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The Evolution of the Press Release
by Harry Hoover

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Mark Twain once said the rumors of his death had been greatly exaggerated. The same may be said for the press release. It's not dead—but its mission has evolved.

Those PR practitioners who are spreading these death rumors would have you believe that press releases should be neither written nor distributed. I take issue with this old-school thinking.

Now, inundating the media with press releases has not been a good practice since shortly after Edward Bernays opened the first PR firm in 1919. Any competent PR person has known for years that garnering media coverage almost never happens directly due to a press release. However, that is fodder for another article.

Let's talk about the evolution of the press release into a solid tool for helping organizations deliver key messages to multiple audiences in the digital age.

In the not-so-distant pre-Internet past, press releases were aimed solely at trade and consumer media outlets. The media acted as the gatekeepers,

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taking your information and making decisions about how, or whether, to use it. Organizations today are able to bypass the media filter in a number of ways, thanks to the Net.

Consider this: both journalists and consumers use the Web for research. More than 550 million searches are done daily via the Web. And, every month, US Web users conduct 27 million searches at Yahoo News, Google News or other news search engines. Also, according to recent surveys by Middleberg/Ross and the Pew Internet Project:

- 98% of journalists go online daily.

- 92% do it for article research.

- 76% to find new sources and experts.

- 73% to find press releases.

- 68 million Americans go online daily.

- 30% use a search engine to find information.

- 27% go online to get news.

But you need to think differently about writing your releases in this new age. You can extend the power of your press releases beyond the media by positioning them for search engines. In effect, your press releases become a long-lasting, online, searchable database about your organization.

Once properly written with both readers and search engines in mind, you need to distribute the release. PR Web and PR Newswire are my two favorite ways to get the message out. Both services help you reach into the newsroom and beyond.

PR Web emails press releases daily to between 60,000 and 100,000 global contact points. Journalists, analysts, freelance writers, media outlets and newsrooms, as well as your average Web users, are signed up to receive this information. Also, it distributes releases via FTP, XML feeds and through a network of its own Web sites. PR Web-related sites are in the top 2,500 most visited sites. Every release sent out through PR Web is optimized for search engines, and PR Web guarantees your release will be picked up by Yahoo, which is the most visited Web site on the Internet.

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Does it work? Let me provide a recent example. I used PR Web to send out a release about my client Brent Dees and his Focus Four training for entrepreneurs. The editor of Leadership Excellence emailed me after seeing the release and asked Brent to write an article for his magazine.

The granddaddy of press release services is PR Newswire, which distributes directly into the central editing computers at daily newspapers, newsweeklies, national news services, trade publications and broadcast newsrooms. It reaches a total of 22,000 media points in the US alone. All releases are distributed to and archived in more than 3,600 Web sites, databases and online services. Additionally, PR Newswire's Web site is in the top 2,000 most-visited sites on the Internet.

Finally, let's take a look at the online media room. Its primary purpose is to provide journalists with easily accessible data about the organization, such as executive bios, earnings figures, key contacts and other solid, factual information. An organization also should place news releases here, particularly those aimed at key stakeholders like employees, strategic allies and investors. Technology savvy consumers often visit online media rooms for the same reason journalists do: they expect to find factual information there.

Churning out releases and dumping them willy-nilly on the media is a dumb practice. But using releases as a strategic weapon to reach key audiences across the digital divide is smart PR. Practitioners who believe the news release is dead need to evolve, or they will be the moribund ones.

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