**Getting the Word Out:***an intro to press kits*

by Heather Allen
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Do you have a product? Are there people who want to buy your product? Are you willing to sell your product? If the answer to these questions is yes, then you are a small business. Now start thinking like a small business owner. How is anyone going to know what you have to offer them if you don’t tell them? How do you tell them with the minimal amount of cash? Public Relations.

I spent seven years in the performing arts public relations world - three years with a major university symphony and four years as the Director of Marketing and Public Relations for a state symphony. In those seven years I was never given a budget that would allow me to pay for the kind of advertising we needed. As in most cases, poverty stimulates creativity, so let’s get those creative juices flowing and think outside the box: develop your own press kit.

Ah, the mysterious press kit! No performer should be without one or thirty on hand. Your press kit is essentially the same kit you send for auditions and agents, but with a few tailored extras thrown in.

**Developing Your Press Kit**

Media sources expect your documentation to be interesting, informative, and accurate. If you fall short in any of these three areas you may very well be building the wrong image and ruining your chances of good and profitable public attention. So when you are in the process of writing your material, keep these three words in the back of your mind:

* Informative
* Interesting
* Accurate

The press expects you to do their work for them. Most of the features writers I know would rather give up cigarettes than do research. The less they have to do to publicize your articles, the better your chances of being published. You must provide everything they need in your press kit. Prepare the supplemental materials for your press kit as you would a junior high class presentation.

**The Tip Sheet or Notice of Event**

The tip sheet is used to notify assignment editors a few weeks in advance about what is taking place, when, where and who to contact for more information. It should be typed and printed on your letterhead and it should include the following information:

* Contact's Name
* Company Name (if you don’t have one, leave it out)
* Address Business
* Phone Number
* After Hours Phone Number
* Website URLs and social media accounts
* Summary
* Headline
* Event Description
* Date & Time
* Location if necessary (be sure to give directions if the location is difficult to find)
* Background Information

**Press/News Release**

A press release is what you use to inform the media of what you are doing that is new, different, better and newsworthy. Keyword – NEWSWORTHY. Keep your press release short (about 500 words or less). Type it, double-spaced, on one side of the paper only. Media people are busy and they have hundreds of press releases to go through a day, so make it as interesting, neat and simple to follow as you can. In fact, write it like a story; not like a fact sheet but like an article that could be printed as is. This is your best bet for getting an article. Most local papers will print exactly what you hand them – make sure it’s exactly what you want.

**Biographical Documentation**

It is a feature story all about you. Include not only your performance history, but also your history in the community. (Grand-daughter of Betty Sue Boop, attended local high school). However, it must be interesting, and give your readers a feel for who you really are. A standard biographical narrative is roughly 200-250 words.

**Clip Sheet**

A clip sheet(s) is a photocopy of all the publicized stories written about and by you with the name of the publication and the date when the article first appeared. These articles show your perceived value in the eyes of others. They may include reviews from shows, pre-production articles where you are mentioned, or just a pre-production article about a show you were in. Don’t overdo it. Use 3-5 reviews and 5 articles maximum. Don’t have these on hand? Get thee to a library! You must have these on file. Call your mom. She probably still has them all.

**Chronology/Case History (optional)**

A case history is the perfect opportunity to describe how you help solve people's problems with your services and expertise. It should be no longer than two pages and should begin by describing the client's problem. If at all possible, this is a good time to include a quote that confirms the client's needs. Next, explain how the client used your services to solve his/her problem and benefited by your expertise in particular. Again, use a quote to show how this same process can be used to help others with similar needs.

**Photographs (not optional)**

There’s no way around it --- use quality photos. Action shots are best, but make sure your headshot is included. Include a variety of color and black/white. The better the photo, the better your chance of getting a feature story and maybe even a cover. Send high resolution digital photos and include a contact sheet with a thumbnail of each print and pertinent information.

**Sound clips/demo CD**

If it is high quality and makes you look more professional send it in! Everyone is looking to discover the next Pavarotti or La Church – reporters are not different. If they think they are discovering something they are more likely to report on it.

**How to Write An Effective Press Release**

Getting your “business” mentioned in the press is an extremely good way to achieve a positive image and attract new clients. Few things can give you as much credibility then as being recommended by a major newspaper or magazine. But just how do you write a press release that gets attention, and brings in results? Although I can't guarantee that you'll get media attention, I can tell you how you can increase the odds of seeing your business in the real-world media. What is a Press Release? A press release is a document that is written in a specific format and is used to pitch a reporter or editor or to make an announcement that you believe is newsworthy. There’s our key word again – NEWSWORTHY. Singing at your Aunt Flo’s wedding is not newsworthy. Celebrating the tenth anniversary of a couple whose wedding you sang for can be newsworthy. You must find an angle. Sometimes it’s hard, but without and angle you have no story and without a story... no publicity.

**The Press Release Format**

The basic outline for a press release is as follows:

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
 For Further Information Contact:
Full Name of Contact
Email Address
Direct Phone Number
 Mailing Address
URL
Headline
Some City, Some Country -- Date (i.e. March 7th, 2016)

* **Introductory paragraph** that answers Who, When, Where, What and So What?
* **A second paragraph** offering more information.
* **Third paragraph** includes a quote that's attributed to somebody important or a recent client, for example: "Our ceremony was.....," says Jane Smith, newlywed.
* **Fourth paragraph** includes some more information, perhaps another quote. This paragraph often includes history and background information about you.

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The entire press release should be no more than 400 words, or one printed page.

**Five Things That You Must Do In Your Press Release**

 1. **Make your press release newsworthy.** Make sure that you have something to say that'll be of interest to the readers of the publication that you're sending the press release to. Keep in mind that the media love news stories with a human side to them. Make your angle on the story entertaining, interesting or newsworthy or don't bother sending out a press release at all.

2. **Target your releases.** There's no point in sending a press release about wedding singers to "Fishing World" magazine. There is however a point to sending a press release to your state’s society magazine almost a year in advance of their wedding issue. These are big business down south.

3. **Use the proper press release format**. Have a professional check the press release for grammar and spelling.

4. **Keep the press release concise.** Get to the point in the first paragraph. Use clear, concise, vivid language. There's no better way to get your story ignored than sending a lengthy release which doesn't state its purpose (Who, When, Where, What) right up front. Don't fill the press release with buzzwords, hyperbole and exaggerated claims.

5. **Write an excellent headline.** The headline is 90% of your press release. Here are a few headlines that work extremely well:

* I Can Help Anyone Find the Love of Their Life in 90 Days Or Less!
* Abraham Lincoln's Office Is Being Given Away... For Free!
* Brooklyn Bridge Sold By New Jersey Man... For $14.95!

Write headlines that attract attention, stir emotion and create pictures in the mind of the reader.

**More On Targeting**

Be careful to whom you send your press release. When compiling your own media list, don't waste your time getting the email addresses or fax numbers of every newspaper and magazine in the country, just the ones who would be interested in your story. The best way to target that person is to read the paper. Find out which features writer covers topics like yours and send your kit to them directly.

**I have my kit together – Now what?**

Stick it in an envelope and mail it. There. You are done. Don’t you wish it were that easy? Now come the three P’s. Presentation, Persistence, and Planning.

**Presentation**

If your kit looks professional, you will look professional. There are lots of little things you can do to make a press kit stand out. First, it’s a kit so it should be compiled into a folder of some sort. Office supply stores carry nice presentation folders of all kinds. Experiment – go nuts – this is the place for you individuality to shine through. Second, make it all work together. I have a logo that is used on the cover of my kits as well as my letterhead. The other pages are all printed on the same mid-weight gray stock. Logos can be tricky. Try not to use clip art unless it’s something very unusual and says something about you. My personal logo is what is considered word art. Also, I have two married friends – Harry and Heather Owen. Their personal logo is H2O. How darling is that? Then they had a child – Christopher, which made them H2C03. They’ll have to be real careful with the naming of their next child. Get creative – or not. This is not necessary; it’s just an added touch that I choose to use. If you have a friend in graphic design use them. Cook dinner for them, bake cookies – barter talents.

**Persistence**

Call the reporter before you mail out the package. Tell them that you read last week’s article on saving the whales and it stirred your heart --- then let them know that you have a packet coming their way, something you think they will be interested in; they should be receiving it in the next day or so. Then either mail it or take it down to the office. If you go to the office DO NOT ask to see the reporter. Just drop it off with a handwritten note attached to the outside of the envelope: “These are the materials I spoke about on the phone. Please do not hesitate to call if you need any further information or have any questions.” The day after you expect your information to be received, call and sweetly tell him/her that you were just making sure they received your packet, and “let me know if I can give you any more information”. (9:30 – 10:00 am is best for most reporters). You should be able to tell how they feel about doing a story. Most of them will come right out and tell you. But keep in mind, your story has no deadline, so it may be used as space filler later – don’t be discouraged.

**Planning**

The key to being a story and not space filler is planning. Find out when the paper does a wedding edition. Try to get a copy of last year’s wedding planner. Call the newspaper and ask the receptionist when they will be publishing this year’s wedding planner and who is in charge. Six weeks out send a letter (tip sheet) to the editor in charge of the wedding planner (possibly the features editor) letting them know how valuable their resource is...have a story idea...will be sending materials --- just a heads-up notice to the editor. You will not get any feedback from this and you should not call him/her. This will probably be the first time they’ve thought about the wedding planner issue since last year and will suddenly kick into gear.

Five weeks before the issue is scheduled for release call and send your package. Sure it’s early, but I’ll bet that you will have to send another packet to replace the lost, stolen, coffee stained packet you sent before. (Did I mention that earlier? Always make extra copies. You’ll use them later). Always plan ahead. Sit down with a calendar now and find out when things need to be submitted. This is just like auditioning. The audition may not be until December, but the application is due in September.

**Is this only good for newspapers?**

Heck no! Unmanaged singers, use these kits for auditions and agents. Obviously there will be not press release, but the rest of the stuff is what they want to know about and you already have it in a professional, high quality kit.

Also, try noontime television shows. Send the kit to the local station’s noon show reporter who does the sit down interviews. Offer to sing on air. If you get to do this, immediately request a copy of it. It’s worth the $20 or so to have in your archives. You never know when you’re going to need it.

When you are contracted for operas (regional companies especially) offer your press kit to the Public Relations person on staff. They are scrounging for information for their own press kits and will be glad to have it. Remember what we said earlier about photos. If you have a beautiful color action shot, whose photo do you think will be on the cover of the paper for the pre-performance article? Yours!! And always, always, always have press kits in your dressing room post performance. You never know when that reviewer will need a few extra tidbits of information.

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