

stempra

GUIDE TO BEING A MEDIA OFFICER



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ABOUT STEMPPRA

Stempra is a network for science, technology, engineering and mathematics PR and communications professionals. We care about the quality of communication in science and want to support our members to negotiate the balance between encouraging public interest in STEM subjects, and retaining balance and accuracy. Our aim is for everyone involved in science public relations and press work to have the requisite skills, knowledge, recognition, and responsibility to do this.

We provide professional support through training, events and networking so that our members can discuss the current challenges and best practice in the sector. Our events, newsletter and active discussion list are a great way for members to come together to share their knowledge and experience.

Membership is open to anyone working in, or on behalf of, an organisation where scientific public relations, media relations, or communication is involved in their job role. Our members range from media officers to directors of communication working for a variety of organisations including universities, learned societies, research councils and museums, as well as freelancers and consultants.

Stempra is run by a voluntary committee of science communication professionals from around the UK, operating under the constitution that has been approved by the membership.



www.stempra.org.uk



[@Stempra](https://twitter.com/Stempra)

INTRODUCTION

From the Stemptra committee

Being a science media officer can be daunting – it's a role that brings with it a huge amount of responsibility. This can include giving our experts a voice, protecting our organisation's reputation and nimbly stepping through endless controversies, but also the profound effect our work can have on the public and policymakers. The stories we work on can amuse or intrigue, but they can also challenge, scare or provide hope, false or otherwise. Stemptra was set up in 1993 to support professionals dealing with these responsibilities and in 2009 Stemptra published *The Stemptra Guide to being a Media Officer*. This is now the third edition of our guide, updated in 2019 to reflect the changing nature of our jobs and the new challenges that we all face.

Stemptra's aim is for everyone involved in science PR and media relations to have the requisite skills, professional knowledge, role recognition and ethical guidance to help organisations navigate the complex environment of science media and public relations. Stemptra's thriving membership ranges from media officers starting out to experienced directors of communication as well as freelancers and consultants. Our members work in universities, charities, learned societies, private businesses, research councils and museums. The combined expertise is immense and Stemptra thrives because so many members are willing to share their experiences through talks, debates, workshops and the discussion list. We have taken just a small portion of this knowledge and put it into the latest version of this guide, which we hope will be essential reading for anyone new to the role and a handy resource for anyone tackling a new task or considering whether there's another way to do things.

Stemptra members care passionately about their roles and responsibilities and this guide reflects that enthusiasm. The pages are filled with the combined expertise and experience of many senior practitioners. Following these will obviously be a great start but we also hope that Stemptra members will keep challenging each other and force us to continually consider whether there is a better way.

COMMUNICATING RESPONSIBLY



GETTING READY FOR MEDIA WORK

Science is not always easy to understand, but making sense of conflicting scientific claims can make it even more of a challenge. How risky is fracking? Does drinking red wine make you more or less likely to have a stroke?

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

Why are you promoting this research now?

Often, we promote research because there is a particular news hook, such as a paper appearing in a journal. Sometimes you might promote ongoing research, such as research being presented at a conference or discussed with a journalist before publication. Ongoing research is unlikely to have been peer-reviewed so you may want to weigh up the following:

- Is there a good reason not to 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 a journal?
- If the research is particularly controversial, is it better to be proactive or reactive?

What are you trying to achieve?

Not all research needs to be promoted. There are good reasons and bad reasons for doing press releases. Press officers should have the confidence to say no if something isn't right. Consider your motivations and those of your academics when preparing a press release.

- Are you aiming to raise the profile of your institution and its academics?
- Are you trying to foster informed debate?
- Are you trying to interest students, recruit trial participants, influence policymakers or gain public support?



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, their institution and the press office.

You should also remember that many patients and their families are desperately looking for hope, and it may be unfair to raise their hopes prematurely before a treatment is proven in clinical trials.

- 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?

How will you communicate this research responsibly?

It is your responsibility to ensure that the claims made in the press release are 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 and present statistics accurately?
- Are there any potential conflicting interests? e.g. if the research was industry-funded was there a firewall between funders and researchers?
Are you being upfront about who has funded the research?
- Is the study well-designed? e.g. is the sample size sufficiently large, did it have sufficient controls, was it randomised and blinded?
- Who is the best spokesperson? (This might not be the lead author).

How do you promote research that involves animals?

There is a growing awareness of the importance of openness about the use of animals in research. As a result, over 100 universities, charities, companies, and research councils have signed the Concordat on Openness on Animal Research in the UK. This is a pledge to be clear about when, how and why animals are used, and to be proactive about providing opportunities for the public to find out more.

There is more information on the Understanding Animal Research website (www.understandinganimalresearch.org.uk). UAR also provides resources and support for institutions which work in this area. Some scientists and other spokespeople may need extra reassurance and preparation before media work involving animals in research.

AVOIDING HYPE

As a media officer you may be under pressure from people within your organisation to get your institution's name in the national news. However, you also have a responsibility to communicate research accurately, without over-stating results and misleading the public – particularly when it comes to health.

Journalists are under a lot of pressure to produce eye-catching copy to deadline, so it's important we give them all the facts in a way that helps them get the story right. Here are some tips on how to avoid hype.

Control the message

If one of your scientists is about to publish a controversial paper, the best way to stay in control of your message is by proactively communicating. Don't be tempted to avoid communicating controversial research as there is a good chance journalists will spot the story, especially if it is being published in a high profile journal and particularly if it is highlighted by the journal press office. If you have to react to the story you're always on the back foot.



You may wish to communicate by issuing a press release which will allow you to work closely with your researchers to develop a clear message. Particularly controversial stories may warrant a press briefing, which gives your experts valuable face-to-face time with journalists to explain their findings. You can always contact the Science Media Centre for help and advice on how to handle a controversial issue, and they run regular press briefings on controversial new research.

Be clear about the limitations of the study

Discuss the study with the scientists leading the research and ask them what the limitations of the study are – what was the sample size, do the results contradict popular opinion, was the treatment tested in humans or animals? Be sure to include these limitations of the study in your press release.

Once you have prepared the release, ask the researchers to check the facts and make sure they are happy with the way you have interpreted the results. If you are not sure the lead researcher is being open about the limitations of the research, don't be afraid to check with someone more senior in your organisation.

See page 14 for further best practice guidance on producing a good quality and responsible press release.

Prepare your spokespeople

If you are publicising something controversial, it is important that your scientists are available for interview and prepared for difficult questioning. Make sure they are confident about what they want to say and what they don't want to say. It is important they don't feel forced into overstating the significance of their work by leading questions from journalists who are eager for a headline.

You should also make sure that they can speak plainly in a way that's clear to their audience, to avoid any confusion or misinterpretation of the findings. Spending a bit of time helping inexperienced researchers prepare for interviews can make a big difference to the way the story is reported.

Don't kill a good story

All research has limitations and, while it is important that you communicate these, make sure you're not so scared of hype that you kill a good quality story. If you have chosen to do a press release to communicate an important, interesting and robust piece of research, be confident enough to tell your story in a way that will generate coverage. Every now and again you will get handed a truly wonderful piece of research that deserves being headline news – make the most of it!



Dr Claire Bithell, Head of Communications at the Academy of Medical Sciences, said:

“The best way to avoid hype is to write a clear and accurate press release. Live and breathe the science, read and reread the paper, and speak to your experts so you fully understand the research and its implications. Don't shy away from including the raw data in the press release and always explain how the research was conducted.”

“Despite all your efforts, a story may still get exaggerated in the media. If this happens, this is the time to act quickly to ensure subsequent coverage doesn't perpetuate the inaccuracies. Ask journalists if web copy can be changed for stories that are already out there. And make sure the public have access to the real story through other channels such as social media or your website.”

ESSENTIALS OF A GOOD RESEARCH PRESS RELEASE

- 1 It's obvious, but don't forget to clearly say where the press release is from!
- 2 Decide whether it should be issued under embargo or for immediate release. State the date and time clearly.
- 3 A headline that clearly summarises the main news angle of the story. Be wary of making it too long and avoid using puns or over-hyping the story.
- 4 The first paragraph or 'top line' is the most important paragraph of the press release. It should explain the main finding of a research paper, or most important element of a report, in a brief and punchy way. This may well include a vital caveat e.g. that the research is in mice not humans, or that the research shows a correlation not a causative relationship.
- 5 The second and third paragraphs should give more context to your top line – this usually includes explaining why this research was carried out, which organisation led the research, where it's being published (e.g. the name of the journal), the size or duration of the study, and further details of what the researchers found and what it means.
- 6 The next paragraphs should cover the 'how'. This is usually the methodology – remember to include key details such as the dose and frequency of drugs given to animals or which patients were included in a clinical trial. Give further details of any important limitations of the study at this stage.



- 7 Well-written quotes can really lift a release. It's often good to include a punchy, 'top-line' quote in the first few paragraphs to give journalists something quotable. Ideally the first quote should start with a very short sentence that you might realistically expect to see in a 100-word article in the Sun. Remember that shorter sentences and words are always preferable and more likely to be used, and longer sentences could be truncated. Quotes can add colour to a release and allow a researcher's personality to come through. If you have good quotes in the release, the researcher will have to spend less time on the phone telling different journalists the same thing.
- 8 Think about other organisations involved and where to credit them. For example, you might want to include a quote from a co-author at another university, a funder, or perhaps a charity or someone representing a patient group involved in the study.
- 9 Notes for editors could include:
 - Contact details for the press office, including out of hours.
 - A reference to the source material, for example a journal reference, title of a report, title and venue of a speech. Where possible you should link to this material. Journals can sometimes provide links to preview copies if the press release is under embargo.
 - Whether or not there are images or footage available for use by journalists – this can really improve the pickup of your story.
 - Background information or 'boilerplates' about the organisations involved.
 - Patient/participant case studies if appropriate.



Chris Smyth, Health Editor at the Times, said:

"A competent press release explains succinctly what the researchers actually did and why this matters to the wider world. Hying up the study gets in the way of understanding these points quickly and larding a release with words like 'breakthrough' only suggests a press officer is pushing the science further than it wants to go. A good press release will add helpful context about the subject that helps to explain why it is important as well as some punchy quotes. The best press releases will anticipate the questions and concerns a journalist is likely to have and answer them, leaving us in the convenient – but uncomfortable – position of having all the information we need in one place."

WHAT'S THE EVIDENCE ON WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE PRESS RELEASE?

Several studies have been published looking at press releases and resulting news coverage, including from a group at Cardiff University (<http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/insciout/>).



Prof Petroc Sumner, Professor of Neuroscience at Cardiff University, said:

“Studies suggest that exaggerations in health news can often be traced back to press releases. But the good news is, responsible and nuanced health news is also normally based on press releases. Importantly, having a cautious headline and including caveats in press releases was not associated with less coverage – so it looks like there’s no good reason to leave limitations out.”

The evidence also shows that things like cautious tone, explicit caveats and absolute risks when given in press releases tend to make their way into news coverage. This is good news for press officers – it shows that what we do matters, that by being responsible we can help shape measured news coverage, and that we don’t have to oversell stories for them to get coverage.

What about correlation versus causation?

A lot of science news comes from observational studies – and they certainly have their place in research. But getting across the difference between an association and causation, and being clear about which one the study in question is, can be tricky. If a study is observational, the bottom line is that on its own it *can’t* say one thing caused the other, because other confounding factors could be responsible. People with a bigger shoe size are better at reading, for example – this doesn’t mean big feet *causes* better reading (or that being able to read *causes* foot growth); here, age is the confounding factor which is probably responsible for wearing bigger shoes and being better at reading.

But what language should we use when it comes to correlation? For observational studies we should avoid using causal statements like “X causes Y” or “A leads to a greater chance of B” – that would be exaggeration. The Cardiff group suggests we can either say “X is associated with Y”, or “A might lead to B”. The evidence also shows that we can include an explicit caveat – e.g. “This study was correlational and therefore we cannot be sure one causes the other” – without getting less coverage.

STEMPRA'S BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR HEALTH AND BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH PRESS RELEASES

It's particularly important to get the right balance between compelling coverage and accuracy when it comes to medical and health research – press coverage can lead to undue worry or premature hope of treatment, and can even lead readers to change their behaviour. It is vital that the public has access to the best evidence and that new findings are put into context and portrayed responsibly in the media – press officers play a huge part in that.

A recent report by the Academy of Medical Sciences (<https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/44970096>) found that only one third of the surveyed public trusts medical evidence, and suggested ways in which the scientific community could improve this. Stemptra was among many organisations given a recommendation in this report – ours was to develop a code of practice for press officers to encourage best practice. To this end, we've produced the following easy-to-use best practice guide specifically for biomedical press releases.

Biomedical research press releases should:

- Accurately reflect – and not overstate or 'hype' – the findings of the research, particularly in the title and top line of the press release. Only include the words 'breakthrough' or 'cure' if the researchers (and preferably third parties) are absolutely sure. Beware of raising false hope among patients.
- Include research caveats and limitations of the study – for example the number of participants in a study, if there were factors researchers weren't able to control for, or if some of the findings weren't directly measured but done for example by survey.
- State if the study was done in cell lines, animal models (state which animal), human embryos or in people.
- State clearly which type of study was undertaken. For example, if it's a clinical trial, is it randomised, controlled, double blind, phase I, II or III? Is it an observational study? Or maybe it's new research, a meta-analysis of previously published data, or a combination of both?
- Be explicit about whether the press release is about peer-reviewed evidence being published in a journal, a conference presentation of unpublished data, or an editorial or opinion piece e.g. "in an opinion piece published in XXXX journal, Professor Jane Smith said."

- Be clear about whether the reported finding is a correlation or causation. If it is just an association, avoid causal language such as “x increased the risk of y”.
- Include, where available, absolute risk as well as relative risk. If it isn't available, include some useful background risk information e.g. “in the general population, 1 in every 3,000 people get the disease”.
- Avoid statistical concepts that are hard to interpret, such as odds ratios.
- Include descriptions of context, including the weight of previous evidence, especially if what you are publicising is particularly controversial, surprising, or contradictory to previous thought.
- Be clear about whether you're talking about the direct findings of the study or wider interpretation or extrapolation, especially if it involves health advice.
- Be diligently checked for accuracy by the original researcher. It may also be prudent to consult a relevant senior academic in the organisation such as the Academic Dean, Medical Director, or Head of Division, for example if your press release is making bold claims or if the research has not yet been peer-reviewed.
- Provide a link to the original study if available. It is not always possible before publication with every journal – but you should have an embargoed copy of the study available to send to journalists who ask for it. Once published, a link should be provided on your website and social media. Not everyone will be able to read the full text of all journal articles without a subscription, but they can at least see the abstract.
- Adopt the press release labelling system for medical research releases (see next section, and <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/a-new-labelling-system-for-medical-research-press-releases/>).

A LABELLING SYSTEM FOR HEALTH AND MEDICAL PRESS RELEASES

In the same report from the Academy of Medical Sciences, the Science Media Centre (<http://www.sciencemediacentre.org>) was given a recommendation to develop a labelling system for medical research press releases to help the research community communicate new findings in an accurate and measured way – a kind of anti-hype device with scientists, press officers and journalists all ensuring that the claims made in the press release are proportionate to the stage of the science. The idea is to help distinguish a press release on an opinion piece or conference poster that hasn't been peer reviewed from one on a randomised controlled trial being published in a journal – so that journalists (and the public) can treat and trust them accordingly.

It is hoped the system encourages good practice where it already exists in press offices, helps press officers push back against eager scientists who may be over-claiming for their own research, and helps journalists see at a glance what kind of experiment took place, what stage the research is at and whether it has been peer reviewed. This may influence how journalists report new findings, perhaps giving prominence to the robust and ground-breaking studies and stopping their excitable editors from splashing more preliminary research.

The number of institutions using the system is growing and the list includes journals, universities and research charities. The system is quick and easy to use, and unobtrusive to the press release – there are just two or three words at the top of press releases, either just above or just below the headline, and clearly visible so journalists can see them quickly. Stempira recommends its members producing health or medical press releases use the labelling system. The label options are:

Peer-reviewed?	Type of evidence?	Subject of study?
Peer-reviewed Not peer-reviewed	Meta-analysis Systematic review Randomised Controlled Trial Experimental study Observational study Case study	People Animals Human embryos Cells
	Simulation / modelling Literature review Survey Opinion piece / editorial	NOT APPLICABLE

You can read more about the labelling system at <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/a-new-labelling-system-for-medical-research-press-releases/>, and there is guidance about which labels to choose at <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/AMS-press-release-labelling-system-GUIDANCE.pdf>.

As long as the labels are at the top, the formatting is up to you. Here is an example of how the labelling system is being used:

EMBARGO 00:01 UK time on Tuesday 2 July 2020

New study suggests people who X are more likely to Y

Peer-reviewed / Observational study / People

Text of press release text of press release text of press release text of press release text of press release text of press release text of press release text of press release...

Here is what some press officers and journalists think of the labelling system:



Tim Mayo, Press Officer at the University of Reading, said:

“The labelling system has been a useful way to highlight some of the key features of scientific studies, both to journalists when used in press releases, and in our own reporting of research on our website. Our academics have been happy to adopt the labelling system and it has helped us to have discussions with them about how we handle research communications with integrity. It has also been helpful for discussing research communications more widely, such as how we plan for non-published research findings. We have found that the labelling has been particularly useful when working with general news reporters without a science specialism, who might not be as familiar with scientific research papers or journals.”

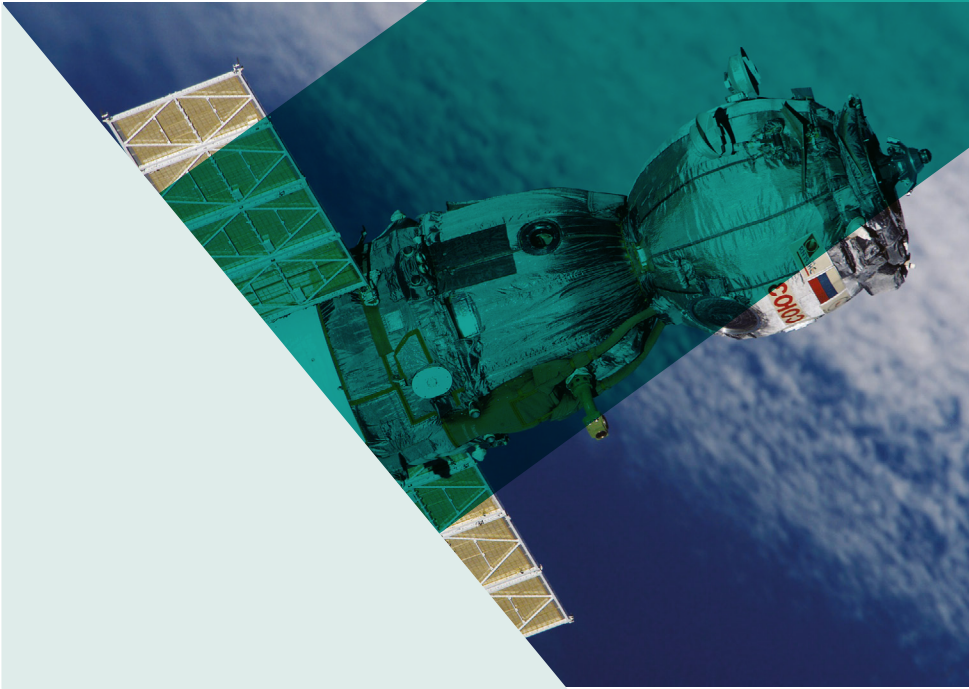
Martin Bagot, Health and Science Correspondent at the Mirror, said:

“Can only help – anything that makes things clearer sounds good.”

Vicky Allen, Science Correspondent at the Daily Mail, said:

“The new press release labelling seems like a great common-sense idea.”

PUTTING YOUR STORY OUT THERE



PITCHING

You may decide to pitch a specific story to a specific editor or journalist for a number of reasons, such as:

- You are pitching a feature or an exclusive.
- The story will appeal to a very specific audience only.
- The story is highly complex, with the potential for inaccuracy or misinterpretation and you want to pitch to a trusted journalist only.
- The story and pitch are part of an ongoing long-term strategy to place specific strategic pieces or messages in specific outlets.
- The story is not strong enough to get picked up by a wide range of outlets.
- You have an interesting story but not enough time to write a press release.
- You are pitching an opinion piece or blog that will be written by someone from within your organisation.

Make sure you know who you are pitching to

This is non-negotiable – imagine the journalist or editor asking: why are you pitching this to me, and why now? If you haven't got clear and specific answers to these questions go back and start again.

You really need to get under the skin of whoever you are pitching to. Read their work, know their audience and, if you can, learn about their personal preferences as every journalist or editor will have their pet subject areas. A top tip for knowing the audience is to find the outlet's 'media pack', a publication produced for potential advertisers which gives a thorough breakdown of their audience.

Be specific

Only pitch to one person or outlet at a time, and pitch to a specific section of a magazine or newspaper or specific broadcast programme.

This really follows from the first rule as your pitch should be tailored to suit a particular person or outlet. If they don't bite, you can then move on and tweak your pitch for someone else.

Keep records

Make sure you keep records of who you pitched to and the outcome. You can then build a picture of what works for your target outlets, and avoid wearing the same people down by constantly pitching to them.

Ways to pitch

Pitches are often done over the phone or via email. Journalists will have their own preferences but if a pitch isn't urgent then email is usually preferred, and you can always follow up with a call if you don't hear back. If you call a journalist, bear in mind the time of day so you aren't calling just as their deadline is about to hit.

If the pitch is by email then remember to write a 'must read more' subject line and be strategic about what time of day you send the email. Don't assume they will know who you are from your email address, so if you don't know them you should briefly outline who you are and who you work for. Remember to keep it concise, and lead with the new findings up front as you would in a press release.

In summary, you should keep your pitch short, accurate, simple and suitable.



Harry Dayantis, Stempira Chair 2017 and Media Relations Manager at The Francis Crick Institute, said:

"When pitching by email, get straight to the point and sum up the key points of the story in a paragraph or less. Read it through before sending and ask yourself honestly 'does this excite me?' If the answer is no, rework your pitch. Repeat until the answer is yes before pressing send."

EMBARGOES

The media landscape has changed dramatically over the last decade. We now have a 24-hour news cycle and the internet has given rise to a multitude of news sites, bloggers, Twitter accounts and mobile apps vying to be the first to break important news. So where does the press embargo fit into this new landscape?

A press embargo allows you to send information to a journalist in advance, requesting that they do not publish the story until a certain time and date.

Most journalists will still agree that embargoes are a necessary evil (and some love them!) and will respect them. Embargoes ensure that there is a level playing field and give journalists more time to prepare when dealing with complex stories. Usually the embargo is predetermined, for example by academic journals which publish at specific times. Some journals are flexible and will allow you to request a time, especially smaller publishers, so it's always worth checking if you can.

Bear in mind that an embargo that works for one outlet may not necessarily work for another. A midnight embargo works for most newspapers and for breakfast TV and radio, but is less likely to get coverage in the evening. Other things to keep in mind when setting an embargo is the time-zone that your target media outlets are based in if trying to reach non-UK outlets, and publication schedule if trying to reach weekly news outlets rather than daily. Think about your target audience and which media outlets will be the best route to them. Press releases sent out for immediate release are usually ignored unless they're genuinely groundbreaking, but the 24-hour news cycle and need to fill online space means that more stories are picked up than were previously.

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 academic journals are often embargoed for Thursdays or Fridays, so there is more competition on those days. You may hear about "Sunday for Monday" – embargoes that allow the journalist to write up the story on Sunday for Monday's press, which can be easier to get into.

The most important thing to remember whatever your embargo is that it is written clearly at the top of your press release and includes the full time, date and time-zone, e.g. GMT/BST/EST etc. To avoid ambiguity on a midnight embargo, 00.01 is better than 00.00.

Broken embargoes

Broken embargoes can lay to waste your best made plans. The 24-hour news cycle means embargo breaks are becoming more frequent. An embargo can now be broken in a moment and with just 140 characters on Twitter.

It is important to prevent or minimise the impact of embargo breaks 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 better to try and hold the embargo in the hope of better quality coverage or to lift it because your hand is forced? 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 or have a tweet deleted.

You may decide to take punitive action against publications that break your embargoes – particularly repeat offenders. This will almost certainly impact on your relationship with its journalists, but may be necessary. However, it is probably best to investigate fully before taking action as there may be an innocent explanation for the embargo break.



Alice Henschley, Communications Director at Nature Research at Springer Nature, said:

“Embargoes are an essential tool in a press officer’s repertoire, allowing us to communicate important research news to the widest possible audience. Embargoes ensure that all reporters have enough time to research a story and report it accurately and are therefore valuable not only to journalists and press officers but also to researchers and the general public.”

TARGETING YOUR PRESS RELEASE

The humble press release continues to be the 'bread and butter' of how we communicate our key messages with journalists.

On pages 11 and 14 we outlined what a press release needs to contain and the pitfalls you should try to avoid. However, the best press release in the world is still useless if you don't send it to the right people. With that in mind, here are some general pointers about how to best target your efforts:

Broadcast is big news

TV camera crews are limited and broadcast journalists will prioritise coverage for the strongest stories. If your story has a broad appeal, you should send the press release to broadcast media. If you have a story that is strong regionally, it is usually worth contacting the local broadcasters. Also if your story is niche but has an interesting visual component it is worth sending the release to your broadcast contacts and making it clear what visuals they'd get. With broadcast a much longer lead time is needed to book in a camera crew and interviewees. You may want to consider flagging to broadcast outlets well before you issue your press release.



A debate for radio

Radio is sometimes overlooked, but it is a good medium for igniting debate and the Today programme on BBC Radio 4 in particular gets the notice of policymakers. If your story sits in a grey area, offers new insights and/or makes controversial recommendations, you should send the release to your radio contacts.

Feeding the dailies

Blanket coverage isn't complete without the daily newspapers. Specialist correspondents get most of their stories from press releases, so it's worth developing good relationships with the relevant correspondents at the main national papers. If you only send them stories that they're likely to be interested in, they will at least read all of your press releases.

Being exclusive

Sometimes you'll find that your story might be better as an exclusive feature pitched to one contact. In-depth magazine coverage can be better than bagging a couple of paragraphs in a few weekday papers, depending on your target audience.

Trade press

Got a story that is only interesting to a specialist audience? Don't clog up everyone's inboxes. Show you know who you're talking to and send the release to the trade journalists who want to know about the news that affects their sector.



Emma Dickinson, Media Relations at The BMJ, said:

"Always make sure that you target the right journalists at the right time, otherwise your press release may not get a second glance. Consider whether your story is suitable for online, print and/or broadcast journalists – and does it have a regional or specialist angle? Get to know your contacts and what they are looking for."

Sarah Boseley, Health Editor at the Guardian, said:

"What drives me crazy is press officers who send me press releases without apparently having a clue as to the sort of stories I write – which they could easily find out by Googling."

PRESS BRIEFINGS

When a story is too complex to fully explore in a press release, you might consider arranging an in-depth press briefing. If you have a particularly messy, controversial or politicised story then get in touch with the Science Media Centre, an independent charity that specialises in difficult issues. They run briefings every week and may be able to help you.

If you want to target the UK's national media and have a good news story that doesn't fit the SMC's remit or simply want to go it alone, then here are some points to consider:

Location

Unless you have the most amazing visual feast that the journalists need to see in action then they're not going to travel, so go to them. Find an accessible room in central London.

Timing

Journalists tend to start and end their days a little later than most and their afternoons are filled with filing their stories, so hold your press briefing mid-morning.

Audience

If you've got a good or important story to share, make sure you target the right journalists. Do you want the science specialists or the environment bods? Or do you really want to get in touch with the consumer affairs or education correspondents? You're usually more likely to get accurate and measured coverage from the specialists than the general news reporters, so make sure you invite the right people.

Format

As we know, journalists have very limited time so keep the briefing fairly short and sweet. An hour is a good rule of thumb. Get straight to the important bits and make sure there's lots of time in that hour for journalists to ask questions and address the points that interest them and their readers.

Content

Specialist journalists often really know their stuff but they may still need a helping hand so having lots of figures and easy-to-follow diagrams can be a great help. Focus on the key points and in particular be wary of wasting time discussing partnerships, collaborators etc. that will never make it into copy. Your experts can expand on details during the Q&A if the journalists want to know more.

Aim

Make sure you know what you want the journalists to come away with and try to anticipate how the news will be reported. If there are difficult or complex areas it can be good to tackle them straight on so there are no misconceptions. In particular, if your scientists are concerned about misinterpretation then get them to clearly state 'what we are *not* saying is...'



Kate Kelland, Health and Science Correspondent at Reuters, said:

"Press briefings with scientists – where I can meet them face to face and ask all the questions I need to – are among the most valuable part of my work. They rarely disappoint, and I often come away with at least two or more story ideas for further thought. There's no better way to really understand what researchers are doing, why and how they are doing it, and what their findings mean for real people."

USING SPOKESPEOPLE

As a media officer you are likely to deal with experts who know their subject areas inside-out, but have limited media experience. If you have members of staff who are expected to work with the media regularly, you may want to invest in professional media training. Many research funders run courses for scientists. Alternatively, if you have the budget, it may be worthwhile bringing in a media trainer for a session at your institution. The Stemptra email discussion group frequently recommends people for specific needs.

In some circumstances you may need to put someone forward who has no formal media training and has no press experience. They won't know what to expect, which could make them nervous and hesitant. You need to be able to brief them with the key information required and give them the confidence they need to be effective in an interview.

Call for comment

If a journalist calls to ask your expert for a statement to include in an online or print article they're writing, the most important thing about this request is the deadline. Journalists work quickly so you need to make sure your expert knows you need information fast. It's sometimes best to catch them on the phone or in person to get an understanding yourself and if they are too tied up you could offer to fashion a statement based on what they said for them to sign off rather than asking them to write it from scratch.



Broadcast interviews

You need to find out as much information as possible about an interview request:

- **Is it for radio or TV?**

It's important to prepare and know whether it's in the studio or not, but regardless of the medium it's vital that the spokesperson knows what they want to say.

The Science Media Centre has a list of great tips for broadcast interviews on their website: <http://www.sciencemediacentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/SMC-Top-Tips-2015.pdf>

- **Is it live or pre-recorded?**

Live interviews are more daunting, but they give your spokesperson more control over what is broadcast. Pre-recorded interviews have the benefit of offering multiple takes, but the editing is up to the journalist. The key issue for any interview is to prepare and for the spokesperson to know the main points that they really want to make and to stick to them. Some journalists will give you an idea of the questions in advance, but it is worth preparing for all the likely ones.

- **How long will the interview take?**

You need to ask this so that your spokesperson is aware how much of a time commitment you're asking for and you know roughly how many questions and what level of information the journalist is looking for. Even a 30 second clip may require a 30 minute interview.

- **What angle will the interviewer be taking?**

Will anyone else be interviewed? Is your spokesperson the main interviewee or are they there to provide balance? Is the piece about your institution only or are you being compared?

Managing expectation

Just because your spokesperson has been booked for interview or has even done the interview, this does not necessarily mean that the interview will be aired. Be sure they understand that TV and radio (especially the news) is always in flux and their story or segment could get bumped for something else.

Giving feedback

Whether they make the headlines or not, it is always worth sending a debrief email to your spokesperson and their manager or team to say how the interview went and sharing any links or engagement statistics. This is a good way of giving positive feedback so they feel more confident next time you want to work with them for media coverage.

ADDING VALUE



COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS

A crisis can emerge in any form and can crop up at any time, so it's important to be prepared. It will always be impossible to predict exactly when, how and why a crisis will occur and unfold but you can give yourself the best chance of managing it effectively with good preparation. Things to consider include:

- Do you know and understand the overall aims of your organisation and its key messages?
- Have you thought about how different types of crises could jeopardise these aims?
- What's the likelihood of different types of crises occurring?
- Do you have a crisis communications plan to help steer your decisions in the heat of the moment?
- Does the plan include names and contact details of all the people who would be decision-makers in a crisis?
- Does it have out-of-hours contact details for these people?
- Do you know who to turn to when key people are on holiday or ill?

Be prepared

Every organisation should have a crisis communications plan. If yours doesn't then it might be time to talk to senior management about putting one in place. All organisations will have some kind of a 'risk register' and this is a good place to start when it comes to identifying potential crisis issues that might come up and also being prepared for them. Sometimes you'll know the crisis is coming in advance. Even if you don't, it's worth identifying the biggest or most likely risks and developing holding statements and basic Q&As in advance.

The plan should also be put to the test every so often. This can be done by simulating a crisis situation with all key staff members to make sure everyone in your organisation knows their role in a crisis situation and has a chance to practice.

Put people first

If the crisis involves a threat to anyone's safety, your immediate priority must be to use your communications channels and resources to help them. If, for example, it's dangerous to travel to work, you can use internal communications, social media, website, or text alerts to stop staff coming in.

Make friends

In a crisis you will need to rely on the help, contacts, knowledge and expertise of a huge range of people.

Useful people could include the assistants to your senior team, the legal team, HR, FOI, IT, security, premises and your equivalents at your major suppliers or partners. Make sure your name and contact details are easily accessible to everyone in the organisation and try to keep up with the people coming and going in different teams.

Be honest

Never lie to anyone internal or external. If you lie, sooner or later you will become unstuck and lose all credibility. Aim to be open and transparent in all your updates to all stakeholders including the media. If you cannot answer a question, do not ignore it – explain why you cannot answer and/or explain when you think you will be able to provide that information.

Make sure all the information you provide is rock solid. You don't want to lie unintentionally, so check your facts before releasing them and don't just take one person's word at face value. Aim to provide regular updates to the media where possible.

Remember that it's not just about how you talk to journalists and the outside world

In a crisis, anyone can become a spokesperson. Plan ahead by providing your senior team with media training so they know how to handle the media if they're caught on the hop. Make sure you provide regular updates throughout the crisis to all your preferred spokespeople about what can be said and how. Ensure that people you'd prefer not to speak to journalists know who to pass enquiries to and how.

Do your best to make sure that the people within your organisation find out about key developments through internal communications first, not out of the blue from the media or social media. Be aware of what's being said by the media and social media, but don't let those conversations pressurise you into making hasty decisions.

Don't be afraid to ask for help

A crisis can become overwhelming very quickly. It is no reflection on your abilities if you have to ask for help and it is always better to ask for help as early as possible in the process before tiredness or stress result in avoidable slip-ups.

You can always go to the Science Media Centre, or if you have the budget, hire in a specialist crisis PR or communications agency or draft in staff from other teams or hire temporary staff to handle the admin side of dealing with a crisis to leave you more time and space to focus on the bigger picture.

Keep a good record

Monitor, record and date as many key actions and developments, especially team meetings, as you can in an activity log. This helps to keep everyone accountable, keeps the process in perspective and provides an objective summary of what happened which you can come back to in the future.

Say thank you

Managing a crisis involves bringing together a team very quickly, and you will need to rely on that team in the future. If their help has resulted in positive media coverage, or prevented or minimised negative coverage, explain that to them so they can see the result of their help. If someone has gone above and beyond in their efforts to help, make sure their line manager or team leader is aware.

Learn

As a crisis comes to an end, unfortunately you need to start preparing for the next one. It's easy to want to go straight back to the day job once things have quietened down, but you never know when the next one might appear.

Once things have quietened down, take the time to reflect on each stage of the crisis. Would you do things differently next time? Why? How? What went well, what didn't? Where were the gaps in skills and resources? Can you do anything to ensure that if a similar situation arose in the future you and the wider team would be more prepared and confident in dealing with it? Have you updated your media database? Have you made a note of the names and contact details of people who were particularly helpful? Could this crisis bubble up again in the future? Do you need to change anything in your plan? Make sure you give everyone else in the team the chance to share their thoughts too.



Fiona Fox, Chief Executive of the Science Media Centre, said:

"Engaging in the media during a crisis can be an opportunity as well as a threat. Yes we might be in the midst of a media frenzy, but the wider public are fully engaged with the story and listening to scientists and experts in a way they are not during peacetime."

"Politicians, campaign groups and pundits are all a lot less media shy than scientists during a crisis but what the wider public and policy makers really need is access to the best, most accurate information from scientists with years of expertise and no axe to grind."

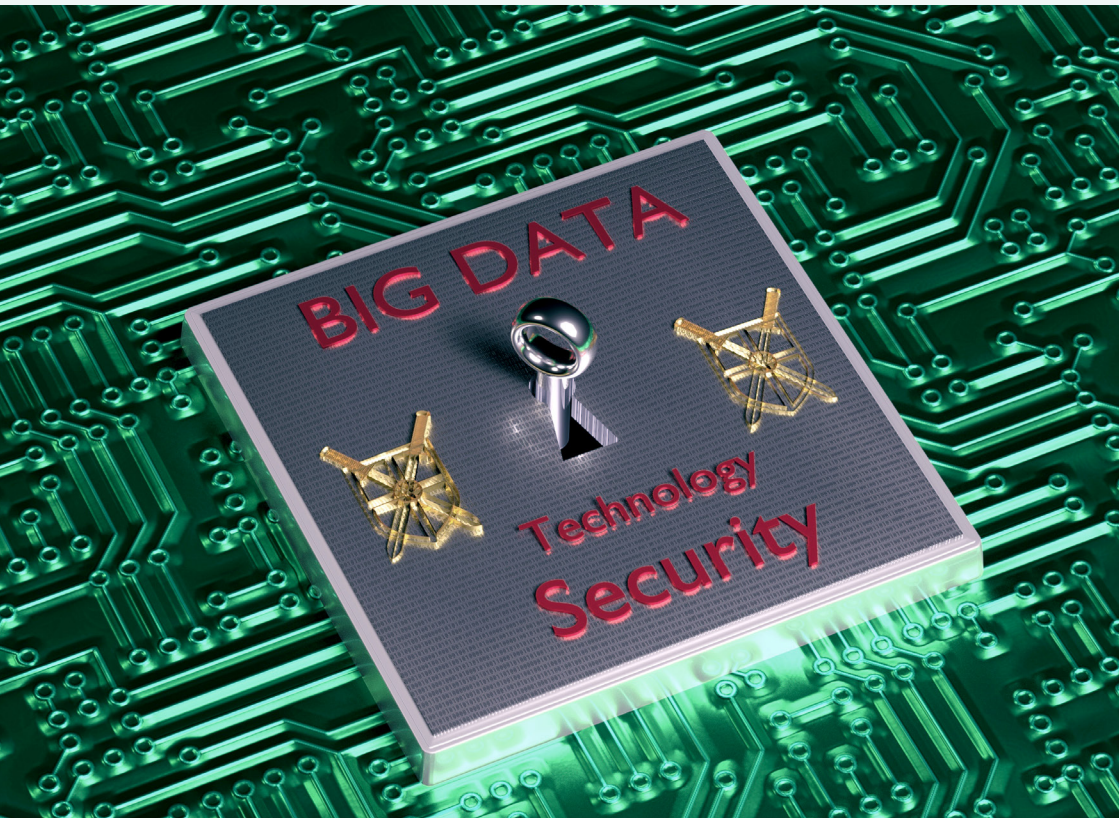
"The most important principle for scientists and their press officers in time of crisis is openness and honesty. Publicly funded researchers with the relevant expertise have a responsibility to share their knowledge with journalists and the wider public when it is needed most. Staying silent at such times for reasons of political expediency or institutional lethargy are a betrayal of the values of science."



Ben Kolbington, Head of Media Relations at The Institute of Cancer Research, London, said:

“In the middle of a really intense crisis, it’s really easy for an organisation to develop a bunker mentality and lose perspective of the situation. Try to keep thinking about the bigger picture and whether the world’s biggest crisis, in your CEO’s eyes, is actually resonating at all with the public or even your key stakeholders. Don’t be pushed into decisions that could make the situation worse by overreacting.”

“If you’ve not experienced a crisis yourself, one way to prepare is to keep an eye on how other organisations respond to crises. Take some time to deconstruct why an organisation might have chosen that spokesperson, or drafted a statement in that particular way. It’s even better if you can get the opportunity to pick the brains of someone at the organisation. After all, you never know if their crisis might become your crisis.”



ONLINE CAMPAIGNS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Campaigns are a really varied beast – they can last from a single day to years, but a few basic rules apply. You need to think carefully about your aims, your objectives and your target audience. Who are you mobilising, what do you want them to do, and why would they want to do it? Getting the planning stages right is really vital to success, so make sure you've thought everything through, including the potential risks.

In today's media, campaigns are also inextricably linked to social media. It's a great way to engage a big audience by getting them to signal support for your content – by favouriting, liking, or clicking a link – or to spread your message more widely by sharing, reposting, or reusing your pictures or video.

Day to day social media – build your network

There are so many different ways of using social media, depending on your network demographics. Some groups mostly use Twitter, but sometimes your best way to target a group might be on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram or a smaller social media site. Think carefully about who you want to engage and what sites will help your organisation to reach them. Then you can go about building your network. Here are a few tips to get you started:

- Identify a well-known voice in the audience you are trying to reach – these influencers may already have large numbers of followers you can utilise.
- Follow key influencers and engage with them by sharing their content (such as retweeting them) and engage them in conversation.
- See what topics and hashtags are being used by your audience and try to incorporate them into your content.
- Think about the audience when you post content – provide interesting content that will make your target audience want to engage with you.
- Tools like hootsuite or tweetdeck can help you manage multiple accounts on different social media platforms. Put aside a time each day to monitor what is going on in your network and what's trending. It's important to keep up-to-date, but don't get sucked into spending all your time on Twitter.

Starting or planning an individual campaign

- Set out the aims of your campaign, i.e. what's your final goal? What kind of world are you looking to create?
- Then think about your objectives – what concrete changes or actions do you need in order to make that vision happen?
- Who do you want to influence and who needs to be involved – is it the people you've already targeted by social media, or do you need to engage a new audience?
Are there any other organisations, internal stakeholders and key opinion leaders you could get on board to give your campaign a bit more visibility? Crucially, have you got the right buy-in from everyone across your organisation?
- What kinds of communication channels can you use?
- When are you going to do it, and when will you finish? Are there any key events that you want to plan your timeline around? Are you working towards a key event?
e.g. Science is Vital campaign particularly around comprehensive spending reviews, when the government makes big decisions about the science budget. Remember that you'll have a big push of activity at the launch of your campaign, but if it's a long-term campaign, think about how you're going to keep up that momentum.
Will you plan a series of events, or will you keep promoting your messages to different audiences?

When planning a campaign, make sure you do your research: What kind of content might appeal to your chosen audience? Where do they normally find content – what websites are they most likely to read? Do they like pictures or infographics? What radio stations or TV programmes do they watch?

Gathering information and insights will help you to decide what you want to do – don't get too carried away with the methods you're going to use at first, be they a PR stunt, a social media campaign or a new website. Think really carefully about how your methods suit your aims and your budget! A PR stunt might be great for raising visibility, but will it actually contribute to achieving what you want your campaign to do?

You also need to consider what you want your audience to think, feel and do after seeing your campaign content. How do you want people to get involved? It may be to signal support, by, for example, retweeting or signing a petition. Or it may be something more involved, like going to a rally, or making a change to their lifestyle. Either way, think carefully about giving them a good reason to do it – you don't need to be explicit about this but it can be a good idea to choose something that allows people to share something they thought was positive about themselves.

For example, the ice-bucket challenge meant that people could express commitment and support for the cause, and show their inventive side.

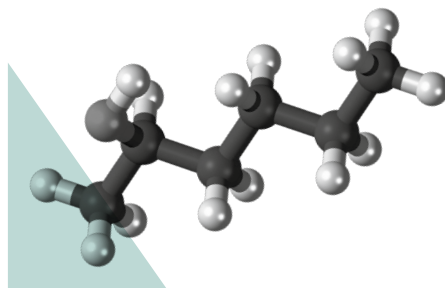
And vitally, has anyone ever done a campaign similar to this, or in this area? Did it work?

Get others in your organisation on board – you can get a nice push from your colleagues, who all have a good motivation to participate, though be careful to make sure it's not just your organisation tweeting! Put together a social media toolkit with suggested tweets, content, images and relevant hashtags/handles and share it with all relevant participants.

Evaluating your campaign

You also need to think carefully about how you are going to measure success. Before you start a campaign you should consider what impact you want it to have and how you can measure it.

To evaluate a campaign you can split it into five elements and think of measurements for each:



Inputs

What did you put into the campaign? How many press releases, leaflets and events? How many hours of work?

Outputs

How many people had the chance to see your campaign? How many people received an email? How many opportunities to view campaign messages did you create?

Outtakes

What did the target audience think about your campaign? Can you get qualitative feedback? Did they open your email or find your blog interesting?

Intermediary outcomes

Did they do anything as a result of your campaign? How many people clicked a link or requested information?

Outcomes

Did it change what people think, feel or do? Did they change their behaviour, take action, or learn something new?

Think about how you could measure each or most of these stages and you have a plan for measuring success!

Risks

Think really carefully about the risks associated with your campaign. Might people disagree with you? Does that matter?

Consider negative consequences of your campaign and any difficult questions it might throw up. You could draft a Q&A sheet to make sure you have answers to difficult questions to hand.

You might find there are one or two people who really criticise you over social media. First of all, decide if it's even worth replying – if it's someone who's really influential amongst your audience, you should, to try and address their concerns. But if it's someone with a track record of trolling these discussions you might decide it's not worth it. If you do decide to respond, reply once at most, to show you're addressing the comments and taking it seriously. Then take the conversation onto direct message or email, out of the public eye.

Ending a campaign

Without proper planning, it's quite hard to know when a campaign is finished. You might have built in a particular endpoint – e.g. a government vote, or a particular event. But for campaigns which are trying to change a perception or behaviour, it's a bit more nuanced! Think carefully beforehand about how long you can reasonably go on for, and remember that after that initial push, you'll get diminishing returns for your effort. Build into your plan a defined endpoint, past which you'll stop putting in the work. At this point, you can evaluate your success. This will be different for every campaign – it might be in terms of a tangible change, or the number of people you reach. Think beforehand about how you measure it, but keep your eyes out for examples you can use to show impact beyond the number of retweets you get!

WORKING WITH AGENCIES

Outsourcing to agencies or freelancers can be an effective way of adding extra support to your press office in busy periods, if you are under-resourced or if you require additional skills or services.

Finding an agency

Finding one that is the right fit for you is crucial. There are lots of ways to research agencies – first it's best to ask for personal recommendations (you can always ask the Stemptra community) – take a look at the agency's website, the sectors they work in and results they typically yield in order to get a feel for who they are. Although it is advisable to look for agencies with strong science communication experience and who understand the research publication landscape, if your specific needs are to reach consumers or support crisis communications for example, it is worth broadening out the search for agencies with strengths in specific areas and with specific audiences.

Once you have the names of some agencies you need to choose which will be the best fit for your business. At this stage it's worth putting out an invitation to tender or request for proposals to three to four agencies, to ensure you get a competitive quote.

Writing a brief

In order to start the process, you need to give the agencies a clear brief so that they can come back to you with recommendations. In your brief you should include:

- Target audience you want to reach.
- Key messages you want to get across.
- Key objectives you want to achieve.
- Key deliverables/outputs.
- Timeframe for project.
- Approximate budget you have set.
- Deadline for next steps.

You should ask the agencies to provide you with information about themselves. Tell them what you want and ask them to give you quotes and a proposal of activity.

The final selection

Once you have the proposals and costs worked out, it's a good idea to invite two or three agencies to present their proposal in a pitch so you can get to know them better. Before you make your final decision you should consider the following:

- Have they interpreted your brief correctly?
- Are they the right size for you? Do they have the right expertise for you?
- What is their reputation?
- How do they charge and how do they measure effectiveness?
Will they negotiate on fees?
- Do you like them? Chemistry is key for a lasting relationship!

Establish ways of working

Once you've chosen your agency, you need to agree ground rules and procedures from the outset and ensure you have set realistic targets. Things to agree at this stage include:

- Scope of work – based on the proposal, what do they need to deliver and when?
- Meeting schedules – do you need weekly update calls? Or monthly face-to-face catch-ups?
- Progress reports – how often do you need these? What should they include?
- Review process – who needs to sign off materials? How many review stages are required?
- Point of contact – agree who your main point of contact will be at the agency.
- Budgets – make sure you are clear on their payment terms. Have they provided you with an estimate (which could end up being more or less depending on the amount of time they need to dedicate) or is it an agreed retainer (a set monthly amount for their services)?
- Notice periods – if for some reason it doesn't work out, make sure you can get out of the relationship with relative ease.

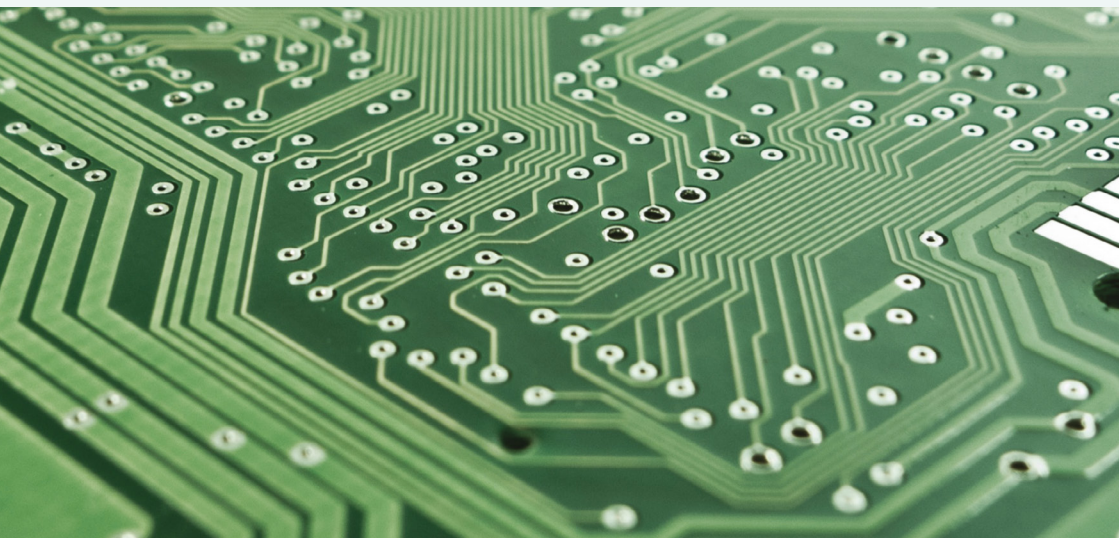
Building a lasting relationship

Communication is key in maintaining any business relationship. Meet often and routinely discuss matters of relevance to both parties, but be careful not to micro-manage them. Communicate your expectations and respond with critiques at each stage. As with all business communications, keep your comments constructive and always respond promptly to emails and phone messages. It will be important that the agency is able to build good relationships with your experts, but being an external organisation can present difficulties. If possible, it's a good idea to have the agency work on site every now and then, so that they can build these relationships.



Joe Meaney, UK Operations Director at AprilSix Proof, said:

“A good working relationship between an agency and an inhouse communications team starts with chemistry and grows stronger over time, reaching its apex through the regular achievement of shared goals. Both parties need to know what their respective remits are and have the tools and information to hit individual targets that feed into a bigger ambition. Without such synergy there is a danger that the agency can be seen as just an outsourced resource or dumping ground for the tasks the inhouse team doesn't have the time or resource to do. This is a really wasted opportunity, and is the difference between an agency/inhouse relationship that wins plaudits and awards, and one that is purely commercial and unable to show any real impact.”



CLOSING REMARKS

From the Stemptra committee

Whether you're writing your first press release, preparing an expert for an interview on Newsnight, dealing with a major media storm or updating your organisation's social media strategy, we hope this guide contains some useful hints and tips for you.

There wasn't room in this booklet to cover everything but the Stemptra membership contains such a wealth of expertise across the sector and we encourage you to raise questions or thoughts on the Stemptra mailing list and start a discussion.

Media officers play such an important role in news reporting and public understanding of STEM topics. With such power comes great responsibility, of course, and we hope this guide might help you navigate tricky issues when they arise and help get the best possible press coverage, done responsibly.

We might all work with expert scientists, clinicians, academics and engineers, but when it comes to media relations YOU are the expert and your opinions and judgement ought to be taken into account within your organisation. We hope this guide will help to empower you and that the knowledge you gain from it will help show others in your organisation that when it comes to science in the media you have the ability and confidence to communicate scientific findings successfully and responsibly. Good luck, and have fun!

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