

MAKING YOUR PRESS RELEASES WORK HARDER

For the past ten years or so, issuing a press release has been pretty straightforward. When law firms had newsworthy announcements, they issued a written press release to stand as an official record, and the press used the release as a source for stories. Then, the release was archived on a law firm's Web site for the rest of the world to see.

But all that has changed with the advent of Web 2.0: first, the audience for press releases expanded; citizen journalists and bloggers are now mainstream. Today, a press release properly optimized for discovery by search engines will pop up on Google and Yahoo under "news," effectively reaching journalists as well as interested clients and consumers.

At the same time, the Internet has changed the way people consume content. Instead of simply reading content, more people watch and listen to it. What's more, with the rising importance of social networks and blogs, consumers interact with that content. They expect to be able to share and comment on things that are of interest to them. And finally, everyone expects that the information that they want and need will be delivered to them so they don't have to go searching for it themselves.

While these changes have been taking place, the press release looks largely the same as early versions. Most law firms issue releases as well-written text documents including a contact name, a link to a law firm Web site and a downloadable photo or logo. The old format helps to drive some traffic back to law firms' Web sites, but a simple old-fashioned press release doesn't begin to take advantage of the new behavior the Web has engendered.

A growing group of corporations – many in the consumer products and technology sector – are adopting a newer version of the press release to optimize interaction with a cross section of audiences. They're called **Social Media Press Releases**, and recently a tiny number of law firms have begun to use them as marketing tools to extend their presence among targeted journalists, bloggers and the general public.

The Social Media Press Release, or SMR, is a new press release format that includes basic text telling a story, along with photos, video, and audio; it also includes charts, graphs and logos that can be instantly embedded on other Web sites. The release is properly optimized with titles and tags for search engines. It also includes "share" buttons that encourage the easy spread of interesting news and, if appropriate, links to social media profiles such as the company's Twitter stream, Facebook page and LinkedIn profiles. Finally, SMRs allow comments from readers.

However, while meant to appeal to consumers, at its core the SMR is a vehicle designed to help journalists and bloggers by giving them easy access to all the information they need to create robust stories for print and on the Web. (Notice, we didn't say "write" those stories. Today's stories may include multimedia elements or really anything that can be digitally created or recreated).

The social media press release is more dynamic, more visual and, at the end of the day, a more efficient and engaging way to spread the news about your firm.

HOW LAW FIRMS CAN USE THE SOCIAL MEDIA PRESS RELEASE

No news exists in a vacuum. Consequently reporters and bloggers often need supportive background information when filing their stories. From the most routine releases to the most complicated, reporters need to get at additional information.

Take, for example, a typical press release announcing the opening of a new law office. In the Web 1.0 world, the release would include information about the new office, its location, and the partners running the office; it would also provide a link back to the firm's Web site. In a social media press release, links to partners' biographies and LinkedIn profiles would not be out of place. A social media press release, because of its format, may include links to cases the firm has worked on that apply to the new office region, or it can even include a podcast from the chairman about the firm's growth outlook and why it is opening the new office. Once distributed, the release is housed on the firm's Web site in its online newsroom, where it can become a living document and a constant source of information for Web site visitors.

Likewise consider a news release issued in reference to litigation. Links can be provided to connect reporters to public documents that are online, or to attorney's biographies, and can include audio and video explanations of the case background, practice group descriptions, or speaking engagements and rankings -- all to help reporters from any medium put together their stories.

It's easy to see from these examples how what used to be a plain vanilla press announcement can be turned into a rich resource for journalists who now have easy access to all the information they need. Housed in an online newsroom that is optimized for social media, they can continue to reap dividends for your many audiences and ultimately for the firm.

[Nortel networks](#) had a lot of success last summer using social media news releases. They started "small" by issuing a news release about a change in the company's corporate green policy. The release included text, video and a "how-to" paper for other companies to use. The video and paper were housed in the company's online newsroom.

Nortel's PR representative reported on her blog that the release was not newsworthy in the truest sense, but rather was intended to insert Nortel into the conversation about rising gas prices and green issues. The release was distributed using a wire service that specializes in social media press releases. The PR rep says that the release generated more press interviews than she had garnered in the past two years. Mainstream print media and one national TV show covered the story. Dozens of bloggers picked up the story and linked to the video. Later that summer, Nortel issued a new product announcement using the same strategy. They created a blog for the product, posted video interviews with the product manager and a [Flickr](#) site with screen shots, and distributed the release using the wire service. Again, the results were superior, resulting in a podcast with *Business Week*, an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* and invitations to speak at conferences for Nortel leaders.

Nortel put a lot of resources behind both releases. But the extra effort paid off. They also benefited from the fact that their product news is of interest to a broad blogging community eager for rich content; and, gaining the attention of national media with soft news, whether you are a big company or major law firm, always leads to a positive outcome and is worth the effort.

THE BACKSTORY

The social media press release isn't brand-spanking new. It was first introduced in May 2006 by a public relations agency, Shift Communications. In the spirit of Web 2.0, Shift announced its new format and then [posted a template for anyone to use](#). Two years later, the [format was revised](#) to help amplify the impact of the releases.

You can see that the format is very complex, with lots of online bells and whistles. It also doesn't leave room for what everyone has come to expect in a standard press release. The information itself is broken up into blocks

SHIFT
communications

SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS RELEASE TEMPLATE, VERSION 1.5

<http://www.company.com/socialmedianewsroom/todaysnews>

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Client Contact Phone #/skype Email Blog Website	Spokesperson Phone #/skype Email Blog	Agency Contact Phone #/skype Email
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PHOTO
e.g., product picture, executive headshot, etc.
Embed -<object w/ URL -> <http://www.m>

MP3 FILE OR PODCAST LINK
e.g., sound bytes by various stakeholders
Embed -<object w/ URL -> <http://www.m>

GRAPHIC
e.g., product schematics, market size graphs, logos
Embed -<object w/ URL -> <http://www.m>

VIDEO
e.g., CEO's view of the news, brief product demo
Embed -<object w/ URL -> <http://www.m>

NEWS RELEASE HEADLINE
Subhead
CORE NEWS FACTS
• Bullet-points or narrative

LINK & RSS FEED TO PURPOSE-BUILT DEL.ICIO.US PAGE
The del.icio.us page offers hyperlinks (and annotation in "Notes" field) to relevant content sources, providing context and on-going updates.

PRE-APPROVED QUOTES FROM CORPORATE EXECUTIVES, ANALYSTS, CUSTOMERS AND/OR PARTNERS
Recommendation: up to 2 quotes per contact. Be prepared to offer additional quotes to content publishers who desire exclusive info.

"3 LINKS THAT MATTER" (OPTIONAL)
Provide more info without overwhelming the reader. Links should highlight relevant data that add context to the news (e.g., blog posts, white papers). A URL "snipping" service like TinyURL is recommended.

BOILERPLATE STATEMENTS

RSS Feed to Corporate News Releases

"SHARE THIS" Universal bookmark widget

TECHNORATI TAGS

OPML Feed to Corporate Blogs

"SPHERE IT" Context related web search

MODERATED COMMENTS
Offer RSS and email update options
Type your comment here...

TRACKBACKS/ BLOGS THAT LINK TO THIS NEWS

that are intended to make it easier for journalists and bloggers to pull what they need for their stories. The creators of the release even suggested abandoning the typical news style of a press release, which includes a lead paragraph, a quote, and a nut paragraph which puts the story into broader context. Instead, they suggested using bullets and highlighting the quotes.

Immediately after this format was introduced, three things happened:

- A large PR agency created its own social media release template and started offering it to their clients. Social media mavens accused the agency of copying Shift's format.
- There was a tiny outcry by journalists deriding a clouding of the line between public relations and advertising. But this is a very old whine. Since being introduced in 1906, press releases have been accused of news posing as ads.
- Because the new format called for information to be bulleted, the public relations industry entered into a tepid debate about whether or not bullets are useful for journalists.



Frankly, we think that all of the above was silly posturing and most of it still is. Bullets have been used for years in fact sheets prepared by public relations practitioners to accompany important news -- and what's wrong with a few good bullets in a press release anyway? Besides, good ideas mushroom and morph; they are slightly tweaked and then touted as new and improved. The entire automobile industry was based on a simple mechanical idea: put an engine under a hood, add four wheels, seats and a spiffy exterior. Rapidly, the Model T became the Mustang, then the BMW 750. (Ok, that's a vast simplification, but you get our point). And the "sounds like an ad" people are right! Badly written press releases often sound like advertising -- and they always have. Good public relations tells a story from a company's point of view and gives audiences information they need, and hopefully, want. This is not advertising.

At the end of the debate, deconstructing the news has not been a popular option for corporations, public relations professionals or journalists. A news release tells a story and we still like to have our stories told in a rather straightforward fashion. But suggested formatting for the margins of the release, where graphics, podcasts, and links to additional information live, is smart. It helps to make the news release work harder for your firm -- and most law firm press releases need all the help they can get.

DISTRIBUTING THE SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS RELEASE

At first, Shift (and other early adopters in the PR Community) advocated sending their social media press releases over the wires, and wire service companies quickly followed suit by offering to distribute multimedia content.

Today, though, the conversation has changed and a [debate rages](#) over whether or not a wire distribution is even necessary for a social media press release. There are new services designed to spread social media releases, such as [PitchEngine](#), which says it is not a wire service but a social media news feeder; and PR Web, which is a distribution service that offers to distribute social media press releases. Traditional PR wire services also offer social media release distribution and tracking services.

The thinking now is to release your standard, text-based press release over wire services or to your select list of contacts, and to include a link to your social media press release on it. The link will lead readers back to your Web site where the social media press release lives in an online **social media newsroom**. This is a place where anyone who is interested in the stories that you are telling can get all the media around it, make comments (which you can archive, track and respond to), and link to. That way, both journalists and clients are able to access all the information they want and need.

THE CISCO SOCIAL MEDIA NEWSROOM

IS ALL THIS REALLY NECESSARY?

There is no doubt that a well-written plain vanilla newsworthy press release still works for journalists. But, as we've noted earlier, press releases are not only written to be used as primary sources for news, they live on corporate Web sites and pop up on Google searches when consumers and clients are seeking information on particular topics. These consumers and clients expect a richer web experience -- that the information they find interesting and important will lead them to other related information.

Eventually, journalists will require the same features to do their reporting. Increasingly, they're finding information in online newsrooms that have been structured for social media.

A recent survey conducted by [Bulldog Reporter/TekGroup International](#), "[The 2008 Journalist Survey on Media Relations Practices](#)," found that nearly 97% of journalists surveyed said they visited online newsrooms for research. Half of the over 2300 journalists surveyed said they visited a corporate Web site or online newsroom at least once a month. It's where journalists increasingly go to get critical information. An online newsroom is a perfect place to house the social media press release.

Finally, are journalists using social media news releases to their fullest? An informal Jaffe Journalist Audit, conducted in January 2009, tells us that many journalists may not know when they've received a social media press release (it's a new term coined by the PR industry); but they do say that they will include links for online stories; they like to download sources' social media contact information; and will look at rich media content, such as videos and podcasts, if it helps them report the news.

The Bulldog Reporter/TekGroup survey found that slightly more than half of the journalists surveyed are using multimedia features they find on corporate Web sites. "Nearly 23% say they seek audio and video material at least once a month—an increase of about three percent over the past year. Among journalists working in national television, some 10.3% seek audio or video material once a week or more, and that number jumps to 46.7% for those seeking such material at least once every three months. Among journalists working in local radio, some 38.4% seek audio or video from corporate Web sites at least once a month," the survey found.

WHY FIX SOMETHING THAT ISN'T COMPLETELY BROKEN?

The modern press release is over 100 years old. The "founder" of public relations, [Ivy Lee](#), wrote the very first release for his client, the Pennsylvania Railroad, to explain the circumstances surrounding a tragic train derailment in which 50 people lost their lives. As co-partner in the public relations firm, Parker and Lee, Ivy Lee built the modern business of public relations under the banner of "Accuracy, Authenticity and Interest."

Those same principles apply to the public relations business and also to building connections with the media and clients, colleagues, and consumers, through social media today. Accuracy is the lifeblood of public relations and journalists. Authenticity is the rallying call for social media – bloggers and the like are authentic voices for the topics they cover. Interest refers to what the audience needs, wants and will use. In today's Web 2.0 environment, journalists, and, increasingly, clients and consumers, want information that they can interact with, gain more insight from and share in different media across the Web. Social media press releases can provide all those things for lawyers and law firms who are using them; they put information at the fingertips of those who want and need it.

The Social Media Press Release



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www.jaffeassociates.com

For further information contact Jay Jaffe, jaffej@jaffeassociates.com or, Liz Lindley, lindleyl@jaffeassociates.com or visit jaffeassociates.com and visit our P.R. 2.0 Resource Center located under Tools and Information.

Jaffe Associates (www.jaffeassociates.com) is the leading public relations firm serving law firms in North America and Europe. Working only in the legal industry, Jaffe offers a broad range of classic PR and PR 2.0 services, crisis communications, strategic marketing consulting, creative support, and web/technology services. Established more than 30 years ago, Jaffe operates as a fully virtual company with a staff of experienced legal publicists and consultants located throughout the US and Canada. Our goal is to 'Make It Happen' for our clients with efficient implementation that goes far beyond goal-setting, strategy and planning.