

Write fewer press releases and more pitches

For the past several years, there's been a debate raging in the world of public relations: is the press release dead or not? Some unequivocally state that it is (or should be), and some still use it and see a value in it.

Press releases may not be dead, but they are not as effective

I think that the press release is not dead, but it is not living like it used to. Press releases no longer generate stories. Instead, press releases have become a way for organizations to write a story and distribute it to an audience, generally via their website. And, press releases put on "wire" services may help with SEO.

Move beyond press releases

If, however, you intend to generate publicity and coverage for an organization, you have to move beyond the press release. In fact, you need to work on your pitching skills, and on your data gathering and analysis. Why? Because the world of journalism and PR has changed dramatically in the past decade. News organizations have consolidated. Small/community/local newspapers are struggling, or are gone altogether. Most news is national news, and most national news is political news around very few issues that generate a high degree of controversy. And then social media has disrupted how people get news, and how they interact with news organizations.

Newspapers are still delivered?

(Aside: The community where I live was going to be repairing our street, and closing it to traffic for 48 hours. I expressed concern to the community manager that our newspapers would not be able to be delivered. She asked if these items

were delivered every day, and whether I paid for this delivery. In short, she did not have *any* concept or understanding of what it means to have a daily, print newspaper delivered to your door.)

There are new issues for communicators to deal with

A couple of weeks ago, I attended the National Press Club's Communicator's Summit, where the following four issues were addressed:

- 1) **Artificial intelligence in news production/news gathering.** The main take-away for PR from this presentation is that for news that is data-based (quarterly earnings reports, for example), newsrooms are creating templates and then using AI to fill out the data.
- 2) **Generational differences and how they affect communication.** There are big differences in how Gen X, Gen Y and Baby Boomers deal with hierarchy and how they prefer to communicate. Millennials do not see hierarchy the same way as older generations, and will communicate directly with superiors. They also want to be kept more updated and want feedback. There's also a marked shift from voice communications to text-based communications.
- 3) **How media organizations are distributing content.** Media organizations are using more content platforms (social media, etc) and formats (video, etc.) to distribute content.
- 4) **Today's challenges and opportunities in getting news out.** Frank Sesno gave the luncheon talk, and he discussed many issues ranging from journalists who have forgotten how to provide objectivity, to the constant connection and "breaking news," which make it harder for communicators to get their message through.

All of the above led me to conclude that we are indeed wasting our time writing press releases in order to generate publicity

(earned media). In fact, a couple of the panelists (both were journalists and/or news editors) said we should be providing thoughtful, short pitches and raw data. They said they do not read press releases, and often delete those emails.

We are overwhelmed with email and news

We've heard it before, but in our accelerated world, people have even less time to slog through countless emails (and definitely not attachments). Few people listen to voice mail. Communicators may have to find a way to communicate with journalists that does not involve email or phone calls. Some people have had success communicating on social media.

In conclusion

A thoughtful, well-written press release can still play a role in a communicator's toolkit. But if communicators are seeking publicity, the best bet is to create solid, short, informative pitches backed up with data (when warranted).

Your thoughts are appreciated. Tell me what you think in the comments.

Beware of the dog(ma)

You may have heard about the ongoing discussion in the public relations world regarding the usefulness of the press release. Many are saying the press release is dead. Some are not so quick to give it last rites. Then there are those that are dogmatic about it: "always send a press release" or "never send a press release."

Always and never are absolutes. To be dogmatic is to state a position unequivocally, to be absolute about it. The problem

with dogma in communications is that nothing should be absolute. In the press release issue above, I would say that it *depends*: What is the news, who is the target audience is and where do you want to communicate the news.

A definition of dogma

Here's what my Webster's dictionary says dogma is:

1. Something held as an established opinion, esp. an definitive authoritative tenet.
2. A doctrine or body of doctrines concerning faith or morals formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed by a church.

Notice what the two definitions have in common? The word authoritative, which is a synonym for official, conclusive, and **dictatorial**.

Examples of dogmatic communications thinking

Back when I started working in advertising, when I was a lowly media coordinator and my job was to place print media buys, I had a supervisor named Eileen. Eileen's dogmatic belief about newspaper advertising was that you *never place a print ad in Friday or Saturday newspapers*. Never. (This was in the 1990s and people did not have the Internet. They read actual physical newspapers.)

But, back in the '90s and even today, the entertainment/weekend section always came out on Friday. I thought most people would get the Friday paper just for the entertainment section, to see what was going on, what movies were playing, etc., so I argued with Eileen that Friday was actually a great day to be in the paper. It was an uphill battle. Eileen had been taught, and believed with absolute certainty, that Friday was, in her words, a dog day for ads.

Recently, I had an online discussion with an website design

firm that states it *never uses WordPress for its clients because it is “always” more vulnerable to hacking*. Instead, the firm always uses Adobe products. When presented with an alternative view (WordPress has open developing practices with thousands of plug-ins that increase functionality, for example) the design firm shot me down. It has a design dogma that disallows it from seeing the benefits of something alternative, or even using WordPress for some clients and Adobe for others, depending on needs.

In the blogging world, there seems to be a dogmatic belief that *you must blog at minimum once a week and more is better*. I have subscribed to this belief, but lately, I think it depends. I have seen blogs that I follow drop to blogging once a month with no ill effects (at least not visible....I don't know if it affects their SEO).

Dogma may be necessary in religion. Faith requires absolute conviction. Communications, however, must be flexible. Things are constantly changing. Look at social media. Five years ago it was all Facebook and Twitter. Today, we have Medium and Tumblr and Pinterest and Instagram and on and on.

An alternative approach: use guidelines instead of tenets

You cannot afford to be dogmatic in communications. Always and never will leave you boxed in and unable to react to situations. A better approach is to create requirements and guidelines for your communications that take into consideration the why, what, where, who and how of what you are communicating.

Do you have a communications dogma? What is it? Please share.