

Psssst! Want to meet more journalists online?

Follow these steps to create a journalist-friendly website

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Modern technology notwithstanding, I sometimes wax nostalgic for the old days when teletype machines clacked out stories one keystroke at a time, and bells rang when an urgent bulletin announced a catastrophe in some faraway land.

There are no bells in today's newsrooms (and no Underwood typewriters, either, unless they're enshrined in a display case).

Nowadays, news is transmitted in muted silence at electronic speed. At any given nanosecond, hundreds of press releases are posted on any of millions of Internet websites, put there with the belief they will be found by members of the press. Too often, though, the delivery can't be completed because the website is not designed to welcome the arrival of a journalist.

Can I be describing your organization's website? Take this simple test: Invite a co-worker, someone who doesn't share your familiarity with your website, to find your latest press release. Count the seconds it takes to find a homepage button marked "media" or "press" or "news" (I'll bet I've encountered at least 50 different names for this button) that opens to an index of your organization's most recent press releases. Can't find the button in less than 5 seconds? Don't have an index page; or, worse, it takes more than 5 seconds for the index page to download? You are in dire need of help. Even if you pass this test, you may still have room for some improvements.

Here are a few important things to remember:

- * The information age has a huge upside: you can email your press releases to as many thousands of news reporters whose email addresses you can find, without licking a single postage stamp or paying a single penny. But it also has a huge downside: on average, today's journalist receives 500 or more emails every day, and they can—and do—mass delete them with a single keystroke.

- * Getting a journalist's attention is a zero-sum game based on the number of minutes (sometimes just seconds) that a journalist can devote to reading email and opening websites. The winners are the ones whose email is read, or whose websites are opened. And, the more time a journalist spends reading a particular email or opening a particular website, the greater the number of losers there will be when the allotted time runs out.

So the best advice I can offer is: Make it as easy as possible for reporters to find press releases on your website, don't clutter your press release page with extraneous materials, and don't ask them to fill out a registration form so they can receive your email alerts to

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future press releases. Just mark an easy-to-follow path to your press releases, and give them the name of a contact person in case they want to make further inquiries.

Now, let's start at the top. Your homepage. Make sure it has a "media" or "newsroom" button that links directly to a second-level page that contains brief descriptions, release dates, and hyperlinks to your organization's most recent press releases. That would be a single click from the homepage to the press release index page.

You'd be surprised at the number of websites that do not include this simple button on their homepage. Instead, there is an "about us" button on the homepage that opens to a second-level page that may or may not include a media/newsroom button. (I've encountered second-level "about us" pages that link to a third-level "resources" page that includes a fourth-level media/newsroom button. Think of it, you have to drill through a hierarchy of five levels to reach a press release: homepage> about us page> resources page> press release index> the press release.

Scale down the size of your press release index page. Some organizations list every press release since the dawn of the Internet, or at least back to the day they launched their website. Reporters aren't really interested in a list of hundreds of press releases that lengthen the time needed to download the page. Your organization's interest in preserving these old press releases can be served by transferring them into an archive folder. Just display a half dozen or so of your organization's most recent press releases on the index page, and remember to arrange them in reverse chronological order (most recent on top) to assure it will display on the opening screen.

Keep your index page as simple as possible. That means no dancing or blinking headlines, or other byte-gulping design elements. Please, NO GRAPHICS of any kind. There are still some newsrooms out there that are operating on 56k dial-up modems. Even journalists with high-speed Internet connections want the quickest possible downloads.

Never categorize your press releases by topic. Reporters want to find your most current press release as quickly as possible. That should be the release at the top of the list. Do not force them to search through lists of press releases that are sorted according to their subject matter.

Never create folders for press releases that change every month. (The designer who thought this up probably never heard of bookmarks.) Any reporter who bookmarks your press release index page will be left in the lurch when the URL for this month's page changes at the start of the next month. The journalist will keep accessing an old month's list of press releases and wonder why your organization ended its practice of posting press releases on its website. If you must change the press release index to a different location, make sure you leave a forwarding address at the old page.

Include a release date on every press release, and with each entry on your index page. We've solved the problem of undated press releases very nicely at Government Policy

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Newslinks. We simply refuse to use them. The same policy applies to any press release that includes a copyright notice, or an author's byline.

What's our objection to copyright notices? Frankly, we don't really know what the issuer of a press release expects to accomplish with a copyright notice. But it could include legal consequences, and we do not want to expose our registered users to legal action if they use a press release they found through Government Policy Newslinks.

Ditto with bylines. We don't know if the material was authored by someone who might be expecting compensation if published or broadcast by a news organization. Again, we don't want our registered users to use information from a press release they received through our service, then get dunned for payment.

Include the name, phone number and email address of your organization's contact person who is authorized to respond to media inquiries. Never use a web-based form or a generic email address for press inquiries. Journalists don't have any confidence that their on-deadline inquiries will get a timely response by typing their question into a form, or by emailing their inquiry to a generic address like mail@xyz.com.

Post your press release on your website FIRST! Don't save it for the last thing to do before turning off the lights and heading for home. Once you start distributing a press release by phone, fax, mail, email, or courier, the word starts to get around. Journalists who are not on your distribution list will hear about it (possibly from a brief wire service story) and go to your website for more information.

Each press release should have its own separate document file. Do not add today's press release to the same document that contains yesterday's press release. In many newsrooms, editors review press releases and assign them to reporters, sometimes by forwarding them an email note with the URL, sometimes by making a paper copy. When making a copy, the last thing an editor wants to see is a stack of stale press releases spilling out of the printer.

Edward Zuckerman, the author of this article, is editor of Government Policy Newslinks which monitors press release activity on government and public policy websites for over 1,300 journalists and government/public affairs specialists.

He welcomes your tips for making websites more friendly to journalists. His email address is: ez@policynewslinks.com

For more information, see <http://policynewslinks.com>