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'We Have to Stop the Madness' (The Problem with Press Releases)

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They remain the PR industry's Achilles' heel: poorly written press releases.

Rife with misspellings and typos while the real news tends to be buried underneath flowery quotes from the CEO, press releases are a sore spot for many communications executives. Too often they're crafted by committee — with no regard for AP style, or any style for that matter — and pushed down to inexperienced PR executives who have no background in journalism. And the push-you-pull-me between the communications team and the client's demands to have the press release written to their specifications can also lead to problems.

Poorly written press releases is nothing new. Our sources admit, however, that the quality of writing has gone downhill in the last few years. "In my nine-year career, press releases have become longer and longer with less and less relevance," says Dave DeVries, senior PR manag-

er for the wireless division of Sprint Corp., who is the on-the-ground rep for Sprint in eight Midwestern states.

David Schull, senior VP of Thorp & Co., one of the largest independent PR agencies in the Southeast, adds: "People seem to have forgotten who they're writing for. The downfall of [PR] writing in the late 1990s has continued into the new decade."

PR executives attribute the decline in press release writing to several factors. These include the advent of the Web, when tech executives couldn't stuff enough (useless) information into press releases that were then distributed online to everybody and their brother. Subsequently, an increasing amount of tech-laden jargon is now included in press releases — a surefire way to tune out most reporters. In the current climate, tighter budgets, smaller staffs and less

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Press Releases

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time have pushed press releases to the back burner.

But failing to improve the quality of press releases chips away at the PR industry's credibility. "We have to stop the madness," says DeVries. "We need to stop companies from looking foolish, and pull everyone together to put out releases that serves [reporters'] needs."

Nancy Tamosaitis, who runs her own PR agency, Vorticom, says the most crucial aspect of writing press releases is for the communications team to first ask themselves whether the information, product and/or service even merits a release. She also recommends that the first two sentences of the press release should be "artfully constructed" to convey maximum impact with style and personality, avoid grandiose claims of owning market share

PR Help Wanted (In More Ways Than One)

Global PR firm Lewis P.R. Inc., San Diego, has recently been in the market for new account executives — and the applicants' grammatical skills leave a lot to be desired. Following are extracts from 1,000 resumes submitted to Lewis P.R., many of them suggesting that young PR pros need a lot of schooling when it comes not just to writing press releases — 90% of the resumes had spelling errors — but how to garner attention. Our favorite: "I'm looking for a job in public relations." Read them and weep.

- Skills: Attention to detail
- "My life doesn't just consist of fun and games, I do a little work as well. Have a look at my timetable. But that's only when I'm not partying."
- "I no you are probably really busy...but I am looking to get a job in the PR industry....I have just completed a course in Media and Communication. To succeed on the course I found it was essential to poses good communication skills...i have a grat grounding to work within an office environment."
- "Please tell me exactly what it is your company does, so that I send my resume.Im more than interested in joining your firm."
- "I like my job very much, but I would like to get another one."
- "Good afternoon, I am sending you my C.V., as I am looking to gain relvant experience with-in a company like yours. I await you reply, May thanks."

Source: Morgan McIntic, VP, Lewis P.R. Inc

and product superiority and keep the headline short and compelling because the release will be lost in electronic clutter if the headline fails to capture the core news

value.

Jerry Schwartz, founder-CEO of G.S. Schwartz & Co., says he tries hard to hire as many ex-journalists as possible and assigns account executives press releases based on skill and the needs of the client. "The same person who makes a great marketing strategist or a brilliant publicist is not the same personality type who can write well, and the industry needs both," he says. "If the client requires minimal writing I might assign a publicist. If it's something that requires a lot of bylines I'll give it to more of a writer."

Schull, from Thorp & Co., says good PR teams have a formal editing/style system in-house for all press releases. Before putting pen to paper, Thorp & Co. executives outline the content for the release, come up with an execution plan and then ask: What's the news? (See "Autopsy")

Successful press releases "are going to take the information and put it into a context that resonates in news value," says Shawn Platt, PR director at LaSalle Bank in Chicago, who teaches a PR course at Columbia College. "Some PR pros don't necessarily look at [releases] as an offshoot to journalism."

Press Release: An Autopsy

The following press release, for Gator Leasing, resulted in a front-page story in the business section of *The Miami Herald* as well as coverage from other outlets in the area. "If you write something without the fluff," says David Schull, senior VP of Thorp & Co., "chances are journalists will be inclined to use it." The release was distributed in January to *The Miami Herald* reporter just a day before it went out to other members of the local media in South Florida.

Source: Thorp & Co.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Gator Leasing to Open 21,690-Square-Foot, 36-Bay Truck Service Facility in Miami's Airport West Area

New Building is First Phase of Truck Leasing Company's \$6 Million Expansion Project

MIAMI, Jan. 30, 2003 — Gator Leasing Inc. today announced it will open a 21,690-square-foot, 36-bay truck service facility in June in Miami's Airport West area.

Currently under construction at 10900 N.W. 25th St., the facility, which will include a 90-foot wash bay and high-speed fuel station, will enable Gator Leasing to expand its maintenance offerings as well as simultaneously service 36 trucks. The facility is the first phase of a \$6 million expansion project that includes the construction of an 18,700-square-foot, two-story office building, which will house Gator Leasing's executive and administrative offices. The company expects to break ground on the office building in 2004.

"During a time of consolidation in the truck leasing industry, we've enjoyed tremendous growth as companies have looked to Gator Leasing as a well-established independent that consistently delivers the highest-quality personal service," said Jim Hammel, president of Gator Leasing. "Our Miami expansion project and last year's entrance to the Tampa and Orlando markets with the acquisition of AMI Truck Leasing reflect the increased demand we're seeing from companies that once worked exclusively with the 'majors.' With our state-of-the-art service facility, we'll gain another competitive advantage with our ability to efficiently turn around customers' maintenance requests to keep their trucks in service."

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Release leads with a hard news announcement that was issued to media six months before groundbreaking. Client wanted to do a story on groundbreaking but Thorp & Company convinced Gator Leasing that the company had to better package the information into a business story.

"Justifier paragraph." Opportunity to elaborate or "justify" lead and provide specifics on the facility sans any fluff or superlative terms.

Quote from a principle from the company. The comment is similar in tone to conversations Hammel had with the media later on in the process. The third or fourth paragraph is the only place in a release that Thor & Co. runs a corporate quote.

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