

P

ractical Marketing Skills – Writing a Press Release

By Julia Zivanovic, Marketing
Consultant

Why Do It?

Although you feel it will be rare for you to need to write a press release, the practicalities of knowing how to write one can assist in a broad range of circumstances. This could include writing an article for an external newsletter, or producing information for inclusion at an external conference or meeting. Use of the media is not just for large firms. It is a great marketing tool for all lawyers, including sole practitioners.

Lawyers tend to shy away from the media in relation to clients' matters, tending to see the use of the media as somehow alien to the legal profession. In this ever-increasingly competitive world, it is essential for lawyers to ensure their reputation and expertise is acknowledged by the public. A good way to do this is to utilise the media, not only during a court case, but also in more general matters that may be topical. As most lawyers believe in "word of mouth" advertising, then the opportunity for free advertising in the media, reaching a large number of people, ought not to be missed. Naturally, you should discuss the press release with your client.

Essential Information

The key rules in the writing of a press release are to keep it short, to ensure that it is free of typographical errors, and to ensure that it is well laid out. Keeping it factual should go without saying.

With the pressure of producing a good press release, it is easy to overlook the basic information which should be included. Ensure that you include the following:

- your firm's details (logo, name, address, phone and fax numbers, at the top of the page);
- a clear statement identifying whether the release has been issued by the firm or on behalf of a client;
- contact numbers at the bottom of the last page of the release (including a home number, if necessary);
- if an embargo applies, a prominent

statement, under the "press/media release" heading of when the document may be released (e.g. "Not to be released until Monday 13 October, 1997");

- a clear indication at the bottom of each page of the release if there is more to follow. (e.g. put "/more" or "/cont" at the bottom of each page other than the last.

Layout Issues

As for text layout, you will need to use double line spacing in order to allow journalists to edit your wording. If you need to put some background information into the release, then put it in single line spacing. Generous page margins assist newspapers with editing and typesetting instructions. Paragraph indentation should follow newspaper style, where there is no indent for the first paragraph, with all following paragraphs indented.

If you have ever seen a press release, you will have noted that the word "ENDS" often appears on the final page. This is unnecessary if you have included contact details on the final page.

Getting to Grips with Writing the Release

It is essential to keep it brief. The key points to focus on when writing a release are:

- What
- Why
- When
- How
- Where
- Who.

Try to get the gist of the story in the first two sentences. It is a mistake to lead up to it slowly. It is important to get the important points into the first two paragraphs because journalists will often cut out the remaining paragraphs if they are pressed for time or space.

Keep to the facts and avoid promotional adjectives and subjective judg-



ments. If you can, include a quotation from an expert or major player. Here, you can include opinion, as long as it is not trivial. Remember, it is better to send one useful sentence than half a dozen that are not. Most of all, remember that a press release is a piece of information, not a feature article.

Checking, Checking and More Checking

- Check all spelling and grammar and have someone else read the release through. It often takes another person to spot the simple errors tiredness and over-familiarity with the text can cause.
- It is critical to ensure all information is accurate and that all names are spelled correctly.
- Ensure that a senior person in the firm and/or the client checks it over prior to release.

Photographs

Including a photograph can often enhance the press release, and will sometimes make the difference to whether or not the release will be used.

It is critical to "caption" the photograph so that it can be easily identified as belonging to your press release. You can mount the photograph on a sheet and write the caption underneath the picture. Alternatively, you can tape a caption to the back of the photograph using a sticky label.

Cardinal sins include writing directly onto the photograph, using paper clips

continued on page 9

Public Education to Public Prosecution

– Jenny Blokland

Jenny Blokland is well-known to Northern Territory practitioners and to the public at large most recently in her role as Dean of the Faculty of Law at the NTU. This will change as Jenny moves to take up an appointment with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions in the near future.

Jenny has been Dean at the Faculty of Law since 1996 and prior to that was Associate Dean (Research and Postgraduate Studies). Her career in the Northern Territory has incorporated a wide range of activities both as a legal professional and in a variety of community positions.

Following completion of articles in the Department of Law, Jenny practised as a solicitor at NAALAS, primarily in criminal and family law. This was followed by a period at the Australian Legal Aid Office (Commonwealth), practising in these areas and including some work in civil litigation.

In addition to these professional activities, Jenny is known for her dedicated contribution to both the legal and wider communities through membership of a number of committees, in-



Jenny Blokland

cluding the Red Cross International Humanitarian Law Committee (NT), the NT Criminal Code Review Committee, the NT Legal Aid Review Committee, the Central Land Council on Community Living Areas Tribunal and many others.

She served a three year period as President of the Criminal Lawyers Association of the NT and has been a member of the Law Society, the Australian and NT Bar Associations and LAWASIA.

Jenny has been active in the human rights arena as evidenced in her involvement in conferences on women's law, rights of indigenous peoples to the sea and most recently on the "Retreating from the Refugee Convention" conference.

As lecturer at the NTU, Jenny has taught evidence, public international law and criminal law. She was instrumental in seeing the first team from the NTU enter the Jessup International Law Moot Competition and was appointed a national judge for the 1992 national grand final of the Jessup Moot.

In addition to playing a major role in the curriculum development of the NTU's Faculty of Law degrees, Jenny has often been called upon to be guest lecturer in other departments, both university and government on a variety of topics and has assisted the Law Society with its CLE program.

There can be no doubt that her presence will be sorely missed at the Faculty of Law by colleagues and students alike. The Law Society wishes Jenny every success in her new position at the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Practical Marketing Skills – Writing a Press Release

continued from page 8

to attach the photograph to the press release, and not using cardboard or hardbacked envelopes to protect the photograph from the trials of the postal system.

Circulating Your Press Release

It is critical in the distribution process to send the release to the correct people in the media. Ensure that your contact list is up to date, and that address labels are correctly addressed. Failure

to do so may result in the entire exercise being a waste of time, money and effort.

If the release is urgent and the post will not be able to deliver in time, then send the release by facsimile. There is no point on faxing to quarterly or monthly magazines when they are near to publication deadline. Such publications are often written months in advance. It is also possible to distribute by e-mail. However, it is worth noting that documents attached to e-mail sometimes experience compatibility problems once they reach the recipient, who may not be

able to read them.

Once you have distributed the release, do not feel shy about following up with a phone call to check if it has been received.

Most of all, do not give up if your first few releases are not used. It takes practice to make a press release work. Take heart that factors outside your control, such as what other stories are being run on that day, can affect whether your release is used or not.