

ASC GUIDELINES FOR SCIENCE COMMUNICATION IN THE MEDIA

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This set of guidelines is directed to Science Communicators who work in the media, with special reference to those who compile and distribute media releases on science matters. From an initial draft, these guidelines have been compiled and revised by ASC members who work in the media and the ASC executive.

To facilitate their use, the format of these guidelines includes a brief direct suggestion, followed by an explanation as to why it has been included. They are not set out in any particular order of importance, and in some cases, alternative or qualifying views may be offered.

1. Don't confuse demonstrated research results with speculation about where research might lead.

Science reports about research findings should be about valid results. That doesn't preclude interesting discussions about where research in exciting fields might lead, but the two should not be confused, still less deliberately confused. Hoping to discover something is not the same as having discovered it.

2. Avoid the clichés of science communication.

A hypothesis is not a finding, and not all findings are "breakthroughs," "world-first," "groundbreaking" or "cutting-edge discoveries." Any discovery is "unique," but that may not make it particularly significant. Whether the work being publicised is "world-beating" should be determined by the world, not a PR staff member.

3. Evaluate how many media releases you send and their real newsworthiness.

Sending a large number of releases and sending them regularly can well turn journalists off, unless they know that everything you send is gold and should be opened every time. This can be a special problem in institutions which have taken out expensive subscriptions to web release sites, and believe that a higher

number of releases will bring the average cost down. Sadly, it often leads to numerous releases of scant news value, and the institution earns a reputation for it among journalists.

4. Use terminology accurately, and provide a science style guide or ensure ready access to one.

Science reports are often inaccurate; species names appear with upper and lower case letters in the wrong places and without italics. Bacteria and viruses are sometimes confused. The singular and plural versions of scientific names are interchanged (bacterium/bacteria; alga/algae). Words such as 'kilometre' are frequently pronounced incorrectly, abbreviations of scientific units may be incorrect (gm), while ambiguous terms (e.g. billions, bugs) can make reports unclear. Hypotheses are confused with theories; "induction" and "deduction" are readily interchanged. While opinions differ regarding the importance of some of these (e.g. pronunciation), others are clearly wrong (e.g. species names) and should be correct in reliable reports. Style guides and a knowledge of how to use them can eliminate these problems, develop better communication and make reports and releases more authoritative. While accuracy is important, making information more 'authoritative' can alienate people. Try to maximise credibility of information while reinforcing an 'inclusive' environment. Use less formal language, limit technical jargon, and remember to reinforce explanations and background.

5. Encourage direct communication between journalists and scientists, and discourage attempts to channel comments and communication through a corporate or media spokesperson.

As research institutions move toward greater self-funding, many try to bolster their good name by way of media releases that are hyperbolic, self-serving or inaccurate, or which seek to promote the institution rather than provide genuine research news. Journalists are well aware of this. They want direct communication with scientists, and their deadlines do not, in any case, usually permit the delay of intervention. This direct communication between scientist

and journalist is endorsed as sound practice by authoritative bodies such as the *Australian Science Media Centre*.

6. Be forthright with the bad news as well as the good.

If you work in controversial areas, there is much to be gained by being on the front foot with the media. Once on the back foot you are defensive, and in the media that can sound like a cover up. A policy that makes this plain can assist not just to PR staff, but also organizational managers, who are sometimes the most timid in releasing sensitive news. Media releases and stories emerging from research institutions will also inspire more trust in the public if they don't feel as though they are only getting half the story.

7. Seek to place the information in context. This will:

- decrease instances of misunderstandings,
- maximise clarity,
- minimise misinterpretation of the message, and
- take into account social and cultural concerns relevant to the issue in ways that will inspire trust and take focus off the 'individualistic ethic' such as allocation of blame.

8. Ensure that internal as well as external communications are effective.

"Communications are not just about the press and external constituencies," says Donald Eastman, President of Eckerd College. "If your own people don't know it or don't believe it, neither will anybody else."

9. Include appropriate media training and induction for staff.

Media training doesn't have to be complex or arduous, but staff should all understand what journalists require, how the media work, whether television, radio or print is the best outlet for them, and how to convey their own message, not simply provide fodder for someone else's idea of a good story.

10. Build relations with specialist science, environment, technology and medical journalists.

Science journalists need scientists and publicists, but it's a two-way street. Most journalists want to get it right, specializing journalists need to. Knowing who they are, understanding their difficulties and deadlines, and working with them all the time can produce better science communication results than the occasional release, issued by conventional means when an institution wants to be seen or heard.

11. Encourage communication strategies to be a dialogue between the provider and recipient, rather than a monologue exercise.

The focus of communication should be on information exchange rather than information transfer. The form of some communication (e.g. media releases) tends to be one-way, but in general information should centre on:

- empowering the recipient,
- reinforcing practical applications/outcomes, and
- trying to blur the lines between provider and recipient.

12. Where possible, make the focus of your communication one of empowerment, not education.

A science communicator's primary responsibility and loyalty should be to the public, not an agency or discipline. Accordingly, be forthright; it will increase trust and decrease skepticism from the public, and break down 'power relationships' between the provider and recipient.

13. Observe accepted practices for science communication, such as protocols for electronic distribution of releases.

Such appendices, revised frequently as technology changes, could explain how to post releases through emails and the internet. These often go out as emails with complex headers, logos and attachments; even with unsolicited photographs. They clog the electronic mailboxes of journalists, who discard them unread in any case for fear of unleashing a virus. Sometimes the entire list of recipients is revealed and promptly copied by others for their use, causing difficulties for those who do not want their contacts freely circulated. There are protocols for email and web postings, and science communicators should be assisted to understand and use them.

14. Encourage appropriate ethical standards for the release of science news.

There are various 'codes of ethics' or 'codes of practice' that relate to journalism and the media, and which provide ethical guidelines in difficult situations. Some ASC members have found the Australia (PRIA) Code of Ethics useful.

15. Develop an in-house set of written induction procedures, guidelines and standards.

Written procedures for an organization's science communicators assist staff, especially new staff, and can protect them from administrators who want stories written for dubious reasons or who insist on positive output when there is little to say. Such guidelines might include points such as:

- releases and stories should clearly distinguish between research findings and projections of where they might lead;
- releases and stories might emphasise that laboratory findings, clinical trials, promising leads and so forth are starting points, not end points, and possibly years away from practical application;
- staff whose work is being reported should not be encouraged into hyperbolic claims about the potential of their work;
- staff should be directed to style guides and similar to ensure accurate terminology;
- staff should be expected to know, use and keep abreast of changes to the accepted protocols for releases issued via email or the web;
- staff should have a clearly described procedure for dealing with 'bad news' or sensitive stories.

16. Publish your policy and appendices, encourage comment on them and revise them periodically to keep them up to date with technological and professional developments.