

Hold the front page! – guidelines for writing a press release

Although 'Hold the front page' is an instruction popular with Hollywood Directors and novelists, it isn't a command which regularly resounds around your local newspaper offices. Let's face it – however good your press release – it's unlikely to attract attention like this. Don't despair, some careful thought and planning can produce a press release that results in a photo and story appearing in your local or regional paper.

Photos first

The old saying 'a picture's worth a thousand words' is still true today. If you're seeking publicity for your church event, always think in terms of photographs, or opportunities for filming, if you're going to approach your local TV stations. Try and visualise what could be photographed or filmed either at the event, or better still beforehand – even if this means organising a 'mock-up' photo opportunity in advance.

Should your local paper say they can't or won't take a photo do consider providing them with one but bear in mind it will need to be of good quality and well composed. Most newspapers now prefer digital photos sent via email, especially for news stories but may consider negatives, copies, etc for feature articles.

If you have a modern digital camera the chances are that it will have sufficient megapixels to provide good-enough printing results for your newspaper (anything with three or more should be okay for most photos) If you plan to enlarge a picture to use in a poster etc do bear in mind that a photo which looks clear and sharp on your computer screen may not print out as clearly as it appears. A general rule-of-thumb is the larger the photo you plan to use the more megapixels you need on your camera. If in doubt double-check with the newspaper's Photographic Department or News Editor.

'Only words'

At least that's what one old song says! Yet however great your photos you will need a press release to go with them. If you can't dream-up a photo opportunity then the second line of that song – 'words are all I've got' applies, so make them count.

Do remember that your press release will be competing with hundreds of other press releases, emails and phone calls, some prepared by media experts, for the News Editor's attention. Get ahead of the competition by bearing the following in mind.

(1) If it's 'New' it's News

The Media love the word and you can often put this to good use. Remember to emphasise this is 'a new project' for our church, a 'new-style' of service, or if it's an on-going scheme 'a new phase' in the building work.

(2) Do something Different

Another fundraising Faith Supper won't hit the headlines. Try a similar event with a theme, perhaps involving fancy dress plus supper made from exotic recipes sent from an overseas link diocese and you may get a photo and some column inches. If you can persuade your Vicar to hold a 24-hour pray-in, or abseil from the bell tower to launch the new roof appeal, you'll probably get on TV.

(3) Local Links

Essential if you want to interest your local papers. For instance 'Back-to-Church Sunday' is only news locally because churches within the diocese of Wakefield are taking an active part in a national initiative. Think 'inside out' regarding stories etc when writing your release but don't forget to mention the 'bigger picture' linked to national stories or issues as well.

(4) People Power

People are important and if you can persuade them to feature in a release it can make all the difference. People make news and in a local paper readers like stories about people they know, or grew up with, went to school with or work with, so don't forget that personal touch!

The very best stories combine all these elements, and if you're lucky enough to have one the Press will probably be ringing you before you've put fingers to keyboard but even highlighting one of these factors could make your news stand out from the rest.

You don't need an English degree or special 'flair' to write a press release – whatever you contribute will usually be rewritten anyway. What you do need is the ability to get the facts in front of the reporter and ensure they are accurate.

Back to basics

1. Study your local Media in advance and keep contact details – phone/fax numbers, names, emails and addresses on file and up to date along with details of deadline days and times (especially for weekly papers or monthly magazines)
2. Gather all your facts in advance and send the release in good time (but not too soon or it could get lost in the hundreds of releases a News Editor receives every week)
3. Try to send the release on your church's headed notepaper so the News Editor knows it is authentic.
4. Don't forget to include the five 'Ws + H' – Who is doing What, Where, When, Why and How.
5. Include a quote from your minister or priest or someone involved to liven up the story and add that all-important 'people power' mentioned before.
6. Provide a 'photo opportunity' – preferably in office hours – and be prepared to be flexible and change times etc if requested.
7. Avoid 'Church Jargon' – or if really can't avoid it put a brief explanation in brackets. Avoid puns and 'suggested headlines'. You think they're clever but they could put people off.
8. Try and stick to one side of A4 – you will get a call if more details are required.
9. Copy and paste the text of your email into the body of an email – many News Editors can't be bothered to open attachments. Try and fax a copy for good measure.
10. Make sure your contact details, or those of the Minister or person involved, are clear and accurate so the reporter can check facts etc (and make certain they are happy to have them released before you send them off). Try and include the name and number of someone available during office hours.
11. If you don't receive a response within a few days ring the News Desk or reporter and ask if the story will be used. If not, don't demand to know why, instead ask whether the story is the kind they're interested in and take note for the future.

If you've done all the things you should and your story still isn't used – don't despair. There could be 101 reasons why, ranging from bad timing on a busy news day when there was a local murder, to the reporter assigned to your story relegating it to the bottom of the pile. Put it down to experience and try, try, try again as they say... and better luck next time!