

Why Your Press Release Was DOA

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This is a guest post by Jennifer Heigl, editor of Daily Blender, an online publication focusing on food, drink, travel, and culture.

Public relations and publications. It's a give and take relationship. We look to you, oh great PR professionals, for timely information, last-minute happenings and relevant fodder for upcoming posts and features. You, in turn, hope that we get excited by your press releases, funneling them into our editorial calendars, scheduling interviews and showcasing your clients.

So where does the breakdown happen? You send out hundreds of press releases a week, we receive hundreds of press releases a week. Will yours float to the top or be tossed away into the round file?

Here are four reasons your press release was dead on arrival:

1. Your Subject Line

Between emails and meetings and phone calls and projects coming in and out of my office, I only have a few minutes of brain energy to evaluate my inbox throughout the day. When I glance at the list of unopened emails, it's easy to pick out which ones to read and which to delete.

Among those that are generally deleted just based on the subject line:

- Items that are obviously not relevant. For example, anything that references a holiday (fake or otherwise) or a recipe are automatically deleted because neither fit my content. I'll talk more about this below. And I'll let you in on a little secret—press releases that are based on fake holidays (National Chocolate Ice Cream Day, National Margarita Week) scream 'lazy.' You know it and we know it. If you're not putting in any effort, why should we?
- Subjects longer than four or five words. You're sending a press release with (hopefully) all the important details included, so I don't need a full summary in the subject line.

Those that survive the cut command my attention with a clear description of what's included in the email.

2. Misspellings and Grammar

I'm still surprised when a press release makes it to my desk with a misspelling. Even if you're utilizing a distribution program like MailChimp or Constant Contact to send out your press releases, type them up in a word processor, like Microsoft Word, beforehand. Those handy automatic spelling and grammar checkers will keep you from embarrassing yourself on a 1000-client blast.

Another tip if you're using a service: be sure to update both the HTML and plain text version of your press release.

3. Irrelevant Pitches

I cover the food and beverage industry for my publication, but that doesn't mean recipes. Over the last five years, I've received thousands of press releases with recipes—even though it states on our website that we don't publish them. Therefore pitches based on recipes are deleted almost immediately.

As you're compiling your mailing list, or if you're just spending the afternoon sending one-offs to build rapport with journalists, take a few minutes to review the publication. Target your pitches and you'll have a higher success rate. Moreso, a well-crafted press release builds trust with a publication—it shows that you're paying attention and that you're available to help that editor or journalist develop a piece showcasing your client.

4. A Lack of Clear, Concise, Correct Information

Throughout my writing courses in high school and college, I was always taught to include all the relevant information within the first few lines of a business communications piece. That means in the first few sentences of each press release, I should know the 5 W's (who, what, when, where and why). From that point, we can elaborate with specifics, a few quotes here and there and wrap it up with a summary—but initially, as an editor and a journalist, I'm evaluating the relevance of the pitch from that first glance. If I have to search a 500-word email for time, date, place and why it's important, you've lost me. If it's not in the first line, make sure it's easy to find!

Additionally, it's embarrassing for us all when you have to send out a second press release correcting yourself—or including critical information you left out of the first release. Re-read before hitting that send button, and then re-read again. Taking a few minutes to verify information is critical to the success of every communication.

Bottom line? Take your time. Slow down. Do your homework on everyone (and I mean EVERYONE) on your contact list. Help us help you and we'll both succeed.

For more advice from journalists, download our free PR Resource Kit, which includes insight from staff at The New York Times, USA Today, and more.

Jennifer Heigl is a writer, photographer, and entrepreneur originally from the Midwest. She is the founder and editor of DailyBlender.com, a niche online publication launched in 2009. In addition to Daily Blender, she has contributed to Delta Sky, Northwest Palate, and The Writer magazines, as well as online at BBC.com Travel, Accidental Hedonist, Societe Perrier, BootsNAll, Focus Organic, Super Chef, Must Have Menus, and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer reader blogs. Heigl also is the principal of Jen Heigl Creative, providing creative services, marketing solutions, and professional insight for start-ups, special events, and beyond.

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