

Shall We Hold A Press Conference

Remarks by

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The press conference, as you know, is one of the oldest public relations devices. In fact, Woodrow Wilson held the first, formal, organized press conference in March of 1912.

It seems that press conferences have been with us for seven decades and hold the promise of being around for many more. After all they are a wonderful publicity tool. In one fell swoop we can get our message across. No call after call. No interview after interview. No news release after news release. It's all taken care of at once. Bam. What could be simpler?

Maybe.

Let's look further. What might our objectives be for holding one?

-- Produce a large turn out of media who write about our industry.

-- Motivate the attending media to write about our particular announcement.

Sound okay, but we've left out one critical objective.

Simply this:

-- Have subject matter for presentation at the press conference of strong enough interest to convince the media to arrange their schedules around your event.

Let me repeat that: HAVE SUBJECT MATTER OF STRONG ENOUGH INTEREST TO CONVINCING THE MEDIA TO ARRANGE THEIR SCHEDULES AROUND YOUR EVENT.

Why is this important? Because you're not holding the press conference for your own edification, or that of your bosses, or that of your company. You're staging it for the benefit of the media you want to attend. And the "what's in it for them" is NEWS of considerable significance.

One reporter talking about press conferences had this to say: The luncheon will sound more like a sales meeting than a press conference. Speakers will enthuse over the new product as though reporters were there to buy it. Background facts will be in short supply."

That same reporter spelled out his criteria for the ideal press conference: "There should be no long speeches, only the announcement of the news followed by questions. Company executives and PR people would assume that every reporter in the room is totally ignorant about the company and its products. Technical terms would be explained and industry jargon would be avoided."

Here's the thoughts of some media people a little closer to home.

We conducted a mini survey of 20 editors from the business and computer trade publications. Fifty percent responded including Business Week and the Wall Street Journal. From these responses we learned that:

- The editors attended half or less of the press conferences they were invited to and of those they attended they felt only half of them were necessary.
- When they do go to press conferences, their reasons for attending range from seeing instructive demonstrations to uncovering useful news sources and interviewing executives they otherwise find hard to reach. For only about half the conferences do they expect to get a good story.
- Two-thirds of respondents say press conferences take up too much of their time and they don't like them.

More specifically:

Wall Street Journal - On press conference

Boston Bureau Chief: "Almost never worthwhile."

Business Week - On press conferences

Associate Technology Editor: "With our deadlines, by the time the press conference is held, it is too late to get the story into the magazine. Any announcement important enough for a press conference should be brought to us 2-3 weeks ahead of time."

Industry Week - On press conferences

Editors: "We scrutinize heavily before we go, but even then more than half weren't necessary except as an ego trip for company or PR people holding it."

So what does this tell us?:

- Don't hold a press conference if your message can be told effectively with no more than a well written press release or press kit.
- Don't hold a press conference to justify your existence, or satisfy a management ego trip.
- Don't hold a press conference when the news is of greater importance to your organization than it is to the media that you want to cover it.
- Do detach yourself from a company perspective and consider the significance of the proposed announcement in relation to competition and other occurrences within your industry.

Consider what would be in it for you if you were asked to cover the event. Would this press conference be important enough to you as a media person to get you out of bed to attend? Would you drop another reporting assignment to cover it? Why is the announcement important?

Unfortunately, what might be a very significant announcement to Honeywell and important to all of the people associated with it -- and perhaps even the culmination of a lot of inside effort -- may be quite insignificant to the very media people you want to reach because of other developments within an industry.

So when is a press conference justified? The best practical answer is seldom. However, there are times when complex subjects requiring a great deal of backgrounding -- such as a technological breakthrough in keyboards -- justify a press conference as an opportunity to explain the technology fully. A special event such as the start up of a new solar system, a major new product introduction like the TDC 2000 entire in 1975, the announcement of a major piece of survey research, or the entry of a company into a new line of products or industry can warrant a press conference.

Most simple matters that don't constitute a public issue, or are not complex in nature can usually be explained in a more routine fashion.

When a press conference is warranted -- and you have a genuine news story -- here are some guidelines for moving the project forward successfully.

1. Define your objectives clearly. What do you want to get out of holding the event? Against what criteria do you want to measure its results?

2. Plan the conference carefully. Prepare a complete budget. Consider how best to entice the media to attend...how effectively you can frame your story...and how meaningfully you can present it.
3. Tailor your media list to invite press people who cover your industry or type of announcement. Don't expect Business Week or the Wall Street Journal to cover enhancement stories. They don't.

Invite the media by phone, by invitation or by mailgram, and do telephone follow ups right up to the day before the event.
4. Decide on the best time and location for the event. Given a choice, always choose a location that's handy for news people to get to quickly. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are the best days to hold press conferences for media turnout.
5. Fine tune arrangements and oversee every detail. Assign someone to worry about name tags, seating, breakfast or lunch, flowers, and so forth.
6. Explain complex subjects using visual presentations and demonstrations. It is still true that a picture says more than a thousand words.

7. Assemble and package a well thought out press kit that conveys your message simply, is devoid of jargon and whose contents can be easily consumed by the reader.
8. Develop a presentation script for the conference. Remember you are the producer of this show so write the actors' lines well, select the best and most effective company officials to deliver them, plan your stage effects for maximum impact on the audience, and rehearse and rehearse and rehearse.
9. Draft Q and A's for possible questions that might arise, know the Honeywell release of information policy as to what can and can not be said. Everything is on the record at a press conference.
10. When it's all over, do appropriate media follow up and take the time to evaluate and measure your results against the objectives you initially set for holding the press conference.

In the event I've discouraged anyone from holding or planning a future press conference, let me offer an alternative that might equally serve your purposes.

The technique is quite simple. Instead of trying to bring the media to your event, bring your press conference to the media. How? We call it press conference in a box. And I've brought along a couple of samples to share with you.

The press conference in a box includes a standard press kit, a taped interview with a company official, a breakfast of danish pastry, instant coffee, powdered creamer and sweetener, a coffee mug and napkin.

A covering letter invites the recipient to sit back, relax, pop the tape into a cassette player and enjoy breakfast as the company's guest.

Does it work?

The day the Activision kit made its rounds in New York, TIME magazine called to ask a lot of questions and tell us they thought it was a clever idea.

A trade editor who received the Narco kit wrote: "What a pleasant surprise in the mail! A very commendable idea...watch for coverage."

Shall we have a press conference? It depends. To assist you with that decision, I will leave a little self-help guide behind that may be useful the next time you are faced with the question.