

MASTERING THE PRESS RELEASE

Marie Asner

YOU'VE JUST been handed the job of writing a press release for your church holiday cantata. "It should be easy enough," you decide, and proceed to write a paragraph about the event. The choir director reads it and wonders why the name of the composer is misspelled and performance times are wrong. "Ooops," you apologize and carefully redo the information. The director reads it a second time and it passes inspection, but with the comment, "How about getting it in the weekly newspapers near us?" You hadn't thought of it and by the time you find out when their deadlines are, it is too late to submit information. The holiday cantata ends up being covered by the church bulletin and newsletter, a few posters in nearby businesses, and a brief mention in the daily newspaper calendar. You could have done better.

The information in this article will be grouped into two parts. Part One concerns the press release, which is just that, a press release. It gives information to the public without being a paid advertisement. There are five things to remember in organizing a press release. WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, and WHY. Knowing the basics means you can compose a press release to attract media attention because it gives pertinent information immediately. In fact, one editor told me, "If you can sum up all your information into one sentence, that is the ideal press release."

WHO—is your organization, whether it is known by name, logo, or initials. For example, you may call the American Guild of Organists, AGO, if the audience in the area is familiar with the group. Included in this part are the names of guest artists and their professions.

WHAT—means what is the event? A concert? Silent auction? Workshop? Recital? Masterclass? Hymn Fest?

WHEN—are the date(s), time(s), contact phone number(s), and e-mail address and/or Web site if the organization has one.

WHERE—means the location of the event, which would include directions (if needed), where to park, handicap accessible, shuttle bus service available, and so on.

WHY—is the purpose of the event. Fund-raiser, such as a concert to raise

money for a scholarship fund or choir trip to Europe? Celebrate the installation of a new pipe organ? Free and open to the public? Free will offering? Tickets, and if so, price, where available, and a separate phone number and/or address for ticket information.

EXTRA—if you wish the event to have photographic coverage, place "Photo Op" in a prominent place on the press release and the times the photo opportunity is available, whether it is during a rehearsal or performance. If you have a photo of your group and/or artist, have enough photos for all your media contacts. Do not expect these photos to be returned to you. Make sure the photo is attached to a paper listing all pertinent information; this should go with the first press release. Clear black and white photos are the best, and next to that, a clear color photo with the group and/or artist in full view with good lighting. Ask if the media you are sending to prefers a photographic print or slide. Remember, detail is lost in reproduction.

When placing this information on paper or as part of an e-mail, put in large letters the words "Press Release" or "News Release" at the top of the page and keep your information to one page. A verification name and phone number is required and this is usually at the top left-hand side or at the bottom of the page.

Don't use unusual print or odd fonts in writing a press release; it looks cumbersome. Points 11 or 12 are good, as is a font such as Times New Roman. Also, don't have a multitude of graphics running around the page; it detracts from the message you want to convey. A logo or small music symbol on the upper left-hand corner is sufficient to draw an editor's attention (in this case the verification information is at the bottom of the page). If you have official stationery, make sure the heading will give you enough room on the page for the press release. Save colored paper for other occasions.

Part Two follows after you have gathered "the five Ws." Carefully—and this can't be stressed enough—proofread the press release. Don't rely on newspapers, radio stations, or whatever to do this for you. Be available in person, or via phone, fax, and/or e-mail to answer questions. Have at least two people check your information.

The term "camera-ready" means that you will present a press release to the media already proofread and "perfect."

Check spelling, not once but twice. Also, if working with a chapter or national logo, make sure you have it ready either on the press release or on disk for the press if they should ask for it. "Camera-ready" means the logo must be clear enough for printing purposes. If the media asks for a disk, ask if they want MAC or PC or have a disk converter available to them.

Know media deadlines. The media usually request a minimum notice of three weeks before the event. This means, if you don't have a media list compiled, you need at least two weeks prior to sending items out to begin. In other words, from scratch to finish, allow five weeks. Two weeks for organization, a few days for stuffing and mailing, and the rest of the time working with the media.

Target the specific media to receive the press release. Area churches and schools? Newspapers? Radio stations? Television stations? Contact the media and see if they would rather have press releases sent to them by regular mail, fax, or e-mail. This saves a great deal of work and postage. A friend of mine, who performs organ recitals during summer months, has a media list of 30 contacts. Twenty prefer to be notified by fax and the other ten by regular mail. It doesn't take her long to publicize her concerts.

After you have sent in a press release, wait five days and then contact the media to see if they have received it. If not, do it again. Items can be misplaced or end up at the bottom of a pile of papers on someone's desk. **BE PROFESSIONAL. Remember: no one has to publish anything you submit as a press release.**

The following points are ones to remember:

- Do** honor deadlines
- be available for questions and follow-up
- treat media contacts fairly
- respect press editing
- Don't** demand your press release be published
- lose your temper over something out of your control
- ALWAYS** send a thank-you note or personal call when the information is published.
- The media will remember you if you don't remember them.

By using this checklist, you will help make your organization a professional one in the public eye.