

# Tips and Guidelines for Effective Press and Public Relations

CHRISTIAN KRAXNER

---

## Contents

---

- Effective public relations for public institutions:  
the public relations practitioner -  
What makes the practitioner credible and successful?

---

- How to write press releases
  - How to write a text which is intended to be passed  
on to the press for information and processing purposes
  - Writing comprehensible press releases –  
Schulz von Thun's criteria of comprehensibility
- 

- Objectives:  
What should your published messages achieve?

---

- Checklist:  
What makes an item of information or event  
interesting for a journalist?

---

- Strategic press and media communication

---

- Survey:  
Vehicles of public relations

---

- Public Relations:  
Practical example for the planning  
and implementation of a project

---

# Effective public relations for public institutions: the public relations practitioner

---

## •) **What makes the practitioner credible and successful?**

### *Important factors that can be influenced by the practitioner*

- ✓ Expertise, competence, adequate up-to-date information
- ✓ Good communicator/effective presentation in public: perfect verbal skills, attractive appearance
- ✓ Long-term planning and thematic emphasis, clearly defined target groups
- ✓ Consider the media's requirements and only provide useful information
- ✓ Credibility and authenticity

### *Factors which can hardly be influenced by the practitioner*

- ✗ The ideological or economic character of the media industry
- ✗ Available financial resources
- ✗ The nature of the political system and the actions of higher authorities
- ✗ The recipients' nature and desires

# How to write press releases

---

- ) **How a text which is intended to be sent to the press for information and processing purposes should be written. 17 recommendations, based on the ideas of Franz M. Bogner.<sup>1</sup>**
1. *The press release should be on an interesting and current topic.* The content, style and choice of words should be adapted to the target audience.
  2. *Leave out loan words or technical terms.* If this is not possible, explain them in footnotes.
  3. *Keep it short and simple.* Press releases should not be longer than two pages, ideally one or one-and-a half. On average, sentences should not contain more than 15 words. Long paragraphs and complicated word combinations increase the chances that your press release will end up in the wastepaper bin.
  4. *Write press releases as if you were writing about somebody else.* Avoid using „we” or „I”, write instead for example, „The Diplomatic Academy organizes...!” Use „we” or „I” only in direct quotations. For example: In view of the 500 attendants, the ambassador said, „We are delighted about the large number of guests attending our summer reception.”
  5. *Avoid superlatives.* Press releases should be written in a matter-of-fact and objective style. Try to adopt the viewpoint of a neutral observer. Use direct quotations for controversial messages or emotional statements, or else use alternative wordings such as „criticized XY” or „said XY”. Intended and controlled emotional statements are likely to be used – for example as headings „XY criticizes Z” – by the press.
  6. *Some journalists work under extreme pressure. It sometimes suits them to get press releases which are already written like proper „stories”.* They can use them as they stand. Freelance writers who are paid by line particularly appreciate this. Yet, you have to be careful. Exclusive information for top journalists should not be pre-prepared „stories”. „Big” stories are still written by journalists themselves – despite the daily stress.
  7. *Good press releases demand precision.* The information given should be accurate – especially numbers.
  8. *Direct quotations* are used to make a text more readable and vivid.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bogner, Franz M., *Das neue PR-Denken*. Wien Überreuter, 1999.

9. *The following guidelines for the layout of press releases<sup>2</sup> has proved to be helpful:* The first page should show the logo or a simple identification heading of the sender (templates are generally used anyway). All press releases should be double spaced. A right-hand as well as a left-hand margin is needed as journalists tend to make their own notes there. Only type on one side of the paper.
10. *When a long detailed release is justified, it is helpful to editors to precede the main story with a short summary of the main points.* Put the summary at the top of the release.
11. *Press releases should contain exact dates.* „Yesterday – today – tomorrow” are not sufficient.
12. *Avoid phrases that put pressure on the publication of the information* such as, „We would be most grateful if you published...Publication absolutely necessary..., As we advertise regularly in your medium, we would be most grateful if you published the attached release.”
13. *Embargoes („Not for publication before...”) are pointless.* Press releases are for immediate use.
14. *Every editor is confronted with a great number of news releases and info sheets each and every day. The graphic design of your press release can therefore vary from the norm,* e.g. print your press release on coloured quality paper. Yet, the graphic design has to correspond with the identity of the sender. Nice or useful gifts can also be helpful. Nonetheless, authenticity is a must and creativity should be appropriate and authentic.
15. *Non-electronic press releases should be in A4.*
16. *The layout of a press release determines its quality:*

Think about all the information you want to transmit with your press release and then divide the information into different topics:

In connection with the anniversary of a public institution the different topics could be:

  - The fact that there will be a new manager
  - Improved budgetary results
  - Decision on a new campaign
  - Removal to a new venue
  - New benefits and better service.

---

<sup>2</sup> Point 9 refers primarily to non-electronic releases

Then decide which information is the most important for the public and at the same time interesting for journalists.

The most important information should be put at the top of the release. What is „important“ should be judged from the journalist’s or reader’s point of view. Less important information should be put in the middle or at the end of the text. This is for two reasons:

1. Information at the top will be taken in most rapidly (primacy-effect). This advantage should be reserved for the main information.
2. Some journalists cut from the bottom up. What’s last will most probably be cut.

The five Ws (Who? What? When? Where? Why?) and the H (How?) should be answered in the opening paragraph.

Further topics should be dealt with in the second and third paragraph. Detailed information can be given in the last paragraph.

17. *Each press release requires a heading and one or more subheadings.*  
The headings should be short and capture the reader’s attention.

**18. Additional hints:**

- Attached pictures make it more likely that a text will be published.
- Press releases should be addressed personally. Ideally to a member of the permanent staff since they delegate jobs to freelance writers.
- The internet comes in handy for press releases. Journalists can simply copy and paste the text. Yet, you should always phone the journalist first to check whether they are really interested in your topic. Sending e-mails at random will probably lead to their deletion.

---

## •) Writing comprehensible press releases

According to the communication psychologist Friedeman Schultz von Thun<sup>3</sup> a text is comprehensible if it has four characteristic features:

- Simplicity
- Structure
- Conciseness
- Additional stimulation

---

<sup>3</sup> Schulz von Thun, Friedeman. *Miteinander reden. Allgemeine Psychologie der Kommunikation.* Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1992.

*What does this mean?*

**a) A text is simple if**

- It mostly consists of simple sentences.
- Common, everyday words are used and technical terms – if necessary – are explained.
- The content is clear, vivid and concrete.
- It can be understood by the majority of readers.

**b) A text is well-structured if**

- There is a central theme from beginning to end.
- The content and thoughts are logically linked („inherent consistency”), notional connections and cross connections are pointed out.
- It has a well-designed layout: paragraphs, structured comments and headings, using bold type for emphasis.

**c) A text is concise if**

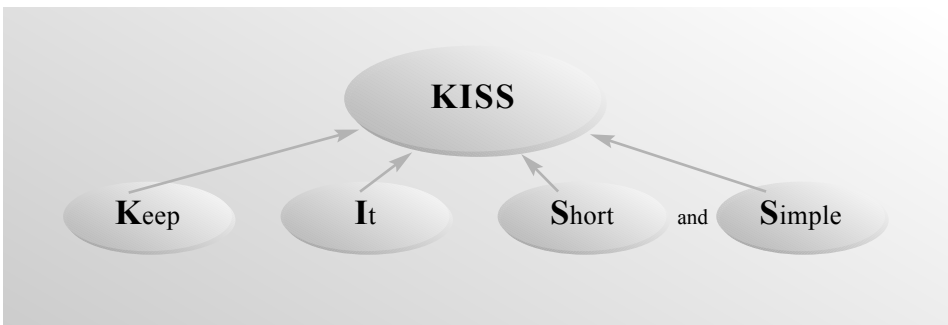
- It sums up the most important information in a few words and it is written to the point.

**d) A text contains additional stimulation if**

- A pictorial and vivid language is used: examples, similes, anecdotes and idioms are used as well as direct speech, quotations and interrogative sentences.

**Notabene:** For traditional press releases the above criteria can only be regarded as suggestions. For the writing of traditional press releases see „How to write press releases.”

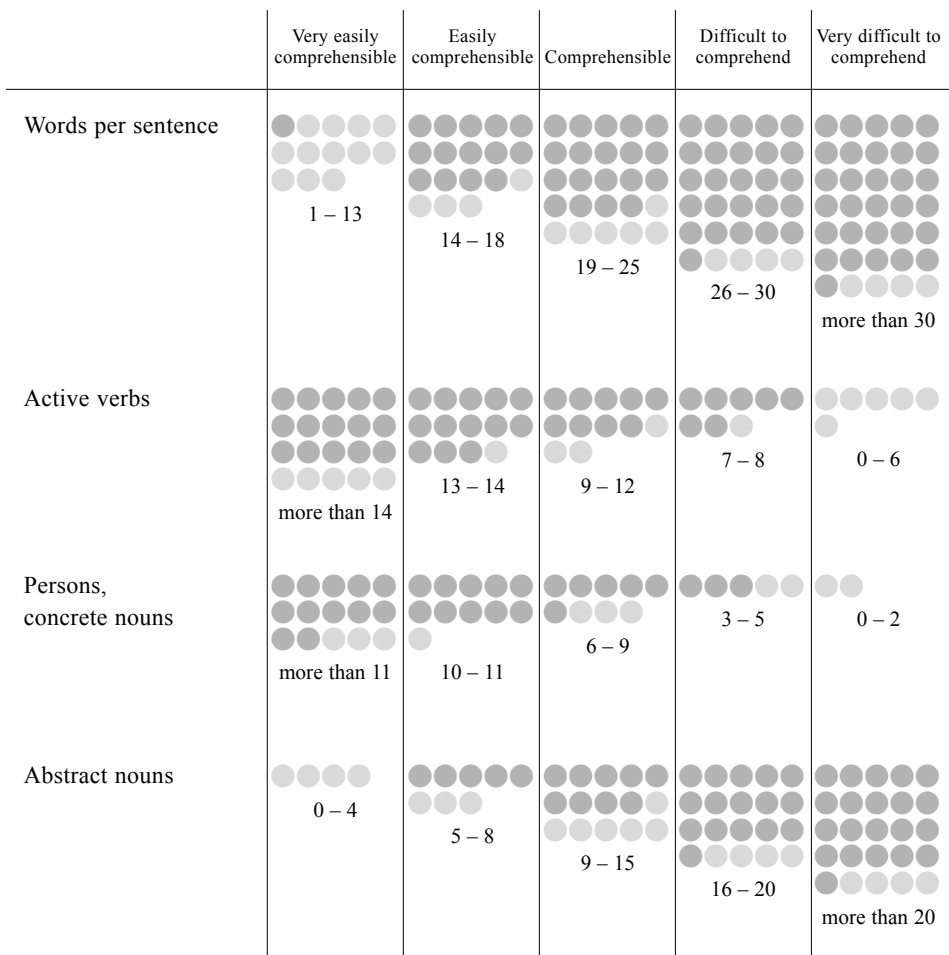
*A guideline for writing press releases is:*



## ● The simplicity or complexity of a text is quantifiable

Whether a text is simple or complicated can also be shown in numbers. The more words or abstract terms are used and the longer it is, the less readable it is. In his book „Rhetorik für Führungskräfte“, the German management trainer Karl Blum<sup>4</sup> offers a chart on the comprehensibility of a text. If you write for a bigger audience, this chart could be helpful.

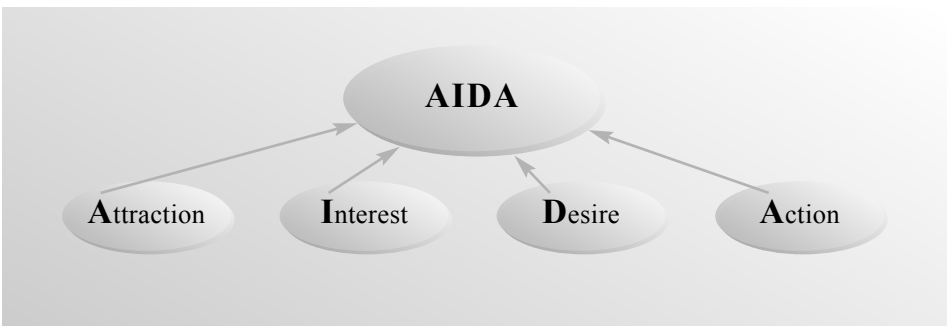
### Comprehensibility of a text



<sup>4</sup> Blum, Karl. *Rhetorik für Führungskräfte. Techniken, Konzepte und Musterreden*. Landsberg am Lech: Verlag Moderne Industrie, 1993.

## Objectives: what should your published messages achieve?

- **The objectives of messages<sup>5</sup> transmitted by journalists are similar to those of paid advertisements. They are meant to provoke the following:**
  - **Attraction:** The message has to be noticed.
  - **Interest:** The content should arouse interest in the reader and, consequently, be fully absorbed.
  - **Desire:** A specific desire should be aroused in the recipient. Product management is designed to persuade the recipient to buy a certain product. Public relations of public institutions, however, emphasise the image or implementation of the organisation's programme. A news release is intended, for example, to maintain confidence in the organisation and to convince the public that the activities of the organisation are for the public welfare.
  - **Action:** Naturally, news transmitted by the media should activate „customers.“ This, however, cannot be achieved by one single article. Yet, a series of positive press coverage over a longer period of time can arouse interest and a positive atmosphere, which can decisively influence people's actions.



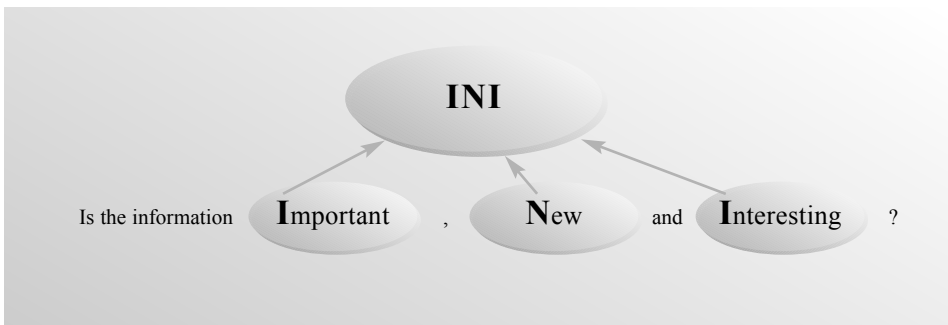


# Checklist

## •) **What makes an item of information or event interesting for a journalist?**

- Something absolutely new, happening for the first time, receiving its premiere
- Something well-established, known is given a new meaning, plays a new role or has a new status.
- Something concerning bigger groups of the population.
- Something with dramatic effects – positive or negative – on individual people.
- Something causing lasting harm to people.
- Something linked to strong conflicts or controversies.
- Something breaking a taboo.
- Something unique.
- Something of a dramatic nature, touching basic human feelings.
- Something concerning people in special circumstances (e.g. orphans, seriously ill people,...)
- Something connected to important issues discussed by the public.
- Something providing an answer to a hitherto unsolved problem.
- Something supporting the topics, tendencies and ideologies of the medium.

*You should always check whether your message meets the following criteria:*



## Strategic press and media communication

---

- a) Your own activities are the starting point for your communication:  
Which of our monthly or annual activities could be of interest to journalists?**

### *Schedule*

What activities are there? What events are we organizing and when? (annual conferences, discussions, presentations, hearings, receptions, festivities, campaigns, social activities etc.)

***Schedule your main activities at the beginning of each year.***

*Then ask yourself what could be of interest for the media?*

What makes your events attractive for media coverage? What is their news value? Can you offer exclusive stories? Do certain activities meet the main editorial emphasis. Are there any events that are of personal interest for a journalist?

Another approach would be: In which way do you have to present your activities so that they media coverage?

***If you want to gain media coverage, you always have to ask yourself one question: What is useful for journalists?***

## **b) Media contacts**

---

*Find the right media for you*

Scan the media landscape for those relevant for you. Which media are important for you? Where can you earn good media coverage? In which media should you have your information published in order to attract the most attention? In which media would you like to have your articles published? Are there any new media relevant for you?

***Maintaining an up-to-date press list is vital.***

*Keep a record of your personal contacts*

Personal media contacts are vital. Good personal contacts make it easier for you to have your information published. It is quite common in bigger public institutions that not only the management or the press officer have good media contacts.

Therefore, it is helpful to keep a record of all personal contacts.

Always cultivate your personal media contacts. Provide your contacts with useful information on a regular basis.

## c) Communicating with journalists

- 1. People working in the media are pressed for time. This is all the more true for journalists who have to come up with a story each and every day. Coming up with the latest news implies that they have to work to deadlines. Being a journalist also means being stressed out most of the time.**

### **What can you do?**

- If a journalist asks you for information, send it quickly.
- If you communicate directly with a journalist, try to be short, clear and concise. Before making contact with a journalist, be aware yourself what your main objectives are.
- Always bear in mind that journalists work under extreme pressure. If they sound disinterested or disinclined it may also be self-defence. The initial lack of enthusiasm does not necessarily mean that your information will be discarded.

- 2. Journalists who have to come up with a story each and every day need some input from outside.**

- Once a reputation has been won for providing interesting information and organising interesting events, the first step to successful public relations has been taken. Providing relevant information once may help you to attract the journalist's attention in the future.

- 3. Media representatives are ordinary human beings with political, social and cultural identities: They prefer certain topics and have special desires and interests. If you want to have your story published, try to find a connection between these interests and desires and your objectives.**

### **What can you do?**

- Try to find out what the personal interests of the journalist are. Which topic(s) does he frequently write on? If you know colleagues of this particular journalist, try to obtain more information on them.
- Provide the journalist with information on their favourite topic. Plan your activities in accordance with their favourite topics.

- 4. Journalists do not have time to study in-depth all the topics they are writing about. Yet, the information they print has to be true. Therefore, they have to rely on experts who can provide them with a quick survey or with the most important information.**

### **What can you do?**

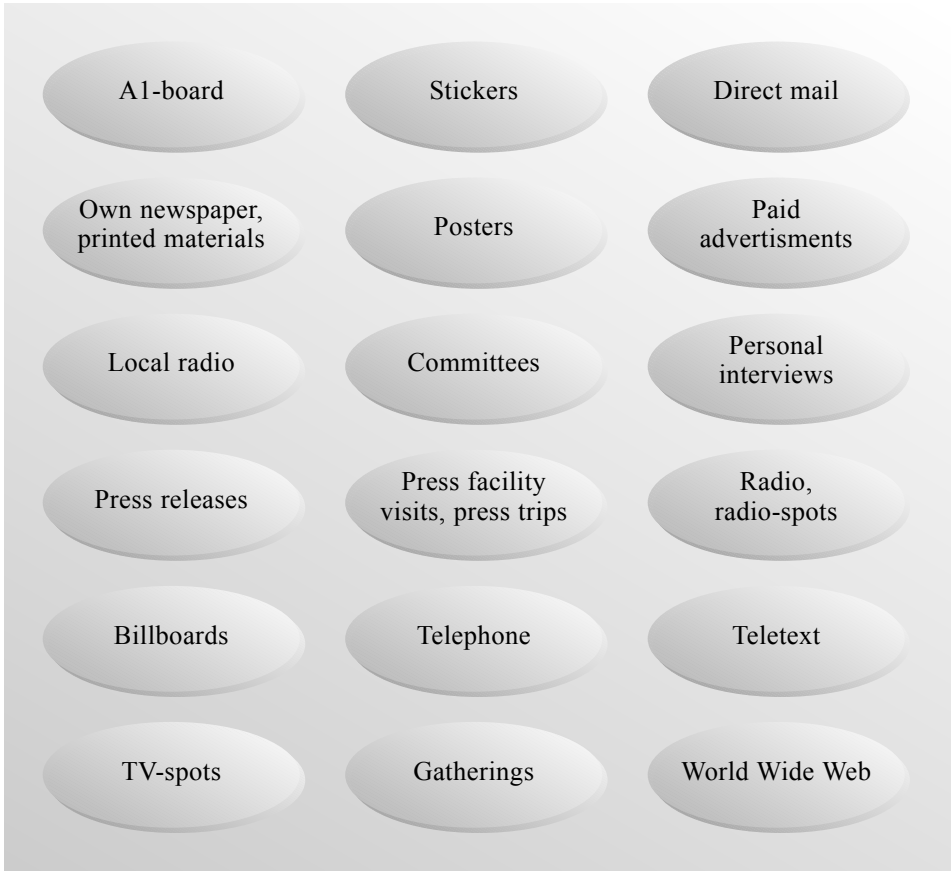
- Become an expert in an area and provide yourself with a solid and up-to-date expertise. If you have achieved that, communicate your knowledge to the public (for example: write letters to the editor, contribute articles to a newspaper, participate in discussions or initiatives, file applications...).
- If you have the chance, provide journalists with the required information, even if they do not have an immediate interest in a story about you or your organisation.

---

## *d)* **Hints for general conversations with journalists**

- Listen actively.
- Be concise and clear.
- If necessary, explain a difficult topic to them. Provide them with a plausible explanation.
- Don't overdo it. Only give as much information as can be taken in.
- Explain keywords.
- Don't be condescending, don't show off.
- Show emotions, yet do not lose control.
- If necessary, contradict.

## Survey: Vehicles of public relations



# Public relations: Practical example

*Practical example for the planning and realisation of a project*

---

## 1) First step – Define your objectives

*What do you want to do?*

- **Inform:** About ideas, intentions, legal reforms, our work area, services and representatives...
- **Promote:** Present our programmes/services, specify the target audience of our organisation, Gain support for concrete projects by working together with the public...
- **Create an image:** Gain confidence and approval for the organisation, win acceptance, influence public opinion in favour of our organisation...
- **Problem solving:** Counteract negative public opinion in times of scandals, conflicts and crises..

*What are the objectives?*

**Examples:**

**Information objective:** „75% of students in Vienna know about the courses the Diplomatic Academy offers!”

**Promotion objective:** „200 journalists writing on foreign affairs have bought our publications.”

**Image objective:** „In comparison to other educational institutions, our organisation is more efficient and practical.”

**Problem solving objective:** „We can convey the impression that we manage problems professionally and use them to implement improvements.”

---

## 2) Second step – Check your resources

*Which resources do you have at your disposal?*

- ✓ **Manpower resources:** How many members of your staff can work on an extended PR project?
- ✓ **Financial resources:** How much money do you have?

- ✓ **Structural and technical resources:** partner agencies, materials, website, info-boxes, A1-boards, banners etc...
- ✓ **Partners:** Which media/journalists are interested in our issues? Which groups and publics can we win? Which opinion leaders stand behind us?

---

### 3) **Third step - Choose your measures and activities, and organise them**

*What measures can you take to achieve your objectives?*

- **Direct press relations:** press releases, press conferences, exclusive interviews, press receptions, outside contributions, interviews, letters to the editor, press facility visits.
- **General public relations efforts:** give-aways, ads, TV or radio-spots, info-boards, festivities, exhibitions and previews, other cultural activities, charities, own newspapers, advertising gifts, public surveys, public forums etc.

*What measures do you have to take to put your plans into action?*

- **What preparations are necessary to implement your measures:**  
*Example press conference:* define the topics, prepare papers, book the venue, choose the right media and invite them, remind journalists, order catering etc...
- **To do on-site:**  
*Example of press conference:* set up venue, distribute press packs, welcome journalists, register journalists, open the press conference, introductory words, distribute questions...

---

### 4) **Fourth step – Schedule activities, distribute work among the staff**

*What does your schedule look like? Who does what?*

- **Spin-off**
- **Various steps of the implementation**
- **Complete implementation**
  
- **Who does what, when and where?**
- Which step takes place when?
- What preparations are necessary for each step and when do they have to be completed in order to secure implementation?

## 5) Fifth step – Implement the plan and control the implementation

*Act!*

→ **Do, act, implement!**

*How can you control the implementation and the course of the project?*

- **Control:** Who supervises the implementation and is entitled to adjust the course in the process? When do you control? (Interim report, final report)?
- **Main control:** When can you tell whether you achieved your goals?

The Author



*Mag. Christian Kraxner*

Born 1968. Studied political science and history at the University of Vienna; accredited trainer for rhetoric communication and moderation-techniques; works as coach, journalist (publicist) and project manager; since 1998 lecturer for the „Special Course” at the Diplomatic Academy.