

## **Ask SCORE**

*I operate a petsitting business and plan to expand the territory that I serve. Without a large budget to advertise, how can I get the word out?*

Behold the humble press release. Even in the age of blogs and RSS feeds, the press release remains the simplest, yet most effective tool for generating publicity about your small business. Even better, the resulting coverage costs nothing compared to the costs of paid advertising. (Keep in mind, however, that complementing your PR effort with some targeted advertising can greatly enhance its effectiveness.)

While you don't have to be a PR expert or writing whiz to create an effective release, a potentially newsworthy item may be overlooked if the release is poorly organized or doesn't seem newsworthy.

First, you need to have news that's worth sharing. Things that may seem important to you may not be relevant to your intended audience. Imagine you're a reader with little or no familiarity with your business, and think about what might appeal to you. Some things are easy, such as adding a new product or service, opening a new location, reaching a milestone anniversary, winning an award or hiring new staff members.

Also consider offering readers helpful hints related to your product or service. If you're an accountant, for example, a list of tips for getting organized at income tax time may be perfect for time-crunched taxpayers. Gift shop owners can prepare a list of innovative ideas for specific holidays, or acceptable items to send service personnel overseas. In your case, questions to ask when interviewing pet sitters might be appropriate.

Aside from the news item itself, the most important parts of a press release are the headline and first paragraph. Because editors sift through dozens of press releases a day, they rarely read anything that doesn't immediately grab their attention. Get to the point by organizing the first paragraph around what your news is, who it's about, and why it's important. Then, use brief supporting paragraphs to add detail.

Remember that like a resume, a press release is designed to pique interest, not tell the entire story. As such, limit your release to no more than two double-spaced pages; in most cases, one page will suffice.

Your company's logo and contact information should be at the top of your press release. It's also helpful to include a contact name, address, phone number and e-mail in the text.

Once your release is ready, contact the publications or media outlets to identify the right editor, and whether they prefer to receive releases by regular mail or electronically and in what format (Word document, text pasted into the body of the e-mail, etc.). Make sure you spell the editor's name and title correctly. Releases with errors or addressed to long-departed predecessors often go into the trash unread.

*This column is brought to you by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE, with more than 50 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business counseling and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit [www.score-manchester.org](http://www.score-manchester.org) for information on counseling, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.*

*Have a question you'd like answered in this column? E-mail it to [info@score199.mv.com](mailto:info@score199.mv.com), with "Ask SCORE" in the subject line.*