

the **stempra** guide to being a press officer



CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Promoting Research Responsibly	4
Press Office Essentials:	
Press Releases	8
Distributing Your Press Release	10
Managing Collaborative Stories	10
Embargoes	11
Preparing Your Scientists	13
PR Stunts	16
Working With Agencies And Freelancers.....	19

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Introduction

When Stempra was formed in 1993, it was to provide a support network for press and public relations (PR) practitioners working in science, technology, engineering and medicine (or maths). Science communication was still a relatively new field.

Since then, there have been many major science controversies in the news: BSE, climate change, MMR and human admixed embryos to name but a few. These have led to much discussion about how science is communicated – how scientists can ensure their views are reflected accurately, and whether journalists have a duty to report science fairly.

As press officers and science communicators, we often act as the brokers in the knowledge exchange between scientists and journalists. We help journalists make sense of complex science and help scientists make the complex science make sense.

At the 2008 BA Science Communication Conference, Stempra asked whether press officers needed a set of 'best practice' guidelines to help us communicate science responsibly, to walk the fine line between generating interest in a story and over-selling it.

Feedback from journalists was that, generally speaking, we act

responsibly. But it was clear that we still had some way to go to become the perfect press officers.

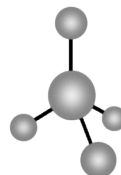
This guidebook is meant to help us improve our game. It is not a code of conduct, but rather a map to help navigate through science PR. It will provide useful advice to newcomers or those who tackle science as a small part of a much wider remit. But it should also make the more experienced amongst us reflect on our practices.

PR is not a science and there is often no right or wrong way to do something, so much of this guide is phrased as questions posed to help you find the best way forward. Where there are concrete ideas – for example, the press release checklist – these are based on discussions with journalists and may raise an eyebrow or two.

We hope this guide provides a useful starting point, but don't forget that Stempra exists to support you. There is a wealth of knowledge and experience out there to be shared through our talks, workshops, networking events and email lists.

Katrina Nevin-Ridley

Chair, Stempra.
January, 2009



Promoting Research Responsibly

Science is not always easy to understand, but making sense of conflicting scientific claims can make it even more of a challenge. Are biofuels good for the environment or bad? Does drinking red wine make you more or less likely to have a stroke?

There are a number of issues to consider when promoting research that may help journalists – and hence the public – make sense of the findings.

- (1) Why are you promoting this research now?
- (2) What are you trying to achieve?
- (3) Who will it affect?
- (4) How will you communicate this research responsibly?
- (5) What is the best way to communicate this story?
- (6) Should you promote research which involves animals?

What Is Peer Review? And Why Is It Important?

When scientists submit their work for publication to an academic journal, it is scrutinised by their peers to assess its validity. This is considered a crucial stage in the scientific process. It is not a perfect system and does have its detractors, but most scientists – and science journalists – will agree that it is essential "quality control".

Research is often presented at a conference before peer-reviewing (though an element of peer review may be involved in selecting speakers). According to research published by the Cochrane Library, "Less than half of all studies... initially presented as summaries or abstracts at professional meetings are subsequently published as peer-reviewed journal articles."

(1) Why Are You Promoting This Research Now?

- Should you wait until the research has been peer-reviewed?
- If your scientist is speaking at a conference, is it open to the public and/or journalists?
- Could speaking about the research now affect their chances of publishing in *Nature* or *Science*?
- If the research is particularly controversial, is it better to be proactive or reactive?

Often, we promote research because there is a particular news hook, such as a paper appearing in a journal or an academic speaking at a conference. Sometimes, it could be that you are promoting ongoing research.

Research being presented at a conference or discussed with a journalist on a visit to your institution may not have been peer-reviewed. *(Please see the box about peer review on page 4).*

(2) What Are You Trying To Achieve?

- Are you aiming to raise the profile of your institution and its academics?
- Are you trying to foster informed debate?

Not all research needs to be promoted. Consider your motivations and those of your academics when preparing a press release.

(3) Who Will It Affect?

- Are all the key stakeholders – researchers, funders, etc. – happy with the press release?
- How might patients and their families react to reading about this research?
- Have you prepared for the consequences?

Coverage of scientific and medical 'breakthroughs' may be interesting to read, but there are often consequences depending on how it is covered. Badly-reported research stories could reflect poorly on the academic, his or her institution and the press office. Also, some patients and their families are desperately looking for hope and it may be unfair to raise their hopes when the research is at too early a stage.

(4) How Will You Communicate This Research Responsibly?

- Are the claims made in the press release supported by the paper?
- Can you get a 'second opinion' about the significance of the work or the claims being made?
- How will you convey risk factors?
- Are there any potential conflicting interests? e.g. if the research was industry-funded.
- Is the study well-designed? e.g. is the sample size sufficiently large.
- Who is the best spokesperson? (This might not be the lead author.)

(5) What Is The Best Way To Communicate This Story?

Press releases are only one tool in a press officer's toolkit. They can attract the widest coverage, but offer less control. If it is a sensitive subject, try to select the most appropriate tool. You might want to consider the following options:

- A **press release** to all journalists – this should result in the widest coverage, but can be more difficult to control.
- An **exclusive** to one, or perhaps two journalists or strategically selected news outlets – this might help you manage the story and target specific audiences.
- A **press briefing** – has the advantage of reducing the number of interviews your scientist needs to do, but can be time-consuming and risks a low attendance.
- Inviting the journalist to **visit your institution** – allows the journalist to hunt for their own story, but they may walk away with many of your best stories.

"National newspaper colleagues gossip a lot, so word tends to get round about which press officers make elaborate claims. At some point their university will come out with a great story, but this time we might not believe it and move on."

*Victoria Fletcher,
Health Correspondent, Daily Express*

(6) Should You Promote Research Which Involves Animals?

In almost all cases, the mention of animal research in the media will not result in repercussions of any kind. In recent years, measures to crack down on animal rights extremism have been very successful and you will find science and health reporters write about animal research all the time without raising an eyebrow (check out press releases of medical research funders for examples).

You may, however, find that scientists - and even university vice chancellors and deans - may need extra reassurance and preparation, ahead of media work, where animal research is to be discussed. The Science Media Centre (www.sciencemediacentre.org.uk) has a leaflet on communicating animal research and the organisation, Understanding Animal Research (www.understandinganimalresearch.org.uk) provides support for those institutions which work in this area.

Know Your Limitations

There is nothing worse than discovering that a terrible science story can be traced directly back to a press release which hyped the breakthrough and failed to include the limitations of the study. We have seen several examples of science journalists at the *Daily Mail* and the *Express* battling with their editors to tone down stories hyped by top science universities – that is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Anyone who has read *Flat Earth News* should know that almost all science and health stories these days are generated by PR. That means each one of us shares responsibility for improving the quality of science journalism.

No science press officer should ever issue a press release that doesn't include a paragraph on the limitations of the study. Is this study only done in mice and needs to be replicated in humans? Is it based on a sample size of only twenty people and needs to be replicated in a bigger group? Was the chemical in question banned ten years ago? We shouldn't be relying on journalists or indeed independent experts to point out these limitations.

Fiona Fox, Director of the Science Media Centre

Press Office Essentials

Press Releases

For many press officers, a press release is the main way we communicate with the outside world. But journalists claim to spend on average three seconds deciding whether a press release is worth reading, so pitching it right is crucial.

Journalists like clear, comprehensive and targeted releases. The perfect press release is one that leaves them with no questions. They hate irrelevant, overly-brief (or overly-dense) releases with low news value. If you send them lots of poor releases, they are less likely to pay attention when they receive a good story from you.

Scientists may be surprised at how "simple" you have to make their research. Encourage them to read stories in the publications you are targeting so they are aware of the tone, style and level of detail required for the "science" to make a news story.

- (1) Who are you writing the release for?
- (2) What is the 'top line' of the story?
- (3) When should you release the story?
- (4) What supplementary information would improve this story?
- (5) Who needs to see the release?

(1) Who Are You Writing The Release For?

Consider your target audience and select a media outlet appropriately. *The Sun* will look for something different to *The Lancet*, so tailor your style if appropriate.

If you are issuing a press release to national journalists and the story also has a strong local angle, consider a separate press release for regional outlets focusing on the local angle.

(2) What Is The 'Top Line' Of The Story?

To make it into the news, your story has to pass the 'So what?' test – i.e. what does this mean for the man on the street?

(3) When Should You Release The Story?

Most scientific projects produce the best and most reliable results when they come to an end, but major ones (long awaited or big budget) can create news when they are launched. For research stories, most people wait until the study has been peer reviewed. (*Please see "Promoting Research Responsibly," on page 4*).

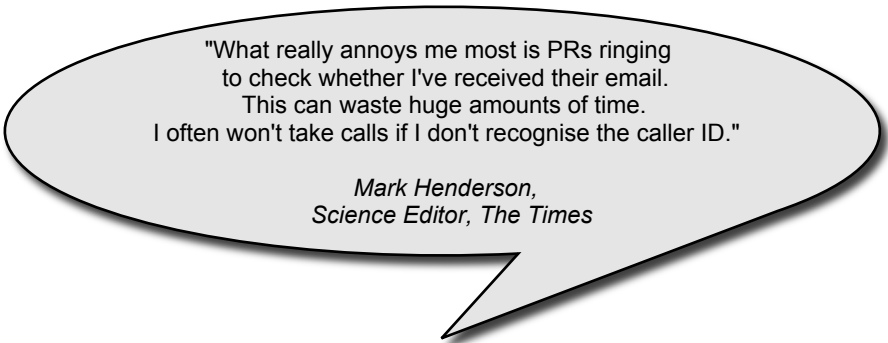
The exact timing of the release is very important and could make the difference between widespread coverage and obscurity. (*Please see "Embargoes," on page 11*).

(4) What Supplementary Information Would Improve This Story?

The more information you give the journalist, the easier it is for them to write the story. Try to include photos, case studies, supplementary facts and figures and quotes from people external to your organisation.

(5) Who Needs To See The Release?

Whilst approval for the release may lie with your scientist and your line manager, there may be other organisations that should be informed, such as collaborating institutions, research funders, patient groups and other relevant stakeholders.



"What really annoys me most is PRs ringing to check whether I've received their email. This can waste huge amounts of time. I often won't take calls if I don't recognise the caller ID."

*Mark Henderson,
Science Editor, The Times*

Distributing Your Press Release

- Paste the release into the body of the email. Don't send it as an attachment – and definitely not if you can see tracked changes!
- Keep the formatting clear and readable. Don't be tempted to include fancy graphics, logos or fonts.
- The email subject should be the press release title.
- BCC the journalists, don't CC them – your media list should be confidential.
- If distributing embargoed releases to the daily news outlets, be careful to avoid also sending to the Sundays.
- Use EurekAlert and/or AlphaGalileo to reach international audiences.
- Use phone calls wisely – don't follow up with a phone call unless you have additional information, a specific angle for that journalist or if it's the biggest news story of the year! (And yes, we know that every Introduction to PR course you will have ever been on tells you to follow up with a phone call. But try asking the people that matter – the journalists.)

Managing Collaborative Stories

Science stories often involve collaborations between multiple institutions, supported by more than one funding body. Working together to promote a story means more support and less duplication of effort and makes sure everyone is happy. Your objective may be to achieve a name check for your institution, but your scientists will want to keep their collaborators – and the people they receive their money from – happy.

Establish contact as soon as possible with the relevant press or communications officer for each of the partners. Developing an email group is often the most pragmatic way of communicating.

Some Questions To Help You Decide Who Should Lead:

- Who has the best relationship with the leading spokesperson or Principal Investigator?
- Who has the time and resources to devote to the story?
- Who is the major funder for the project?

Embargoes

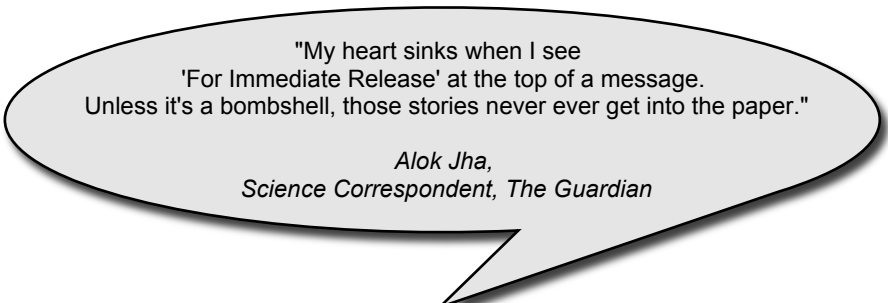
Most journalists agree that embargoes are a necessary evil and will respect them: they help ensure that there is a level playing field for all journalists, and mean you can issue a press release about a complex story in advance to enable journalists more time to prepare.

Sometimes, the embargo is predetermined, often by a journal. At other times, it is up to you whether or not to set an embargo and what that embargo will be.

Be aware that an embargo that works for one outlet will not necessarily work for another. A midnight embargo works for most newspapers and for breakfast TV/radio, but is less likely to get coverage in the evening. Think about your target audience and which media outlets will be the best way to reach them. Be aware that press releases issued for 'immediate release' are often ignored.

Also, be aware of how the wider news agenda is likely to affect your story. Even within scientific news there is competition for limited space. Stories from many major journals are embargoed for Thursdays or Fridays, so there is more competition on those days. You may hear about "Sunday for Mondays" – embargoes that allow the journalist to write up the story on Sunday for Monday's press (which are often easier to get into).

Whatever your embargo, make sure it is written clearly at the top of your release and includes the full time, date and time zone, e.g. GMT/BST/EST etc. To avoid confusion on midnight embargoes, 00.01 is better than 00.00.



"My heart sinks when I see
'For Immediate Release' at the top of a message.
Unless it's a bombshell, those stories never ever get into the paper."

*Alok Jha,
Science Correspondent, The Guardian*

Broken Embargoes

Broken embargoes can lay to waste your best made plans, so it is important to prevent them or to minimise the impact if they occur. Make sure that all parties involved are aware of the embargo and its implications and that the story must not appear anywhere – including online news pages or internal publications – before it lifts.

If a publication does break your embargo, try to assess what damage this will do. Is it worth lifting the embargo? Broken embargoes are often down to a mistake or misunderstanding, and a quiet word to the publication may be enough for them to take down online coverage.

You may decide to take punitive action against publications that break your embargoes. This will almost certainly impact on your relationship with its journalists, but may be necessary.

Press Release “Top Ten” Essentials

- 1 Embargo date and time (including time zone)
- 2 Catchy title that explains the main point of the story
- 3 First sentence that encapsulates the story
- 4 First paragraph to explain the story and give the context
- 5 Key questions to answer:
What? Why? Who? How? When? Where?
- 6 Name checks for relevant collaborators, funders, etc.
- 7 Quotes to help the journalist cover the story and add "colour" - try to get at least two quotes.
- 8 Comment from external organisation where appropriate, e.g. a relevant patient charity.
- 9 Length: Journalists say that 500-800 words is ideal
- 10 Notes for editors:
 - Contact details for the press office, including out-of-hours contacts.
 - Relevant boilerplates (paragraphs about each institution)
 - Journal reference for paper, including link to an online preview copy, where appropriate.

Preparing Your Scientists

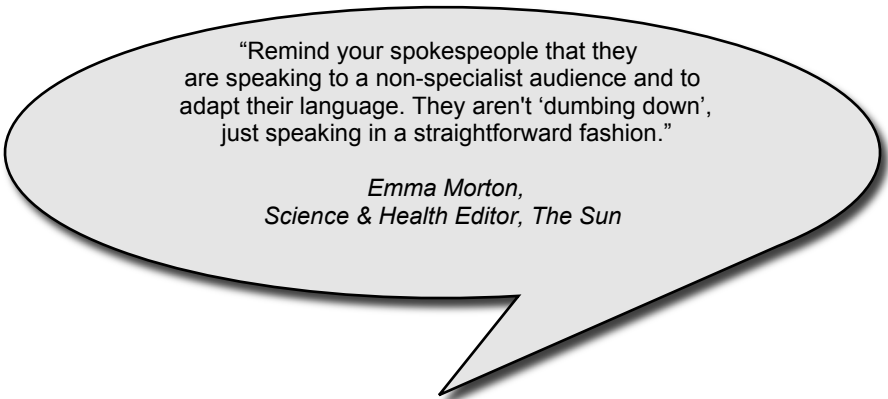
When you are preparing your scientists for media work, here are some issues to consider:

- (1) Who is the right person for the job?
- (2) Does the scientist know what to expect?
- (3) Managing expectations
- (4) Media training
- (5) Additional support

(1) Who Is The Right Person For The Job?

Journalists often ask for the most senior person in the research group or the head of department, but they are not necessarily the best – or most appropriate – person for the job. They may be the most recognisable name or have the strongest reputation, but consider the following:

- Do you need someone who has a good overview or someone who knows the most about a specific area of research?
- Can they communicate well in lay language?
- Do they have the time to commit to dealing with the media?
- Are there more junior researchers who have more time and are equally capable as communicators?



“Remind your spokespeople that they are speaking to a non-specialist audience and to adapt their language. They aren't ‘dumbing down’, just speaking in a straightforward fashion.”

*Emma Morton,
Science & Health Editor, The Sun*

(2) Does The Scientist Know What To Expect?

You will often be dealing with a scientist who is new to the media. There are a number of practical issues that they should consider which will help prepare them:

- Journalists work to short deadlines, and require quick responses. Return phone calls or emails promptly.
- Media work takes up time. It may be necessary to rearrange clinics and cancel meetings or teaching commitments. If this is not possible, ask if they can suggest an alternative spokesperson.
- It may be possible to conduct radio interviews over the phone, but it is usually necessary to go to a local studio.
- TV interviews will usually either be in their office/lab, or at a studio. The former can be time consuming and disruptive, so ensure that their colleagues are aware.
- Find out as much information as possible about the interview:
 - How long will it be?
 - What angle will the interviewer be taking?
 - Will anyone else be interviewed?
 - Will it be live or pre-recorded?

(3) Managing Expectations

Press officers are often asked to pitch stories of very low news value. Be honest with your scientists about what to expect, particularly if it will take up a lot of their time for little return. This will help maintain a good relationship between you, your scientists and the journalists.

It Might Help Your Scientist To Know The Following Things:

- Not all stories that are interesting to a researcher are interesting to a journalist or the general public.
- A news story can be "spiked" by breaking news – this means that a story gets cut out at the last minute, even if the scientist has done the interview.
- Pre-recorded interviews are almost always edited to less than a minute. The scientist may spend an hour with a journalist and find that their contribution lasts 15 seconds.
- Interviews with print reporters often result in short quotes appearing in an article.

(4) Media Training

- How often is your scientist likely to work with the media?
- Have they had any media experience before?
- Do they need formal media training or would a "mock interview" conducted by yourself be enough?

If your scientist is expected to work with the media often or a particular piece of research is likely to be widely covered or controversial, consider offering media training.

There are many media training courses on offer. The Science Media Centre offers a free 'Introduction to the News Media' course, and many funders will offer media training at some level. Alternatively, it may be worthwhile bringing in a media trainer for a session at your institution.

(5) Additional Support

Most scientists (and press officers!) will have a number of people they can turn to for help or advice when they have a story to tell. These include:

- You – make sure your scientist has your mobile number (and vice versa)
- Colleagues with media experience
- Funding body's press office
- Science Media Centre
- Stempra

PR Stunts

Stunts – such as photo calls, mass-participation experiments and opinion polls – can provide a valuable tool for achieving media coverage, particularly for a "soft" story, for example an evening talk.

Before You Organise A Stunt, You May Wish To Consider:

- (1) What are you aiming to achieve?
- (2) What precautions and protocols do you need to consider?
- (3) How will the stunt impact on other stakeholders?
- (4) How "sound" is the science behind your stunt?
- (5) What would be the consequences of an unexpected result?
- (6) How will images from your photo opportunity be used?

(1) What Are You Aiming To Achieve?

- Are you recruiting participants/attendees?
- Are you raising awareness of your organisation?

Whatever your aims and objectives, take time to make sure that they are clear to everyone in your organisation.

(2) What Precautions And Protocols Do You Need To Consider?

- Have you carried out a health and safety assessment?
- Do you have public liability insurance?
- Do you have permission from the participants (or their guardians if under 18) to use their comments or photos?

If the public is involved in your event, ensure that your organisation is covered in the event of any accidents or injuries and that you have considered the health and safety implications if necessary. Also, don't assume that because a person has taken part in an activity you automatically have the right to use their photograph or contribution for publicity purposes, particularly if he or she is a minor.

(3) How Will The Stunt Impact On Other Stakeholders?

- Will the outcome of your survey or experiment be presented or interpreted as the opinion of your organisation?
- Could the outcome of a stunt impact on other stakeholders?


If the stunt is being executed under your organisation's brand, then it is important to consider the impact it may have. If your survey finds that the majority of the public are opposed to GM crops, will this be viewed as your opinion?

Remember, too, that stakeholders could be affected by your results. An experiment asking the public to measure rainfall and climate across the UK may seem innocuous, but would a town striving to increase visitors want to be labelled "the wettest town in the UK"?

(4) How "Sound" Is The Science Behind Your Stunt?

- Does your study or activity claim to be scientific?
- Does your opinion poll have a statistically-relevant sample size?
- Could the stunt leave your organisation open to accusations of "dumbing down"?

Many PR stunts are only intended to be light-hearted, but if you are conducting an experiment or carrying out a survey, should rigour be important? If the public trusts your organisation's brand, do you have a duty to ensure that the study has credibility?



"There are times when you have to make your own news by putting on an event or activity which is essentially staged. Be clear why you are doing it, what you want to achieve and what your market is. 'Stunts' get quantity coverage; they rarely get quality. 'Real' science writers hate them because they're not real science - so don't pretend they are."

*Dianne Stilwell,
Communications Consultant*

(5) What Would Be The Consequences Of An Unexpected Result?

- Is there potential for the stunt to backfire?
- How will the results impact on the reputation of those involved?
- Are you duty-bound to release the results?

Many stunts, particularly those involving mass participation, such as surveys, can have unexpected results. The results may prove unpalatable to the organisers or to other stakeholders, such as sponsors, so you will need to be prepared to deal with the consequences.

If you do not want to announce the results, you will need to be able to justify your decision. The more successful the launch of an activity, the more interest there will be in the results.

(6) How Will Images From Your Photo Opportunity Be Used?

- What is the worst possible photo that could come out of your stunt?

Not all photo opportunities will be stunts – many will be integral to the story itself – but the precautions are still the same. Inviting press photographers along rather than issuing your own images will ensure each publication gets its own unique picture, but makes the final image more difficult to control. Watch out for potential pitfalls. Imagine how a photo opportunity for "The Big Count", a hypothetical event to raise awareness of maths, could go horrendously wrong if the education minister's head obscures a key letter on a publicity banner!

Working With Agencies And Freelancers

Outsourcing to agencies or freelancers can be an effective way of adding extra support to your press office in busy periods or if you are under-resourced. However, before you hire external support first ask yourself whether this is the most cost-effective way to achieve your aims: would it be a better use of resources to fund an additional post in your office?

Find The Most Suitable Agency

This is very important. It is advisable to look for agencies with strong science communication experience and who understand the research publication landscape. If you work at a university, it is an advantage to understand the higher education culture. Word of mouth recommendation is always best.

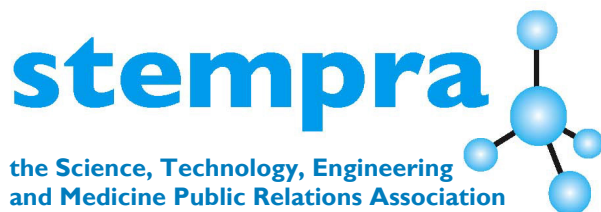
Establish A Good Working Relationship With The Agency

This is essential. Ensure your ground rules and procedures are clear from the outset and you have set realistic targets. Always ensure the press office has final sign-off of press releases and agrees the issues date beforehand.

Two-Way Communication Between Your Press Office And The Agency

This is vital. Meet often and routinely discuss matters of relevance to both parties, but be careful not to micro-manage them.

It will be important that the agency is able to build good relationships with your academics, but being an external organisation can present difficulties. Encourage them to get on campus regularly and meet academics in order to build up trust. Academics wary of working with the media can be even more wary of working with external agencies: make sure a non-disclosure agreement is in place to allay any fears of intellectual property leaks.



**the Science, Technology, Engineering
and Medicine Public Relations Association**

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