Releases: Impressing the Press

Here are seven steps to writing and distributing effective press releases.

By Gene Rose

Look at today's newspaper. How many stories do you think were the result of a press release? Probably lots. Many reporters use press releases as a starting point in writing the stories that appear in your local newspapers, magazines, radio and television news shows. A press release can be one of the most cost-effective ways to send a message to a large number of people.

WHEN TO WRITE A PRESS RELEASE

For a legislator, the primary purpose of a press release is to raise public awareness and influence decision making through the media. As a lawmaker, the nature of your position allows you, to an extent, to create news. Take advantage of this by developing a publicity plan. Don't miss an opportunity to announce a newsworthy event or action. Those notices will become part of your public record.

Examples include announcements of town meetings, recognition of achievements or resolutions, announcements of local projects, commemorative events, viewpoints on national holidays or your participation in NCSL's back-to-school event.

If you know that the governor is considering signing or vetoing legislation, you can issue a release with your reaction to the new law—or its failure. Be creative, but always thoughtful, about what the public would want or need to know. And remember, the media will soon tire of releases that are not considered "news," so give them only material that you honestly believe will be useful.

The luxury of planning a news release, however, is not always an option. Often a good reason to write a news release is as an immediate response to an event that occurred that morning or afternoon. Unplanned events that are newsworthy could be anything from a natural disaster in your district to the unexpected introduction or passage of legislation you strongly support or oppose.

HOW TO DO IT

A release is most effective when it results in a story printed or broadcast to the public. The competition for media attention is intense. Major electronic distributors of releases, US Newswire and PR Newswire, transmit hundreds of releases a day. Many releases, though, are never used by the media because reporters see little news value to the general public. Fortunately, your chances of a media outlet using or publishing your release can increase dramatically by following a simple set of guidelines on format, content and distribution.

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Use a standardized format.

Develop a standard format for every release that conforms to the Associated Press (AP) style. (Buy a copy of The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual.) Unless you are distributing your release electronically, use double-spacing since the extra space allows editors room to make notes. Standard margins are two inches from the top and 1.5 inches on each side and the bottom. Write "more" at the end of each continuing page and "end" or "###" at the end of your press release.

A press release is a highly structured form of communication. The content should include contact information on the top, a bold and catchy headline, a date and an interesting lead paragraph followed by the main body and a recap. Be sure to answer the five Ws— who, what, when, where and why.

GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR PRESS RELEASES

• Prepare a monthly or yearly publicity plan with planned press releases.
• Prepare a crisis communication plan for unplanned events.
• When writing your press release:
  1. Use a standardized format.
  2. Always include a current press contact name, phone number and e-mail.
  3. Sum up your key points in the first one or two sentences.
  4. Proofread your release for spelling, grammar and punctuation errors.
  5. Always double check that the date printed on the release is correct.
  6. Avoid excessive "hype."
  7. Use quotes from yourself, local constituents and issue specialists.
  8. Follow up with a phone call to key reporters to ensure that they received your release and inquire if they have any questions.
STEM-CELL RESEARCH GROWS IN THE STATES

- States financing stem-cell research
- States considering legislation to finance stem-cell research
- States considering legislation to support stem-cell research, but without specific plans to use state funds.

A WIDE RANGE OF POLICIES

State approaches to stem cell research policy range from laws in California and New Jersey, which encourage embryonic stem cell research, including on cloned embryos, to South Dakota's law, which strictly forbids research on embryos regardless of the source. Many states restrict research on aborted fetuses or embryos unless permission is granted from the mother. Almost half of the states also restrict the sale of fetuses or embryos. Louisiana is the only state that specifically prohibits research on in vitro fertilization embryos; Illinois and Michigan prohibit research on live embryos. Nebraska prohibits the use of state funds for embryonic stem cell research.

A significant portion of state legislative activity related to stem cell research has focused on the creation of cloned embryos for research. Arkansas, Iowa, Michigan, North Dakota and South Dakota prohibit the cloning of embryos for the purpose of research or reproduction. Virginia's human cloning law also bans cloning for reproduction and may ban cloning for research, but it is unclear because of some ambiguity in the statute. California, New Jersey and Rhode Island also have human cloning laws that prohibit cloning for the purpose of initiating a pregnancy, but allow it for research. Missouri also forbids the use of state funds for reproductive cloning but not for cloning for the purpose of stem cell research. Human cloning as well as state and private sector funding of embryonic stem cell research is unrestricted in all jurisdictions with no legislation in this area.

—Alissa Johnson, NCSL

ADVOCATES PLAN BALLOT MEASURES

Although most of the recent proposals have come from state legislators, activists in some states are hoping to mimic the California ballot initiative.

A private advocacy group known as Cures for Florida is beginning to campaign for a measure that would provide $1 billion to $2 billion for embryonic-stem-cell research in the state, said Art Brownstein, who founded the group. "The success of what happened in California on Prop. 71 pushed us to do it," he said. "I'd like to get the same type of initiative."

Organizers of the measure must collect 611,226 signatures on petitions before it can be placed on the general-election ballot, according to the Florida secretary of state's office.

CRIMINALIZING CLONING

Not all state lawmakers are eager to embrace or finance stem-cell research. Several states are set to hear bills that would criminalize research cloning, in which human embryos are cloned to make stem cells for experimental treatments. William B. Neaves, president of the Stowers Institute for Medical Research, in Kansas City, Mo., said a proposed ban on research cloning "would do grave harm to research institutions across the state." He said if the bill passed, the institute would halt plans for a 600,000-square-foot facility in Missouri.

Although advocates are quick to tout plans to provide state resources, some researchers like Charles Jennings, executive director of Harvard's Stem Cell Institute, say it would help if the NIH were more closely involved in setting policy on stem-cell research.

"It's much more preferable to do this at the national level so you donate the money to the best researchers," he said.

The concern isn't only that grants will be based on where a researcher works in the country, but also that each state may have its own policy on the research. That could result in a patchwork quilt of different laws.

"Probably in reality the differences will be minute," said Kevin Wilson, director of public policy at the American Society for Cell Biology, "but in science that relies so heavily on collaboration and peer review, to have the same things done different ways in different states certainly won't be helpful."