

New Patient Marketing

More on The Media

by William Howard Horrocks

Are you aware that 70 percent of the stories you read in your newspaper are actually press releases or stories generated by press releases? And only 30 percent of the time will the newspaper editor make any changes in them? Often they'll print releases word for word. (Source, Alan Caruba, "Public Relations: What Is It?" *New Jersey Business*, November, 1982. Also, my own experience).

There were so many people interested in my June article about using the media to your advantage that I decided to revisit the subject. Most of the calls I received asked "exactly how do I write a press release?" There is a definite format to follow and some mistakes to avoid or your releases will end up in the round file. I'd like to give you some tips on getting press recognition.

Press Success

Free press, generated by a properly written press release, is just too valuable and too easy to get for you to pass up.

Recently, a client friend of mine Dr. Robert Korwin, who practices in New Jersey, was responsible for the ABC New program "20/20" doing a feature on toothpaste advertising claims in a segment called "Brushing Away the Hype." The segment aired nationally last March. He told me he had been after them for some time to look into this subject and they finally did.

In order to take advantage of this on his local level, I wrote a press release for him (see the sample press release below the article) entitled "Middletown Dentist Sparks '20/20' Story" and gave some of the details from the program, tying it all in with how Dr. Korwin got them to do the story. He got a very nice write up in his local paper, which consisted of a word for word reprint of my release, complete with a photo of him holding the autographed pictures of Hugh Downs and Barbara Walters, which he received as a "thank you" from ABC.

Pretty good, right? But it gets better.

The newspaper then requested a follow up article about him and his practice. I wrote one for him entitled "Can Dentistry Be Painless?" and so far it has produced 10 new patients for the practice. That's pretty good return for a few lines of free ink. But it gets even better.

There's More To Free Press Than New Patients

For several weeks following the article, every single patient Dr. Korwin saw commented positively on the two articles. Not only that, but most of the comments were on the order of, "I'm really proud of you and so happy to be a patient here in your practice." Not only did he get great exposure, which introduced him to new patients, but his relationship with existing patients was enhanced as well. Now his patients wouldn't think of going anywhere else and this fact will certainly turn out to be more profitable than the 10 new patients.

Sample Press Release

So how do you write a proper press release so you can start getting your share of free exposure? First take a look at the sample release below.

Ten Guidelines

Here are some guidelines for writing a press release in the proper format. Many editors are very picky about format. If it's not right they could chuck it for that reason alone.

1. "For immediate release" tells the editor the release is timely and ready to be seen now.
2. Note who the release is from, your address, phone and who to contact for more information. This is important because the editor may need to call you to clarify some point in the release or, in some cases, arrange an interview with a reporter. If you have an ad agency or PR firm ghost write the release (as in my example) they will often source themselves for the story but give your number for information request. I usually don't put my

agency's number on the release because I want the editor to call my client, not me.

3. Your headline performs the exact same function as a headline for an ad. It has to create interest in a very few words. Editors get tons of press releases. They don't have time to read each to the end to see if the story will interest their readers. So it's up to the headline to telegraph your story and get their attention. If it grabs the editor it will also grab the reader.

4. The body of the release tells a story the readership of the paper would be interested in reading. Keep your audience in mind. You're not writing for the editor, but for his or her readers. Editors prefer not to do any work or rewrites so if you can write it like a finished newspaper story, you have a better chance of getting it printed. What you're doing is presenting the newspaper with a completed package that needs little or no tinkering.

5. Don't send a cover letter, just the one or two page release (no more than two pages). They'll know what it is. If you feel compelled to explain your release in a letter, then you haven't done a good enough job in the story.

6. Photos are not required though sometimes your story will need one and you have a better shot at publication if you include a photo. Never fax a photo. Send your release along with a black and white photo of yourself with your name and a caption written on a slip of paper taped to the back of the photo. (For reasons I won't go into here, don't write directly on the back of the photo - it creates problems for the printer.)

7. Don't write it from your viewpoint, as if you were the author even though you might be. Write as though you were the newspaper reporter. That way you can quote yourself. Use quotes. Newspapers will not allow themselves to be put in the position of making claims.

However, they will report on the claims made by others.

So if you say, "most toothpaste advertising claims are unproven" they won't print it. But if you say, "Dr. Smith says, most toothpaste advertising claims are unproven" you will be okay.

8. Try to weave your name and practice location into the story and headline. This is easy to do with small neighborhood papers. If you live in Middletown, a story about a Philadelphia dentist won't be nearly as interesting as a story about a Middletown dentist. And if your story presents news or any "how-to" advice, it's quite natural at the end of the article to tell the readers they can get more information by calling your office.

9. Press releases must be news. If your release is too much of an advertisement they will simply tell you to buy an ad. But what is considered news, especially on a local level, can be as mundane as, "Dentist Gives Tips to Avoid Periodontal Disease." That's an article that could get printed.

But "Dr. Smith offers 20% Off Teeth Whitening" won't see the light of day.

10. Don't be discouraged if your release gets ignored.

Most are. However it's often because the guidelines above were not followed. Simply keep trying. It's also sometimes the case that an editor will read your release and decide that they can use it, just not right now - in which case it gets filed and may appear months later.

Go Local

Don't get the idea you have to do what Dr. Korwin did and land a story on a national network program in order for free press to work for you. That's rare. What is definitely not rare are local business people getting stories about themselves into their neighborhood newspapers.

Here's an example of how easy it could be. We know the tobacco industry is under heavy fire in the national media. The subject of smoking is already getting attention.

Would a dentist have anything interesting to say about this? I think so. Here's a headline "Peoria Dentist Sees Smoking Danger up Close." Here are your first few sentences: According to Dr. Susan Smith, a practicing dentist in South Peoria, smoking does more than damage your lungs, it can also wreak havoc on your teeth and gums as well. 'Everyday I see what smoking does to the inside of the mouth,' says Dr. Smith 'and it's not pretty.'

Recently Dr. Smith has become even more acutely aware of the problems because of a revolutionary new piece of dental technology she uses called an intraoral camera. This device, which resembles a pen or wand, contains a tiny but powerful video camera. 'Because the camera magnifies the inside of the mouth up to forty times I can get an amazingly good view of what happens to the teeth and gums of a smoker,' says Dr. Smith. She goes on to point out that...."

You get the idea. Even if you don't have a camera, you can still say something about smoke damage seen with the naked eye. Now, can't you see a story like this in your neighborhood newspaper or even in your major daily? Absolutely! These stories appear every day in papers all over the country. So think of an interesting story you can tell. Try to tie it in with something that's already getting attention, as in the tobacco example, so you can ride the coattails of a story that's already being told.

Once you have your release ready, call all the print and electronic media in your area and get the fax numbers for the appropriate editors, usually "Health" or "Lifestyles," and fax it directly to them unless you have a photo, in which case you should mail the release and the photo together.

The press can be a marketing tool. But you have to grasp the tool; it won't just fly into your hands.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Middletown Dentist Sparks 20/20 Story

"We're in touch, so you be in touch," is the invitation co-host Barbara Walters delivers each week at the close of the popular ABC News program, 20/20.

Middletown, New Jersey dentist Dr. Robert Korwin decided to take Ms. Walters up on her offer. He wanted to focus the public spotlight on his belief that there is too much hype and not enough truth in the toothpaste business. "I thought if I could get a program like 20/20 to look into the claims being made by some toothpaste makers, it would go a long way toward helping people sort out fact from fiction," says Dr. Korwin.

So he contacted 20/20, expressing his reservations about the veracity of some toothpaste advertising. To his surprise, his concerns were forwarded to the investigative staff and the result was a segment called "Brushing Away the Hype" which aired on the March 8th installment of 20/20.

During the segment, correspondent Arnold Diaz interviewed dentist-experts and the President of the American Dental Association, who all said basically the same thing - that many of the claims toothpaste advertising makes are unsubstantiated and unproven.

"For example," says Dr. Korwin, "any dentist will tell you that you can't remove tartar by brushing alone, yet that's what some of the advertising would have you believe. What these 'tartar control' toothpastes can do is slow the formation of new tartar, but even then only on the tooth surface and not below the gum line where real damage is done."

And that's not the only claim that gets Dr. Korwin's thumbs-down. "The best selling toothpastes today contain baking soda and peroxide. These two ingredients are responsible for selling more over-priced toothpaste than anything else, yet there's not much proof they do anything more than perhaps improve the taste."

What's the bottom line? According to both Dr. Korwin and the experts seen on the 20/20 segment, "floss daily, use an ADA approved toothpaste containing fluoride, it doesn't matter which one, and brush longer."

So, did it help to call in one of the most watched news programs in the country? "Absolutely," says Dr. Korwin. They did a great job and certainly reached more people than I ever could have on my own. And not only that, I got a terrific autographed picture of Hugh and Barbara."

For more information on toothpaste effectiveness, call Dr. Robert Korwin at (908) 219-8900.