



10

Most Common Mistakes Companies Make When Preparing Product Releases

By Steven M. Stroum

1. Boasting and exaggeration

Forget about hype! Leading off a press release with XYZ Company, “a world leader” is one of the greatest turn-offs to an editor. Making performance claims without quantifying and substantiating them will also make certain your release reaches the editorial wastebasket. Don’t use adjectives like “unique, powerful, innovative, superior, or revolutionary.” An editor alone reserves the right to make those judgments and to use that language. Remember, you can help yourself by helping the editor or web host. Concisely spell out what your product is, what it does, how it does it, who needs it, where you get it, and what it costs. Even releases distributed online where you pay your money and can write anything ought to be well-written to stand out from the hype-ridden releases out there!

2. Promising to advertise

Don’t even think of trying to “leverage” an editor. High quality publishers know that editorial integrity is their most important product. The greater their credibility... the greater their value to their readers or site visitors. According to *Penton Media*, “A publication should not sell editorial. It should be independent from the advertising sales department with editors free to select only the material of interest, relevance and value to the reader.” A leading editor once wrote an editorial entitled, “Church and State? ... Journalism 101” in which she stated, “The other day I got a press release in the mail and the envelope in which it came had the following stamped on the front: ‘Advertisers Press Release Enclosed.’ I was tempted to throw it away without even looking at it. The sender was implying that my judgment on the value of the release would be affected by the word ‘advertiser.’ So, if you ever wondered whether I favored advertisers with editorial coverage that wasn’t warranted, there’s your answer.” The practice of selecting news based upon “newsworthiness” still exists!

3. Snapshot photography

That old expression, “one picture is worth a thousand words” is really true when dealing with editors. First of all, a photograph says a great deal about your pride and commitment to product quality. Surely you wouldn’t make a sales call wearing blue jeans. The same principle applies here. Your press release is making a sales call on an editor or web host. A good first impression is important... you only get one chance to make one. And a homemade snapshot makes a negative first impression. Editors are busy people who receive hundreds of e-mails with press releases every week (sometimes daily). If you write a subject line that gets their attention and then spoil it with an inferior photograph.... shame on you! Your product deserves a first quality, professional photograph that an editor can use in their publication or web site with pride, assuming, of course, the information suits their requirements. Gorgeous photography always gets noticed and if it is really good and communicative it may land on a front cover! The better the photograph, the more space and/or better location you will likely receive.

4. Assumptions about technical knowledge

Engineers especially have a tendency to assume that editors are familiar with their technology or product lines. All too often they'll write in acronyms and initials; rather than keeping their message simple and generic. There are many instances where editors, particularly associate editors, who are often responsible for selecting products to review, are not technically trained in a particular discipline. That is *not* to say, however, that they are not skilled technical journalists. Also, be cautious about presenting claims and comparisons based upon assumptions. Take the time to carefully define the features and benefits of your products. Quantify whenever possible. If your product is fast... how fast? If it is strong... how strong? If it is compact... what are the dimensions?

5. Writing too much copy

Anything beyond a single page, double-spaced is too much for a product, literature or personnel announcement. Two hundred words or less is a good length. Besides, if you can't describe your product that concisely.... odds are you don't understand it well enough yourself. Moreover, how many product reviews have you seen in magazines that are more than 200 words? Now, if you were a busy editor or web host with hundreds of press releases in your in-box, do you think you would read the ones that were longer than a page, knowing full well that you may be faced with an arduous editing task? All things considered, especially deadlines, an editor is going to review press releases that can be read fairly quickly. In addition to the above, businesspeople often equate words with value: the more words, the more value. When it comes to getting publicity, the opposite is true: stay to the point and be brief and you will enhance the odds of having your press release published.

6. Mixing Apples and Oranges

If you are going to write a product announcement, then focus on the product. Have you ever seen a product review page with quotes from the president of the company? John Doe, president of XYZ Company says, "this world class product truly revolutionizes our industry," is exactly the kind of extra advertising-style copy that hurts the chances of your product getting the attention from editors which it may deserve. Stay focused on one topic at a time. Be sure to resist adding information about your new factory in Detroit or the warehouse in Wisconsin. If you want to announce a new facility... then do it separately in another press release. It provides another opportunity to get exposure.

7. Overlooking publicity opportunities

This is one of the most costly mistakes you can make. Remember, a product doesn't have to be *new to be newsworthy*. A new application for an existing product will be newsworthy to the right audience. We presented an industrial product to the marine marketplace and the first line of the product review in a major publication read, "this is one of those handy little gizmos you never knew you needed before you saw it." Our presentation made it newsworthy! A product release which focuses on one key aspect of your product, such as its compact size might be newsworthy whereas another release featuring some other attribute of your product might also be topical. Try to consider all the possible features and benefits of your product and think about supportive photographs for each that are interesting and newsworthy. In other words, if size is critical, then be certain that characteristic is prominently featured in your photograph. Don't make the mistake of assuming that your customers will *Google* you if they need your product. Publicity *creates* that need and gets them interested in your company first! Publicity increases web site traffic and it creates better organic search engine results!

8. Failing to look beyond your products

Don't forget how effective new literature, or new video or website releases can be. They frequently generate more leads than any other type of publicity opportunity. Why? Because people like to receive free information and this type of publicity has been traditionally designed by publishers to elicit responses from their readers. Not only do media outlets provide a service to their readers by allowing them to get this type of information, but they are also able to gauge what interests their readers most by tracking the inquiries. This helps them plan future editorial coverage and expand their topics. What's more, people who inquire are also prospective advertisers and names which can be mined elsewhere. Again, new facilities, plant upgrades, new contract, distributor appointments, and new personnel are all terrific publicity opportunities. The more news there is about your company on the world wide web the better your odds of landing on page one of searches.

9. Believing that "click-thrus" are just "literature collectors"

Numerous studies over the years corroborate the fact that people who take the time to inquire are valid sales leads. Inquiries do lead to sales! The real issue is how your company responds to them and integrates them into your marketing program. Those who "opt in" by requesting information from your company about a product should, at the very least, become part of your regular e-mail contact program. Another way to look at this is: when someone inquires about your product, they are exhibiting "interest behavior." Your goal is to convert that interest behavior into "buying behavior." However, you often have no control over what event may trigger that conversion. Therefore, what you need to do is "be in front" of them when they are ready to buy. The trigger might be expansion, a botched delivery from a competitor, a price increase, or another factor. Also, don't minimize the benefit of being visible to prospective customers in publications, on the web and in their e-mail box.

10. Thinking that product announcements are just extras

Over 35 years ago, an article in *Advertising Age* magazine read, **“this unprogressive idea that publicity is a fringe function may well be costing billions of dollars in lost opportunities to persuade and sell products and services. “Many marketing directors and product managers do not fully appreciate... or even understand... the efficacy of a sophisticated PR campaign.”** This observation is more critical now because of the value of publicity in the internet age. Publicity is even more important today because it is *news* in a world cluttered by sponsored messages and paid advertising, in addition to different types of media. Also, most readers of traditional publications and their websites who are interested in a product will visit the company’s website directly if it is published or will *search* for the company. Again, another great aspect of publicity today is that it enhances search engine optimization by creating link popularity with publishers’ web sites and other high quality media outlets. The more pages you have on the web featuring your products, the more likely it is you’ll be listed on the first page in a “search.” *When properly implemented, product publicity is the most powerful and cost-effective tool in the marketing mix. In fact, there’s not a successful product anywhere that wasn’t first introduced with publicity, regardless of industry.*

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The “**10 Common Mistakes Companies Make When Preparing Product Releases**” were compiled by Steven M. Stroum, president of Venmark International, a company he founded in 1976. Since that time he has authored or edited over 15,000 press releases and has been recognized as the “best in the business” by many leading editors.

In recognition for his contribution to the success of many smaller companies by publicizing their products and services for them, Mr. Stroum was elected to serve on the *Commonwealth of Massachusetts Small Business Task Force* and was later appointed by Governor Edward J. King to serve a four-year term as one of 18 small business advisors.

Mr. Stroum’s contribution to the small business community was recognized further when he was selected by the *International Rotary Foundation* to join a five-man Group Study Exchange Team and tour South Korea for six weeks as an ambassador. He has also been listed in “Who’s Who in the East,” was an executive member of the *American Marketing Association*, and addressed the *Inventors Association of New England* at MIT, and the *New England Chapter of IEEE*. Mr. Stroum was also appointed to the Norbert Weiner Forum at Tufts University to study the impact of technology on society. He has been a guest lecturer at Babson College, Boston College, Northeastern University, and has addressed numerous business and civic groups. He can be reached at news@venmarkinternational.com