

How The Press Release Has Evolved Online

The humble press release has been the primary tool for public-relations professionals around the globe for the last 100 years. No matter which continent the fine art of PR is practiced, the press release continues to play an important role in alerting the news media to a company's communications efforts.

Its introduction came in 1906 when one of the founding fathers of modern-day PR, Ivy Lee, sent the first press release to the *New York Times* giving a statement on behalf of his client, the Pennsylvania Railroad, following a train crash, which killed 50 people in Atlantic City. So impressed with this innovative approach by Lee, the newspaper decided to publish the release, which they titled "Statement from the Road."

Unbeknown to Lee, the introduction of this new method of communication now synonymous with the PR industry was probably the first step toward the practice of modern-day PR. And as the media evolved and innovated through print to radio and television, the press release continued to play a pivotal role.

However, decades later, something happened. A new kind of media was beset upon the world. Its name? The Internet. And it changed everything.

Communication, regardless of geographical location, became cheap and easy; consumers were given a platform to buy and sell from a global market place; information was freely available via the algorithm of a search engine, and anyone can create their own media and have the potential viewership of a worldwide audience.

Given its age, some say that this new medium's impact on the world is nothing short of a revolution while others argue it is more of an evolution due to the time it takes for complete change. Either way, the media will never be the same again. Which begs the question: If the media is changing dramatically, then why should the press release stay in the same form it did over 100 years ago?

According to many authoritative and well-known online PR specialists, it shouldn't. The Internet has brought about the need for a new kind of press release; one that caters for this new social media world. And it's here.

Known as the Social Media News Release (SMNR) it provides a platform where journalists, bloggers and other social media users can easily absorb, digest, share and gather information relating to a company's news announcement.

The SMNR's inception came quite by chance when a well-known blogger and an ex *Financial Times* journalist, Tom Foremski, made a passionate rant on his blog in February 2006 about his distaste for the traditional press release containing "pat-on-the-back phrases and meaningless quotes." Foremski's blog post, titled: "[Die, Press Release! Die! Die! Die!](#)" asked for content that was easily accessible, shareable and without the so-called spin often associated with press releases and marketing-speak.

Foremski's rant generated a lot of attention and discussion among the PR blogging community. Some in defense of their most- prized tool while others in unison with Foremski's demand for change. Boston-based PR agency, SHIFT Communications, took the initiative and created a copyright-free, downloadable template that they released into the blogosphere as a model for the PR industry to use and build upon.

SHIFT's principal, Todd Defren, who [announced the template](#) on his blog said he hoped it would "serve as a helpful guide to kick-start thinking about how we can evolve the PR sector." It did. And it's been a discussion-starter among the online PR community ever since.

When embracing this new form of news release it is still important to realise what the Social Media News Release is not.

It isn't a secondary afterthought to traditional news distribution. Timing with a SMNR is just as important as other forms of news distribution. Outdated or already published news should not be used for distribution on a SMNR.

It isn't a tool used instead of conventional PR methods. While the balance of influence is shifting in favour of the individual, other communication channels should not be ignored. Any PR person worth their weight in salt will know this.

It isn't the shiny new thing that will change bad PR practice. The SMNR is only the delivery mechanism and the real value lies in the content. Knowing what your audience wants and providing them with something of value is the first step to creating an effective and useful SMNR.

Finally it isn't a tool to control the message. PR in social media should not aim to spin or deceive the audience. The SMNR can, however, be used as a way to communicate with and gain valuable feedback from key audiences.

What it is, is a way to distribute your news that takes full advantage of all the conversational opportunities that the Internet provides.