Press release syndication

By Marisa Louw

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It's a grossly misunderstood phrase, 'syndication'.

Some time ago, I was involved in a discussion about what it means to ‘syndicate a press release’. The individual I had the discussion with was of the opinion that syndication of a press release is the process of sending out the press release in mass and following up with the journalists to secure that said news is published in as many media titles as possible. I did not agree then, and I do not agree now.

Upon consulting the English Oxford dictionary, it became clear that the noun ‘syndicate’ is defined as “an association or agency supplying materials simultaneously to a number of newspapers”; as a verb it means “to publish or broadcast (material) simultaneously in a number of newspapers, television stations, etc.”. These definitions did not answer my question about what it means to syndicate a press release to my satisfaction and I decided to consult with professor Google who in turn referred me to Wikipedia. According to the latter, there are two main distribution models for a press release: the traditional model, where an article is sent to a newswire such as the South African Press Association (SAPA) who then makes the story available to subscribing news organisations; and the self-published press release, which is sent directly to the news organisations or to free and paid distribution services. During my research on the topic, I found another word that is often misinterpreted: dissemination. The English Oxford dictionary defines it as “to spread (something, especially information) wide”. I like to refer to it as the spray-and-pray approach of press release distribution.

After all the reading I have come to the conclusion that many PR professionals are confused about what it really means to write and distribute a press release. I think it is important to first and foremost establish what constitutes a newsworthy press release. This subject in itself is another article on its own so I will try and keep it short. One of the most important parts of your job as a PR professional is to make sure your client does not just send out a press release for the sake of sending it out. If you are announcing that a new assistant sales manager has joined your client’s team it is not considered as newsworthy as when a new CEO is appointed, and you need to make sure that your client understands this. The former announcement, in my opinion, should be used as a means to keep your client top of mind with a small group of targeted media titles that might or might not publish a one-liner if they need to fill space in their publication. The latter announcement, if pitched as an exclusive to one of the main titles, could easily generate the volumes of exposure your client is expecting with other media titles wanting a part of the story once the news is out there.

Once you are certain your client’s press release is not another of those ‘so what’ stories it is your responsibility to make sure the right person reads the article. A small but very targeted media list will almost always yield better return on investment for your client than a database of thousands of journalists and reporters across all the beats you can think of. When I speak to journalists they mention that one of their pet hates is when all five reporters in the newsroom receive the same press release. This is where I believe the relations part of public relations comes to play. By doing the following you can be sure that your press release will be seen and that it will be published if it is one of the top relevant stories that landed that the reporter’s inbox on the day:

Making journalists happy

• Always address the journalist by name. He or she is not ‘The Newsdesk’. Use mail merge to customise each email and for the love of God, please don’t send out a press release by CC’ing or BCC’ing the reporters!
• Avoid using PR buzzwords like ‘reaching out, awesome, super-excited’; the list goes on.
• Type your release in the body of the email. Avoid attachments, especially PDFs. This makes it easy for the reporter to copy and paste, and edit your press release when he or she prepares it for being published.
• Make sure your client’s spokesperson is available on the day you send out the press release. There is nothing that irritates a reporter more than wanting to speak to the spokesperson on the day he or she received a press release only to find out the spokesperson is on a flight between Johannesburg and New York and will only be available in 24 hours.

These are just some of the things you should and should not do when you send out a press release. If you get the content right and you send it to the correct reporter, there will be no need to follow up whether a press release had been received. That means that if your news monitoring agency does not pick up the story in any media titles, it was deemed not relevant by the reporter at the time. Remember, a media organisation is there to provide the most relevant stories of the day to its readers. This, however, does not mean that you should re-send the same press release four weeks in a row with the hope that it will be relevant in any of the given weeks. Nor that you should bully or bribe the reporter into publishing your story.

The press release part of what we do is simple. We compile newsworthy content that is delivered to a reporter in one of many formats like a written article, a sound bite, a video clip, and photographs. There are also various means of delivering said content: email, press conferences, tweets, the telephone pitch, and more. So should we be using the phrase ‘syndicate a press release’, or even ‘disseminate a press release’ as part of our PR vocabulary? My opinion is: No, we should not.

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