advertising the clear choice for promoting products and services. Whether the advertising material is a printed brochure or a display ad, the company or organization has complete control over the copy and design and can exercise unlimited creativity.

Distribution and exposure to a target audience are also completely under the company or organization's control – the sales team will distribute brochures to customers or prospects; a

Double Duty: Writing Copy for Advertising and PR (continued)

direct mail campaign will be aimed at a specific audience; and display ads will run in publications read by the target audience.

The strengths of public relations

Because it is written by an unbiased third party, a newspaper or magazine article about a company or organization has credibility that can't be matched by advertising. Similarly, a press release about a new product or service, when printed in a newspaper or magazine, has more credibility than advertising and may even be seen as an endorsement.

Public relations can establish, improve, or rehabilitate a company or organization's image. Publicity can create brand awareness or buzz in a different way than advertising.

Unlike advertising, the publicity generated by public relations is free!

Using public relations to reinforce advertising

Public relations is just one part of the overall advertising, marketing, promotion, and publicity effort of a company or organization. In fact, a press release that successfully generates publicity very effectively reinforces and lends credibility to an advertising campaign.

So what is a press release? It is a pseudo-news story sent to a journalist that suggests a story, provides background information, or promotes expert testimony. It is informational rather than persuasive and above all, is *newsworthy* – meaning the journalist can see that his readers will find the topic interesting or useful.

Press releases are typically written in *news style*, which follows the conventional newspaper approach (lead paragraph summarizing who, what, where, when, why and how).

A *feature story style* is written in a more entertaining style, similar to a magazine article. A feature style may set the tone and background before introducing the main topic.

Writing newsworthy copy

To write newsworthy copy, you will need to think about your company or organization's products and services in a new way – not from your perspective as a company insider, but from the perspective of your customers, prospects, and the public at large. Temporarily put aside everything you know, and imagine you are a new customer or interested prospect. What would cause you to be excited or curious or intrigued? What would make you want to learn more? What would keep you reading to the end of the newspaper or magazine article?

Here are some questions to get the creative juices flowing:

- In what ways is your business different from its competitors?
- What makes your product or service better than others?
- Do you use techniques or procedures that are unique or unconventional?
- Do you have unusual opinions or perspectives for your industry or for the local business community?
- Are you involved in philanthropic causes or community projects?

You may have to do some brainstorming to come up with uncommon answers to these questions. Remember, you are looking for a story angle that will catch the journalist's interest. Saying that your product or service is better than others because it is higher quality is not a unique story angle. Saying it saves lives because it never fails is.

Newsworthy advertising copy

Writing newsworthy advertising copy may seem like a contradiction. After all, a good press release avoids hype, clichés, and puffery in favor of objective newsworthiness. In contrast, advertising copy is written to suggest or provoke

“Public relations can establish, improve or rehabilitate a company or organization's image.”

“A feature story style is written in a more entertaining style...”



Double Duty: Writing Copy for Advertising and PR (continued)

a desired response and uses colorful adjectives, motivating adverbs, and word pictures. Can these diverse aims be reconciled so copy can do double duty?

We think so, especially since today's reader has become a jaded skeptic when it comes to

advertising. By using the newsworthy angle in your advertising copy, you are bound to surprise your readers with an unconventional brochure or ad. Think like a customer; think like a journalist; and write convincing copy that truly does double duty.

"...provoke a desired response and uses colorful adjectives..."

Public Relations Goals

A public relations campaign can have a variety of goals. Here are some possibilities:

- Establish a spokesman in your company or organization as an expert
- Build good will
- Create or reinforce brand or image
- Develop favorable impressions about the company or organization
- Introduce a new product or service

To get the word out, consider using one or more of these techniques:

- Press release
- Infomercial-style articles
- Customer case studies or success stories
- Letters to the editor
- Seminars or public speaking engagements
- Sponsorship of community events

All these techniques have the possibility to generate favorable publicity, develop a positive community image, or provide sales leads.



"Develop favorable impressions about the company or organization."

References for Writers

Journalists who receive your press releases also have editors who expect stories to conform to established style conventions covering grammar, punctuation, and sentence syntax. To increase the possibility that your press release will be used as submitted, it is a good idea to conform to style conventions.

The classic reference for conscientious writers is *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. Published in 1918, the book provides the principal requirements of plain English style. Its intention is for use in English courses that combine the study of literature with composition. The book provides "a few essentials, the rule of usage, and principles of composition most commonly violated."

In the introduction, Strunk asserts, *"It is an old observation that the best writers sometimes disregard the rules of rhetoric. When they do so, however, the reader will usually find in the sentence some compensating merit, attained at the cost of the violation. Unless he is certain of doing so, he will probably do best to follow the rules. After he has learned, by their guidance, to write plain English adequate for everyday uses, let him look, for the secrets of style, to the study of the masters of literature."*

Specific to journalism is the *Associated Press Stylebook* and *Briefing in Media Law*, edited by Norm Goldstein. The 35th edition was published in 2000.



"To increase the possibility that your press release will be used as submitted,..."

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Q&A
questions and answers

“The balance of the body copy substantiates the information provided in the lead paragraph.”

Q. What are the parts of a standard press release?

A. A press release typically has five sections:

- Contact block
- Release date
- Main title or headline
- Body copy
- Boilerplate

The *contact block* provides the name and contact information (address, phone, FAX, e-mail) of the person submitting the press release. The *release date* is an actual date or

may state *For Immediate Release*. The *main title* briefly states the news, finding or announcement in headline format. (You may also include a subhead that elaborates on the headline.)

The *body copy* begins with a lead paragraph written like a newspaper article – who, what, when, where and how. The balance of the body copy substantiates the information provided in the lead paragraph. The release ends with *boilerplate* – a block of standardized text about the company or organization that is used in every press release.

If the press release continues beyond a single page, put the word *more* at the bottom of the page to indicate a continuation. To indicate the end of the press release, put “30” or “###” at the place where the text ends.