



THE SPIN PROJECT

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CONTENTS

1
NEWS RELEASES
 What they are and what they're not

2
TIPS FOR NEWS RELEASES
 What they should look like, what to include, when to send them, and what not to do

4
SAMPLE NEWS RELEASE

6
SAMPLE MEDIA ADVISORY

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The who, what, when where, and why of it all

News Releases

Other than the telephone, press releases and media advisories — often lumped together under the term “news releases”—are the basic methods of communicating your news to reporters.

The Reality

Reporters throw away or ignore many if not most press releases because they:

- Do not contain any news
- Do not have contact information or other key data to make the reporter's job easier
- Are filled with typos and other embarrassments, causing the reporter to doubt the integrity of the organization that sent the release
- Are confusing, poorly written, or worse—boring

Two Types of News Releases

“Media Advisory”

This is a short, one-page, concise piece advising the media of news to be made. Typically, a media advisory invites reporters to cover

some event or press conference or notifies them of your news. It usually contains the “who, what, where, when and why” of the news, including contact names, phone numbers, email and web addresses and other critical facts. The media advisory is sent out before an event or news is made.

“Press Release,”
 a.k.a. “Media Release”

This document is longer than a media advisory, but rarely more than two pages. A press release is typically written like a news story—containing quotes, “color” and background—and summarizes your news. It is written as if it were to appear in the morning newspaper—though, of course, that will not happen since most media will not run your release verbatim. The press release is often handed out at a news event or included in a press kit.

The key to successful news releases is brevity and factual accuracy. Get to the most important part of the news as soon as possible and make sure everything is accurate: facts, name spellings, dates and times. Some reporters

have said that if their attention is not piqued by the headline or the end of the lead paragraph, they rarely read any further.

Tips for Media Advisories and Press Releases

Starting at the top of the page, all news releases should contain:

- Your organization's logo. This should be at the very top of the paper.
- Either “For Immediate Release”—meaning the information can be used as soon as a reporter gets it; or “Embargoed Until [date]”—meaning the reporter cannot use the news until the date specified.
- The date the release is distributed.
- Contact name(s), email and web addresses and phone number(s), including cellular phones.
- A “boilerplate,” a 2-3 sentence description of your organization in clear, concise, jargon-free language.

Reporters’ desks are overflowing with news releases announcing some “big news” that really is not. Most of these are trying to sell some commercial product or event in the guise of news. Fortunately, your release, which will promote your cause, can and will distinguish itself from the others if you follow these basic tips.

The headline is key. Most reporters have about thirty seconds to scan a news release. They want the news to jump out at them. If you do not catch their attention in the headline, into the “circular file” the release goes.

Summarize your news into a headline. The headline can be up to four lines long, centered, in bold face and written all in capital letters, usually in a larger type size. You may do a stacked headline: a main, attention-grabbing head followed by a slightly smaller, more detailed head. The headline should capture the larger frame of the news, communicate a sense of drama, and pull reporters into the story.

After the headline, the first paragraph—“the lead”—is paramount. This is the summary paragraph that communicates the most important components and frames the issue for maximum media im-

pact. It must also capture attention. *Caution:* Do not try to explain everything in this paragraph.

Write the remainder of the press release in descending order of importance. In journalism, this is called the “inverted-pyramid” style of writing. The most important, base-laying news goes at the top, the lesser details below.

Frame your news—establish its importance and impact, and your position—by the end of the lead paragraph. At the latest, your news should be framed by the end of the second paragraph. By the third paragraph you should move your key messages.

Include one or two pithy soundbite quotes in the press release.

In media advisories, list the “Five W’s”—who, what, when, where and why—after the headline and lead framing paragraph.

WHO: Who is announcing the news? This will probably be your organization or coalition. But remember, the news is not the fact that your group is announcing something, but what is being announced. Therefore, the lead paragraph will first communicate the news, then indicate who made it. A brief list of key speakers may be included here, with their names and affiliations.

WHAT: What is being announced: a media event, rally, protest, press conference or release of a new report?

WHERE: The location of the event. Include the actual address or directions, unless it is an obvious place like the main steps of City Hall.

WHEN: The time—include am or pm—and date. Make certain the day and date correspond.

WHY: This is your key message. It is “why” you are making news.

Since your event will feature strong visuals, tip reporters off to the photo opportunities at the end of the media advisory. This is utterly essential for TV.

End both advisories and press releases with the marks ###, or -30-. This lets journalists know the release is over. If your release jumps to the next page, write “more” at the bottom and center it. At the

top left corner of the next page, write “Page 2” and provide a subject reference.

When to Send the Release

In general, you should mail (including email, for those reporters who prefer emails) the release ten days before the event, fax it five days before the event, and follow up with a phone call within three days of the event. Of these three methods, faxing (or emailing) and calling are paramount.

Remember: Do not call reporters to ask if they got your release. They do not have time to respond to every release they receive. Instead, call them to pitch the news and remind them about the release. Be prepared to send another if the first was misplaced.

News Release Taboos

- Do not include jargon or political rhetoric in your releases.
 - There should be no mission statements in releases.
 - Do not write in long sentences and ponderous paragraphs. One- or two-sentence paragraphs are fine.
 - Typos, factual inaccuracies and other mistakes kill the integrity of your organization and news.
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- Keep it short.
 - Write a strong headline or stacked headline.
 - Write a tight and hard-hitting lead paragraph.
 - Move your messages!

Sample Press Release

Press releases are typically written like news stories. They summarize the news and event, contain quotes, “color” and background. A press release is written as if it were to appear in the morning newspaper, although most media will not run the release verbatim (some neighborhood or smaller press will, however). The press release is distributed at the news event, included in the press kit, and faxed or e-mailed to no-show reporters the day the news is made. Press releases should be no more than one or two pages long.

**ATLiving
Wage**

Atlanta Living Wage Coalition
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PRESS RELEASE

Embargoed for:
Thursday, October 21, 2001

Contact: Cindia Cameron (404) 555-1213
Sandra Robinson (404) 555-1214

ATLANTA LIVING WAGE CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED

Community Pushes for City To Join More Than 60 Other Locales with Living Wages for Employees of Companies Receiving Tax Dollars

Survey Shows Strong Political Support For Measure

ATLANTA... As low-income workers told their stories of toiling at two or more full-time jobs and still living in the hardship of poverty, community leaders from around Atlanta gathered to announce the kick-off of the Atlanta Living Wage campaign today. More than 60 community, labor and religious leaders plus scores of supporters participated in the event.

In addition, survey results from mayoral and city council candidates, released at the kick off, showed two-thirds have committed to supporting a living wage ordinance.

“A person working full time should earn enough to lift a family above poverty,” said Sandra Robertson, Director of Georgia Citizens on Hunger. “Companies that benefit from taxpayer dollars can and should pay a living wage.”

The living wage movement is a response to the rapid growth of low-wage service jobs, the declining value of the minimum wage and the spiraling costs of housing, healthcare and childcare. The living wage ordinance will require that the city and other employers receiving tax dollars pay workers a wage that lifts a family above the federal poverty level and provides health benefits.

Camille Johnson, a security guard at Hartsfield Airport, is one of the workers whose family would benefit from a living wage ordinance.

Camille has more than four years of experience in her job, yet she earns just \$7 an hour and receives no health benefits. Camille and her children currently live in a homeless shelter. Wages for security guards at the nation’s busiest airport are startlingly low. Meanwhile, Americans are demanding a shift in priorities in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and continued threats.

“The job I do stands between you and disaster,” said Johnson, “yet it doesn’t even pay enough to keep a roof over my family’s head or provide a safe place for my children to stay while I’m working.”

More than one-in-four hourly wage jobs in Georgia pay \$7 an hour or less, and metro Atlanta accounts for 65 percent of all jobs in the state, indicated Charlie Flemming, President of the Atlanta Central Labor Council. “Wages that low put even a modest standard of living beyond the reach of large numbers of working families.”

(more)

Write all releases on organization letter-head with the address and phone number.

Write “Press Release” or “Media Release” in large letters to draw attention.

Indicate whom to contact for information.

Indicate the date the information can be released, or the date the news happens. If embargoed (restricted for release), indicate when reporters can go with the information.

Use larger font for the headline than for the text. Make sure the headline includes the essential information about the release.

“Stack” headlines to draw more attention and spotlight the main news and hooks.

Lead paragraph should catch attention, frame and summarize. Include your “hooks” at the beginning.

Communicate your key message—here it’s “people who work should not be poor”—near top of the release. Can be a quote or paraphrase.

Use short paragraphs in body. Write in “inverted pyramid” style with most important information at the top narrowing down to the least important information at the end.

Include sound bite quotes from key spokespersons, especially those affected.

Type “more” if it jumps to a second page.

According to preliminary figures from the Georgia Family Economic Self-Sufficiency Project, a family of three would need at least \$13 an hour to cover a minimum-needs budget. A single working adult would need at least \$9.50 an hour.

In addition, the Department of Housing and Urban Development considers a housing budget to be 30 percent of a worker's total income. By that measure a worker earning \$7 an hour could afford to spend no more than \$336 a month on rent. In Atlanta, fair market rent for a one-bedroom apartment is \$590 per month.

"We need a living wage ordinance in Atlanta so that workers like me can provide safety and security to our families and the public," said Hartsfield Airport worker Camille Johnson. "Our jobs are valuable to the community, and so is our need for time with family and volunteer activities. Working one job with a living wage instead of several poverty wage jobs would make all this possible."

Supporters of the living wage pointed to ordinances in other cities similar to the Atlanta measure. Research of those ordinances indicated:

- Costs to employers were modest. For the majority, the living wage increases were less than one percent of operating budgets.
- Costs to taxpayers were negligible. In Baltimore, cost has been about 17 cents per person annually. The real costs of the city contracts actually decreased the year after the law went into effect.
- Job creation did not suffer. Baltimore contractors, for example, who held contracts both before and after the living wage ordinance was passed reported no lay-offs.

The Living Wage Campaign was founded by 9 to 5, Atlanta Working Women, Atlanta Central Labor Council (AFL-CIO), Georgia Citizens Coalition on Hunger and Project South in April 2001. More than 60 community, religious and labor organizations have so far endorsed the campaign

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List facts in concise and easy-to-grasp format. You don't need to list every fact, just the key ones that reinforce your frame and message. Consider one or two well-placed facts to head off opposition's arguments before they even happen.

Type ### to indicate the end of the release.

Sample Media Advisory

A media advisory is written in simple form without many details. Primarily, it contains the who, what, where, when and why of an event. The “why,” of course, is your key message. The advisory alerts journalists to an upcoming event without giving away all the substance. Media advisories should be no longer than a page in length. Fax or email 3-5 days in advance, or at least the day before. Follow it up with a phone call to the targeted reporter the day before the event to ensure they are coming.

**Our Town
Living Wage Coalition**

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Fax (333) 555-1213
info@ourtownlivingwage.org

MEDIA ADVISORY

For immediate release: October 21, 2001

Contact: Jane Smith
Office: (333) 555-1212
Cell: (333) 555-1234

LIVING WAGE RALLY AT CITY HALL TO FEATURE WORKERS TRYING TO MAKE ENDS MEET AND RISE ABOVE POVERTY

Our Town City Council Will Vote on Living Wage Ordinance That Day

Supporters of an Our Town living wage ordinance will rally at City Hall as the Mayor and City Council vote on the measure – the first of its kind in the state. Living wage laws raise the earnings of certain workers above the poverty line. Without a living wage, some workers must toil at two or three full-time jobs just to make ends meet.

WHAT: A rally on the steps of City Hall to coincide with the scheduled vote on the Our Town living wage law. This vote culminates months of intense political debate between workers and those opposing the ordinance. The public hearing at City Hall that day, and the rally, will highlight testimony from low-wage workers, social service advocates, clergy and an economist.

WHEN: 10:30 am – 12 noon, Saturday, June 17th, 2000.

WHERE: Our Town City Hall, 301 First Street

WHO: Workers to be affected by the vote, leaders and members of local religious congregations, unions, community groups, representatives of the living wage campaign.

WHY: “Our Town is ready to make history by passing a living wage ordinance,” said the Rev. Robert Smith, pastor of Our Town Episcopal Church. “With a living wage, the workers serving Our Town will earn enough to raise a family out of poverty. Everybody who works should not live in poverty.”

VISUALS: Banners, signs, giant “Living Wage Paycheck” made payable to “Working Families of Our Town.”

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Write “Media Advisory” in large letters to draw attention.

Important: Indicate who to contact for more information. Include cell phone if possible in case reporters have to reach someone at the event.

Don’t forget the date. If the advisory contains news that is embargoed (such as findings of report to be released later), indicate that. Otherwise, write “For Immediate Release.”

Write all advisories on organizational letterhead with the address and phone number.

Headlines get larger type fonts than text. Make them stand out and grab attention. Sometimes reporters don’t get past the headline and first paragraph!

Subhead (or “stacked” head) further frames the news and provides hooks.

Lead paragraph should catch attention, frame and summarize event. Include as many hooks as possible (controversy, timeliness, first-ever, human interest, etc.).

Include only the “Five W’s:” who, what, where, when and why. Don’t try to explain everything in your release, let them come to the event to get it. Include enough information to interest reporters. Include a list of speakers, if confirmed.

Make sure the day and date match, and the time is am or pm.

Include a photo-op to lure cameras.

Type “###” to indicate end of the advisory.