

# Guidelines for Teaching the Social Media Release

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A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2008 NCA Annual Conference in San Diego.

**Keywords:** SMR, social media release, social media, news release, assignment

Frustrated with sensationalized news releases and the task of picking out useful information and reassembling it into news stories, Tom Foremski of the Silicon Valley Watcher wrote a blog post titled "Die! Press release! Die! Die! Die!" on Feb. 27, 2006. Foremski (2006) asked public relations practitioners for a different kind of news release. He proposed deconstructing the news release into bulleted information, a list of quotes, hyperlinks to resources, and tagged information. He explained that this organization of content would help reporters turn news releases into news stories.

On May 23, 2006, Todd Defren of SHIFT Communications answered Foremski's request by providing a new format for news releases on his blog, PR Squared (Defren, 2006a). This format includes bulleted information, multimedia content, RSS, social bookmarking, Technorati, delicious, and quotes from various people. Defren (2008a) revised his template for the SMR. It also emphasizes engagement by enabling viewers to leave comments and by including trackbacks, which are blog posts that people have written about the SMR.

Journalists voted in Bulldog Reporter's competition and awarded "PR Innovation of the Year" to SHIFT Communications in April 2007 for the social media release (Market Wire, 2007). At the time of the award, the template had been downloaded nearly 100,000 times. Many companies have adopted the format, such as Dove, GEICO, Krispy Kreme, Mattel, and Zappos. Nevertheless, a study of 332 tech industry bloggers suggested that social media releases (SMRs) are not commonly used yet (Steyn, Salehi-Sangari, Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2010). Due to slow adoption at this time, students are well positioned to teach their employers how to use social media releases in their roles as interns and entry-level practitioners.

## The Importance of the Social Media Release Assignment

Professors have highlighted the importance of learning how to write social media releases (Anderson & Swenson, 2008, cited in Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010). As described by one study,

With the embedding of photos, audio, and video and the linking to microblog and blog posts, the social media news release is a vehicle to increase the discovery rates of media releases via search engines and to gain traction with bloggers and other social media outlets who want quick, compressed details and information from organizations. (Waters et al., 2010, p. 247)

In addition, the social media release does not confine storytelling to the written word. Furthermore, the added multimedia content helps short-staffed reporters who might not have the resources to send a photographer or cameraperson. Multimedia materials are ideally available as part of the SMR, in part because reporters dislike multimedia email attachments due to concerns about viruses (Waters et al., 2010). Multimedia content also helps bloggers by enabling them to follow best practices by including a picture or video with their posts (Bivins, 2011).

Another reason why teaching social media releases is important is because the ability to post comments to the releases makes the tactic a dialogic tool, and public relations students need additional opportunities to explore dialogic approaches to public relations (Bailey, 2009). As one student commented, "Everyone says public relations is about relationships, but I never really got that feeling. It was all sort of one sided" (Waters & Robinson, 2008, p. 3). The comments section of social media releases invites publics to engage in a dialogue with the organization about the social media release topic. The organization can respond to the posted comments by posting replies in the comments section. "The concept of interactivity, or responsiveness to stakeholder information needs, is crucial to relationship building" (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003, p. 67). Social media releases also represent a dialogic approach to public relations because they enable audiences to download the content, remix it, and write their own stories about it. The organization can post reactions in the comments section of remixed social media releases. Thus, the social media release is a tool that contributes to "more balanced organization-public relationships and increased participation of citizens in community life" (Kent et al., 2003, p. 63).

## Drawbacks to Social Media Releases

Some SMRs are limited to bulleted text, rather than also having a narrative section. Although this design forces students to learn to write in a concise manner, this format could also degrade a student's progress toward mastering storytelling and writing for the media. Instructors can overcome this disadvantage by using a vendor such as PitchEngine, which contains space for a bulleted version of the release, as well as a traditionally written story.

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Additionally, although anecdotal reports indicate that SMRs are a welcome evolution that empowers media and bloggers to more easily compose a story by remixing content in the SMR, empirical data does not yet support this idea. Indeed, journalists overall could still prefer the traditional news release. Again, a writer can use a vendor such as PitchEngine to write SMRs in both formats, which enables audiences to choose a preferred format.

Using a vendor rather than posting a SMR to an organization's newsroom, however, drives traffic to a third party website that could have been driven to the organization's website. This is a serious drawback because at this time, adding content to an organization's website, such as a news release, results in a higher listing in Google's search results. The added content, however, does not contribute to an organization's search engine optimization if it is housed on a vendor's website.

### Social Media Release Principles

The layout of the release is not as important as the content within. Defren (2006b) described the following principles of the social media release:

1. **Democratize access.** Anyone can use the SMR, not just credentialed journalists.
2. **Ensure accuracy.** Organizations need to make their logos, graphics, and multimedia available for others to use while also keeping an eye on responsible use.
3. **Engage in community building.** SMRs encourage a sense of community by allowing for comments and by enabling viewers to download and use parts of the SMR for their own blogs and projects.
4. **Share the context.** Organizations should share links to industry research and even articles about competitors that can be labeled with the organizations' perspectives.
5. **Promote visibility.** Using search engine optimization and tags will help others find SMRs. See Defren's blog (<http://www.pr-squared.com>) for a pdf about how to optimize news releases for search engines.

It is well discussed and accepted that within the SMR, practitioners are encouraged to link to multimedia. A less discussed tactic and benefit of the SMR is its incorporation of pitch agents. Practitioners can post links to blogs and other media stories that point to the importance of the SMR's topic, which could increase the likelihood that recipients write about the SMR topic.

### Limitation of Wire Services

Wire services do not appear to pick up social media releases as often as traditionally formatted releases, according to an experiment conducted by Corliss (2009). Many portal sites are not compatible with XHTML. One implication is that formatting such as bold and italics is not easily read. Corliss also reported that multimedia formats are often not read by wire services. Defren (2008b) created a chart to illustrate SMR capabilities based on the wire service.

### How the Vendors Compare

Students can use PRX Builder or PitchEngine for free. Below are some comparisons.

**Layout** – Students can write the body of the SMR in either a traditional narrative format or a series of bulleted facts with PRX Builder. PitchEngine contains an area for a traditional narrative, as well as a column for bulleted facts, which can be helpful for readers with different preferences. A Web producer for a

news station in Eugene, Ore., complained about receiving news releases with just bulleted facts. He explained that with time constraints, he would like the option of having a story put together that he can assess and then possibly place on the news station's website. Thus, we ask students to include both a traditional narrative, as well as bulleted facts.

**Cost to Practitioners** – Students should understand the general cost of both vendors for when they transition into jobs as entry-level practitioners. Publishing a SMR through either service online is free; however, the SMR will be removed after 30 days from PitchEngine unless an archiving fee is paid. For PitchEngine, practitioners can pay a flat fee of \$35/month or \$400/year to have their SMRs remain online beyond the 30-day expiration date. SMRs produced through PRX Builder can be published on a WordPress blog for free using a plugin (Fleet, 2010). In addition, SMRs can be sent through PR Newswire, which has an exclusive distribution contract with PRX Builder. The most popular packages for distribution on PR Newswire cost between \$219 and \$360 per news release.

**Unique Capabilities** – Through PitchEngine, SMRs can be shared by organizations and viewers through Twitter, FriendFeed, and Facebook. Also, people can post comments to SMRs on PitchEngine. PitchEngine asks users to identify a category (e.g., nonprofit) for their news release from a list. Reporters can subscribe to PitchEngine SMRs by category. In addition, PitchEngine recently partnered with the organization Search Engine Optimization to further optimize content for search results in places such as Google and Yahoo.

Through PRX Builder, SMRs can be posted to WordPress blogs through a plug-in feature. In addition, Tracer is a feature on PRX Builder that displays the date and time, IP address and domain, country, city, and referring link to an SMR each time someone views it.

### The Social Media Release Assignment

This assignment can be used in a writing class that teaches students how to write a news release, or it could be deployed as a part of a campaigns class. Positioning the SMR as part of semester-long client work enables students to showcase various tactics they can produce for a single client. Ideally, students should use clients with a large number of existing social materials (e.g., multimedia, microsites), unless creating those additional social materials is part of the class. A large social media presence gives students greater opportunity for linking within the release. Following assignment grading and final revisions, students can seek the organization's permission to make the SMR publicly available online.

**Account Details** – Students can create their own free accounts on PRX Builder, or the instructor can create a single account that all students can use. If students use PitchEngine and want to keep SMRs online longer than 30 days (which is suggested for displaying materials in e-portfolios), they will need to share a special classroom account. Instructors wanting to use PitchEngine can contact the company at [pitchengine.com](http://pitchengine.com) and ask for a complementary class newsroom. Regardless of which vendor is chosen, students should be reminded that Web applications can time out or crash, so drafting the work in a Word document is advised for frequent saving.

**Introduction to the Assignment** – Prior to undertaking the assignment, instructors should provide a short lecture on how the SMR differs from the traditional release (based on the material provided earlier), and they should showcase examples of SMRs from

organizations such as public relations agency Converseon (<http://blogit.realwire.com/?ReleaseID=6166>) and shoe company Zappos (see the social media release newsroom at <http://www.pitchengine.com/newsroom.php?id=2290>). It is important to emphasize that the same news values the young professional would use in crafting a traditional release are needed in the SMR, but the format of the SMR allows for the inclusion of interactive elements. If an instructor does not feel comfortable providing a short overview, a guest lecture could be done in person by a local practitioner or via Skype with a thought leader in the SMR movement.

**Assignment Structure** – As part of the assignment, students are asked to compose quotes and content for an SMR. The SMR should display acceptable and well-constructed quotes, use bulleted facts, and link to multimedia to attract coverage and interest from audiences ranging from bloggers to traditional media journalists. The learning objectives of the SMR assignment are to (1) use journalistic news values to determine the best angle and news facts to include, (2) understand how linking multimedia to a release can make content more attractive, and (3) know the proper composition of a social media release.

Professors can create an assignment sheet for students to house all of the details about not only what site to use in the release but also how to access the SMR tool of choice. The following layout and content recommendations can be shared with students:

1. Indicate your organization's name.
2. Provide contact information and make yourself the public relations point of contact. Your client could request that you change this later.
3. Write a headline and subhead for the release.
4. Provide dateline information that includes the location and date of release unless you are using PitchEngine, which will automatically include the date when you publish the SMR.
5. Write several core news facts as bulleted items – you don't have to use full sentences. Make sure to cover the five Ws and H. Some journalists and bloggers will choose to write their own story from the news bullets and facts, so make sure all of the key information is provided and use writing for the Web techniques that maximize impact through word selection and clarity.
6. Include links to multimedia (images, video, games, quizzes) that go along with the release.
7. Present several bulleted quotes from various people in your organization about the issue. You can also include third party quotes. Ensure the quotes have impact and say something important beyond mere excitement about the announcement made in the SMR.
8. Provide company information (such as a boilerplate) that is concisely written and avoid fluff.
9. Suggest keywords for tags.
10. Optional: Link to other relevant coverage to date or blogger coverage of the issue, so the media know that this has already generated interest, which will increase your chances of getting published.
11. Optional: Link to RSS feeds for the company or a special feed related to this issue.

Students should also be told whether the assignment will be graded online or whether a printed copy should be submitted. The printed format of

an SMR does not look as good as the online format, which can be stressful to some students who think they are printing it incorrectly. Consequently, it is important that instructors show students what to expect when printing the SMR based on an example.

PitchEngine can be tricky to navigate, so the following instructions should be shared in writing for students who use this service:

1. Go to <http://www.pitchengine.com> and log in (it is best to share a complementary class account, so students' SMRs can be used in e-portfolios beyond the normal 30-day expiration).
2. Wait for the left column of brands to appear (the column can load slowly).
3. See if your brand has already been created (only relevant if you're using a shared login for the class). If your brand already exists, skip to step five.
4. Select the "+ Add a New Brand" button near the top. Enter your brand information. Get back to the screen where you were at with step three; if necessary, log out and log back in and follow the steps above to get to it.
5. Scroll past the brands on the left column and select the social media release link at the bottom of the left column.
6. On the new page that is opened, scroll through the list of brands in the center column. Find your brand and select "+ New Release."

Because PitchEngine plans to launch a new platform that is easier to navigate, it would be wise to test these instructions to see if they are still relevant before giving the assignment.

**Grading Rubric for the SMR** – When grading a SMR, professors should treat it much like one would a traditional release. Did the student accurately communicate facts in a concise, well-written manner that adheres to AP Style? A good SMR will have excellent news facts, solid quotes (typically no more than two per source), quotes from sources outside the organization, and lots of multimedia, such as logos, head shots, videos, and photos. Did the student select quality facts for the news bullets? Could a reporter or a blogger write a quality story from the content provided? The good SMR will have well thought out tags suggested for those who want to re-mix the content. A poorly written SMR lacks multimedia, includes meaningless facts, does not use Web writing techniques, and does not have quality tags. The grading rubric should be shared with students with the assignment to clearly establish expectations.

**Lessons Learned from Implementing the Assignment** – Timing is an important consideration. Students should master the traditional news release first, rather than simultaneously writing both versions. Otherwise, the assignment and grading feedback are likely to overwhelm students. In addition, scheduling at least 30 minutes of in-class time is important to allow students to work on the SMR in class due to initial challenges students commonly encounter when learning to navigate the software. The in-class writing time can also be used to give students coaching about how to change an adequate headline into a memorable one.

Provided that technical challenges are handled, students tend to enjoy the assignment, especially for its compatibility with Web 2.0, and many are proud of their education when they have the opportunity to teach their potential employers (during a portfolio presentation) and employers a new tactic.

A final learning point is to have fun. The SMR is not your grandparents' news release, so embrace the technology, the sharing, and the storytelling.



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