



# Fire Department Public Relations Toolkit

Prepared by



# Introduction



Dealing with the public and the media is not usually considered part of the firefighter’s job description. However, it is becoming a more and more integral part of any department’s livelihood. Presenting a good image provides many benefits for your department. And any missteps are amplified by the sound chamber of the media. Be prepared and proactive when dealing with the media, and your job will be much easier.

To help you, we’ve prepared the following materials:

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# How (and Why) to Build Great Media Relationships



When dealing with the media, you should always aim to be proactive. Always seek to develop a relationship with those who will be covering local events. Create a media list, a list of journalists in your area that you will be working with. Offer to be a subject-matter expert for them, provide your own press releases and send them relevant information when requested. That way, when issues do arise, you've already built a relationship with the very person or people who will cover it, which can be a boon in times of crisis.

Always try to understand things from their perspective. Like many professions, news people are overworked and often have too little time to get their stories done. You want to make their lives as easy as possible: don't delay in returning their calls. If you don't have an answer handy, let them know that you'll get back to them when you do get it.

Above all, appear helpful. Provide them with facts, either as a technical resource or on specific cases, if possible. Reporters aren't experts, and if you want them to get it right, you have to help them.

Always present information in as few words as possible. This has many benefits, but the most important here is that they neither have the time nor desire to rework what you've said. If you're dealing with a newspaper, offer to provide a photograph to accompany the story. Make it easy on them, and they'll make it easy on you.

Before speaking to a reporter, do your research, and have a fact sheet on hand. What form this takes will depend on you and the situation, but it should include the principle message you'd like to get across and the most relevant facts.

# How to Build a Media List



A media list is a critical tool for your department's PR efforts. Put simply, it is a list of journalists in your area and their contact information. These are the people you'll be working with to share news about your department. A sample media list can be found immediately following this list.

1. List the media outlets that you read, listen to, or watch. Do a web search and find other local news outlets (don't forget to include exclusively online news outlets).
2. As you build your list, divide it by the type of outlet (print, TV, etc.) and frequency of publication (i.e. daily, weekly, monthly).
3. Once you have your list, find out who to contact in each organization. You can often do this using a Google search and a quick phone call or two. You'll want to collect the following information:
  - Media outlet name
  - Contact name
  - Phone number
  - Email
  - Fax
  - Social media (twitter handle, etc)
  - Address
  - Deadline (journalists may request news be given, for example, a week before a story goes to print)
  - Circulation
  - Miscellaneous notes
4. Always call and confirm that the contact information is correct, and introduce yourself to the contact person.
5. Once you have your list created, you'll want to check in every six months or so and update any necessary information.

## Sample Media List

Name	Contact	Phone	Email Address	Address	Deadline	Fax	Circulation	Notes
<b>Daily</b>								
Sun Tribune	John Doe	415-555-1237	jdoe@suntribune.com	111 E. 83rd Ave. Anytown, USA 46410	1 week before	415-555-1238	20,000	
The Suburban Times	Jane Doe	510-555-6868	jdoe@subtimes.com	222 6th Ave. Anytown, USA 46321	1 week before	510-555-6877	25,000	
The Countywide Times	John Reporter	510-555-4545	jreporter@cwtimes.com	321 Delila Dr. Anytown, USA 46321	1 week before	510-555-4588	18,000	
City Tribune	Jane Reporter	415-555-5432	jane@citytribune.com	456 Main St. Anytown, USA 46433	1 week before	415-555-5499	30,000	
<b>Weekly</b>								
Weekly Journal	Sally Jones	510-555-5678	sjones@wj.com	123 First Ave. Anytown, USA 46999	1 week before	510-555-5644	14,000	
<b>Bi-weekly</b>								
CR Publications	Jake Jacobs	415-555-3322	newsdesk@crpubs.com	55 Broadway Anytown, USA 46789	4 days before either date	415-555-3380	12,000	
<b>Monthly</b>								
City Magazine	Sally Smith	650-555-0987	ssmith@citymag.com	1829 7th Ave. Anytown, USA 46321	2 weeks before	650-555-0999	15,000	
<b>Television</b>								
KPIX	Sam Smith	415-555-3322	sam.smith@kpix.com	456 Battery St. Anytown, USA 46433		415-555-3355		
KRON	Mary Jones	415-555-7890	mary.jones@kron.com	987 Maple St. Anytown, USA 46433		415-555-7899		
<b>Online</b>								
Fireonline.com	John Jones	510-555-5678	john@fireonline.com	878 Third Ave. Anytown, USA 46567		510-555-5644		
<b>Radio</b>								
KRCW	Jay Johnson	650-555-4567	jay.johnson@krcw.com	234 10th Ave. Anytown, USA 46321		650-555-4590		

# General Media Guidelines



Before giving a statement or interview:

- Always ask the topic, and if any specific information (such as statistics) will be required.
- Double-check everything.
- Prepare this and other background information in a factsheet for yourself.
- Remain positive and non-combative. Don't make negative comments about others.
- Treat all news people well—build relationships, but not favorites.
- Remember: there is no such thing as off the record.

When giving an interview:

- Know the main points you want to express.
- When you answer the first question, segue into your main points.
- Use real stories, anecdotes, facts and figures.
- Remember to keep moving the interview in the direction you want it to go, toward your main points.
- If you don't have an answer, be honest, then segue into something you do know, or your main point.

When doing a radio interview:

- Prepare yourself with background info, relevant facts, your main point, a sound bite (if you prepared a press release on this subject, you may have one already prepared).
- Speak in your normal, conversational voice. Be yourself and be personable.
- Speak in short, direct sentences.

When doing a television interview:

- Always look calm, comfortable and presentable when going on television.
- Don't talk to the camera, talk to the reporter.
- Speak in short, sound bite sized sentences. They will edit this interview before it airs.
- Don't refer to a handout. This does not look good on TV. You're going to have to prepare beforehand and draw your facts from memory.

# How to Write a Great Press Release



Putting the best foot forward is crucial in our ever-more media conscious society. In order to do that, you want to have a proactive presence in the media, providing updates on the good things your department is doing and how you're helping the community. The best way to share this information with the public is through the tried-and-true press release.

It can be surprisingly easy to write effective press releases—if you understand the individual parts and prepare accordingly. News people are overworked and if you can provide them with something newsworthy they don't have to rewrite, they'll reward you by sharing it, sometimes verbatim. This is the real power of the press release: your words will be shared with their audience.

If you still aren't a believer, then check out Conan O'Brien's recurring [Newscasters Agree](#) segment. Want to know how it is that new stations across the country happen to say the exact same thing? Someone crafted an excellent press release, and all of the stations went ahead and aired it because (1) they didn't have to rewrite it and (2) they didn't have to rewrite it.

So, now that you see what a press release can do, you want to create one for your organization. To do it effectively, you need:

- **A clear topic/event in mind**—don't try to jam too much into one press release. Ask yourself:
  - What is the news/event?
  - Why is it newsworthy?
  - If this is an event, what are the dates, times and deadline to apply/register?
- **A strong headline**—If you're going to spend time anywhere, spend it here. If people don't read your press release, it'll be difficult to reach them.
- **A sound bite**—This is a catchy introductory sentence or two designed to provide the newsperson who reads your press release with a chunk of their work already done. To get an idea of what this means, see the Conan segment above.

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- **A powerful quote**—Before you start writing, make sure you have a quotable quote: something that is short, adds insight to the issues, and sounds more conversational than scripted.
- **An organizational description**—The good news is you'll only have to write this once and use it for all your press releases. Tell the story of your department and its goals in no more than four sentences. Be sure to include the URL to your department's web site.

That's it. Once you have those pieces, the press release will write itself. If you would like to see examples of press release templates, see the template in this guide or go here: <http://www.iccsafe.org/safety/pages/media.aspx>

The (not so) fun part: proofing, checking, and double checking.

This is a critical step when dealing with the media. You want all contact information to be correct, as well as any numbers or other data you provide. A small slip up here can be a big black eye later, so take the extra time here and save yourself the headache.

If you don't have one, buy a copy of the *Associated Press Stylebook*. It will help you with grammar, word use and special style uses media outlets prefer. Having your news release conform to AP style will go a long way to getting it published.

Once your press release is written, proofed, checked and double-checked, here are some possible avenues to release it. This will depend on the scope of your public relations campaign. Here's where a well-developed and current media list will be invaluable.

- Your website (when uploading to your website, include embedded links where relevant).
- Local news (newspaper, regional magazine, TV, etc.).
- A press release newswire. There are many web sites where you can post your press release. For example, [www.prnewswire.com](http://www.prnewswire.com).
- Finally, get the word out through your own social media announcement.

#### Looking for press release ideas?

- Fire safety week
- Holiday fire safety
- Home safety
- Fundraising events
- Summertime safety (grills, etc)
- Smoke alarms
- Fire department funding or other issues where the department needs community backing
- Firefighter hiring, promotions and retirements
- Firefighters helping in the community outside the scope of emergency response

## Social Media

Social media is becoming an increasingly integral part of our lives. For your organization, you'll want to make sure you have a strong social media policy in place to ensure that you're in control of how your department is perceived.

- Ensure that everyone knows that they are representatives of the department, even when they aren't in uniform.
- Limit the number of people who can update your department's official social media policies, ideally just one or two.
- Avoid negative remarks about people, organizations, and events.
- Always promote your activities.
- Share useful tips when you don't have anything specific to write about.



# Press Release Template

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date

INSERT FIRE DEPARTMENT LOGO

Contact Person

Contact Person's info

**Headline** (A short, catchy headline)

**Subhead** (longer, with additional details)

**City, State** —(always include City, State and an em dash (—) before the first sentence) The sound bite and introduction: summarize the press release here, just the basic information

**The Body:** This is where you expand upon the who, what, where, when, and why, also always include the quote you've prepared. This section will often be more than one paragraph, be sure to keep the quote towards the top.

**Organization's Information:** In the final paragraph, you want to include a preapproved, short paragraph length stock description of your organization and its history. This will usually not be unique to each press release, but it will appear on all of them.

You will generally want to keep press releases as short as possible and always aim for under a page. Those seeking more information will contact the person you identify at the top.

###

(these hashmarks indicate the end of the press release)

# PSAs



Public Service Announcements (PSAs) can help position you and your department as a vital resource for the community. In addition, they are of great educational value. PSAs can come in various forms. Print PSAs can be distributed at events in the community, either hosted by the fire department or not. Radio and Television PSAs are often aired for free, but usually only when a station has commercial time that has not been purchased.

The U.S. Fire Administration has [a wide array of PSAs](#) available in all three formats, as well as helpful tip on how to achieve a better reach with them.

## **Getting Your PSAs Out into the Community**

Make a list of media outlets in your area. Not just newspapers and TV stations, but also neighborhood newsletters and other smaller outlets.

Contact people inside of each outlet that you can speak to about getting your PSAs out into the community. The telephone is still the best option, allowing you to make your case in a more personal way than email or fax. Some outlets and publication have specific rules for submissions, so be sure to check.

When pitching your PSA to a media outlet, include a simple letter explaining the PSA and why or how it relates to the issues faced by your community; include the PSA, and information about your department.

Always follow up offering to answer questions, or provide additional information. If the outlet agrees to run your PSA, make sure to note when and or how so that you can both promote it and track the success of your campaign.

# Where to Find the Resources You Need: A Comprehensive Guide



Identifying your public relations needs is the first step, but developing them yourself can be costly, and may require skills unavailable within your department. Luckily, there is a wide range of media resources available for you to use. These resources can save you time and provide your community with professional quality, topical media.

## **The National Fire Service Resource Guide**

[www.nvfc.org/files/documents/National-Fire-Service-Resource-Guide-2013.pdf](http://www.nvfc.org/files/documents/National-Fire-Service-Resource-Guide-2013.pdf)

This is an excellent place to start. Use its chapter on media relations as a starting point.

## **The International Code Council's Public Relations for Building and Fire Officials**

[www.iccsafe.org/safety/pages/media.aspx](http://www.iccsafe.org/safety/pages/media.aspx)

Here, you'll find prepared press releases on a variety of topical and seasonal subjects such as: holiday tree safety, snow loads, and summer safety tips. With a little customization, you can prepare press releases in a fraction of the time.

## **The International Code Council's Building a Media Relationship**

[www.iccsafe.org/safety/Documents/MediaRelations.pdf](http://www.iccsafe.org/safety/Documents/MediaRelations.pdf)

A short media relations primer filled with best practices and talking tips that cover a variety of media relations situations. Be prepared for the media, and they'll make it easy on you.

## **The U.S. Fire Administration**

[www.usfa.fema.gov/media/](http://www.usfa.fema.gov/media/)

A repository of approved media campaigns, tips for news stories, but most importantly, a free to use, high-quality archive of stock photos and B-Roll footage that any fire department can use to strengthen their PR media. They also have prepared PSAs that include print, radio, video, and social media elements.

## **The National Volunteer Fire Council's Social Media Page**

[www.nvfc.org/hot-topics/social-media-policies](http://www.nvfc.org/hot-topics/social-media-policies)

A collection of resources for and by fire departments relating to social media, how to use it, how not to, and how to make the most of it.

Consider bringing on a community volunteer to help with your department's public relations.