

News Conferences

A *news conference* is an announcement and group interview staged by public relations practitioners to provide an organizational message simultaneously to a large group of reporters. It can be one of the most interesting and rewarding activities a public relations practitioner can undertake. It also can be one of the most risky. The outcome depends on how prepared you are and how much you can control the situation.

News conferences are occasions when you put your professional credibility on the line. You tell reporters that your organization has something of interest to these audiences. And you tell spokespersons and managers that it is in the organization's best interests to hold the news conference. In short, you go out of your way to call attention to your client, business or organization.

With a news conference, you can select the topic and present information, but you have no control over the questions reporters will ask or how they will use the information you provide. And there is no guarantee the reporters' questions will remain within your selected topic.

Some public relations practitioners like news conferences and use them as often as possible. Some fear them and avoid them. Some replace them with other ways to communicate, or they decide not to communicate publicly at all. But news conferences should be held not because of personal preferences. Rather, they should be based on a strategic decision that they will be effective in helping an organization communicate in a given situation. Keep in mind that news conferences are not favorites of most reporters. They prefer to get their information and do their interviews one-on-one rather than in a group with their professional rivals. Because of this, the wise public relations practitioner is very selective about using the news conference format.

When it does seem appropriate to call a news conference, give some thought to timing. Consider media deadlines. Select a time most convenient for reporters. For example, 7 p.m. may be too late for all editions of a morning newspaper, and a late-afternoon paper may have a noon deadline. An evening television news show may need information before 4 p.m., whereas a radio station may be able to take stories up to about 10 minutes before each hourly report. If you aren't certain, ask reporters how

much time they need to prepare a story and what they consider the best times for a news conference.

You won't be able to accommodate everyone's schedule each time, especially reporters on competing morning and evening newspapers. Just make sure you don't continually favor one deadline over another. Keep a record in case you are accused of favoritism. Also realize that, although a news conference requires solid news, it's also a bit of a theatrical event. If the subject can be demonstrated, demonstrate it. If it can be shown in a model, as a new building or construction project could be, use a model. To succeed with the electronic media especially, the news conference must be carefully staged to take advantage of every potential for visual impact.

Planning Sheet

A news conference is an occasion for dealing with important news, and it deserves care-ful planning. A good public relations practitioner will take the necessary time to design a news conference that will serve the interests of the sponsoring company or organiza-tion. The standard planning sheet saves you time and will keep you focused on your goals and objectives. This planning effort also will give you more control over the impact your news conference can make on your target publics. Exhibit 17.1 is an example of how the planning might look on paper.

Exhibit 17.1—NEWS CONFERENCE PLANNING SHEET This sample planning sheet helps the public relations practitioner prepare for an effective news conference.

News Conference Planning Sheet

Background: Employees at the LakeLand Chemicals plant in Middletown have been working without a pay increase for 19 months, since the Union of Chemical Workers of America and plant managers worked out a mutual wage and hiring freeze for both union and management employees. Negotiations are nearing completion to provide an immedi-ate 5 percent salary increase for all employees and a second-stage increase in six months of 3 to 5 percent. There are two reasons for the increase. One, sales are up, including a \$7.3 million two-year export agreement with Guatemala. Two, a six-month-old electronic smokestack filter is unexpectedly efficient in recovering the chemical tri-chlorofluoromethane, thus saving the plant \$12,000 a month.

Focus: Announcement of salary increase.

Public A, Reporter (Reporters for county weekly/daily newspapers, radio & TV; print photographers & TV camera operators): New including financial projections, photo ops

Public B, Employees: Salary raise, gratitude for sacrifice

Public C, Union: Recognized union role in plant recovery

Public D, Business Leaders: Financial benefit for community

Public E, Environmentalists: Affirmation of company's concerns re: air pollution, ozone
Benefit: Company will give salary increase, recognize union-management cooperation, help community with cleaner air.

Tone: Positive, appreciative of worker sacrifices, optimistic re: impact on community.

Common Objectives for All Publics:

To have an effect on awareness; specifically to increase understanding about the increase and recovery.

To have an effect on acceptance; specifically to create positive attitudes about the recovery.

Specific Objectives for Reporters:

To have an affect on awareness; specifically to create understanding about the increase and recovery.

To have an effect on action; specifically to have them accurately report on the increase and recovery.

To have an effect on action; specifically to have them write favorable editorials on the increase and recovery.

Specific Objectives for Employees:

To have an effect on acceptance; specifically to increase morale and positive feedback.

To have an effect on action; specifically to increase productivity by 15 percent.

Specific Objectives for Union:

To have an effect on action; specifically to maintain cooperation between union and management.

Specific Objectives for Business Leaders:

To have an effect on action; specifically to increase positive feedback about the company.

Specific Objectives for Environmentalists:

To have an effect on awareness; specifically to create understanding about the firm's environmental practices.

To have an effect on action; specifically to decrease criticism of the company on environmental issues.

Invitations

The public relations practitioner must invite many media representatives, generally through a written invitation. Invitations essentially are media advisories that provide information of interest to city editors and assignment editors—the general topic; date, time and location; the name of the speaker; information on the availability of photographs for both print and broadcast photographers; and the contact name.

Remember the difference between a news release and a media advisory. For the invitational advisory, provide only a general topic and logistical information. Do not give too much advance information. You don't want to read an article in the morning newspaper that reports the substance of your news conference scheduled for later that day. That not only would put a damper on your news conference, it also could injure your reputation as a fair information source for all the media.

Exhibit 17.2 is a sample of how you might invite reporters to a news conference for your organization. This usually would be sent to news directors for radio and television and to editors for newspapers and magazines. However, if you already have a working relationship with a reporter or if your pending news conference falls within the "beat" of a particular reporter, you may decide to send the invitation to that person. Distribution may be by mail, hand delivery or faxing.

Occasionally, you may find yourself in the situation of knowing that a news conference will be held, pending some other activity. For example, you may know that a vote on a strike settlement is near, and you may wish to send an advisory to the media, telling them that a news conference will be called on short notice as soon as the vote is decisive. This allows reporters to prepare for the news conference by doing background re-search and formulating questions, yet it gives you flexibility about the timing.

At other times, you will be dealing with an emergency or unexpected situation. In such cases, you will need to hold a news conference fast, using the telephone to contact editors and news directors. Be careful! Journalists are competitive people. They are keenly aware that others are receiving the same invitation. They often use the phone call as an opportunity to begin their news gathering, probing for details you want to hold until the conference itself.

Writing can come to your rescue. Prepare yourself a script for the phone invitation. This will help you give each journalist exactly the same information. If you are asked for more information, politely but firmly say that this will be discussed at the news conference because right now, in fairness to all, you won't provide any more information. Of course, journalists will ask for more information—that's their job. But reporters appreciate a public relations person who is fair, who doesn't play favorites, and who shows an understanding of deadlines and the competitive nature of the news media.

A news conference invitation is a business announcement, not a social invitation, so don't expect a reporter to RSVP. It is your job to follow up, if this is necessary. Practitioners often make follow-up telephone calls after they have invited reporters in writing to attend a news conference. This can be an effective reminder and a good remedy for the occasionally lost notice. If you do telephone your media contacts, don't ask for a guarantee that they will be at your news conference. Instead, simply ask if they have received the invitation and express a polite verbal invitation. Don't expect a commitment, because your news conference will have to stand on its own merits against fires, accidents, trials, visiting celebrities and other news conferences happening at the same time.

Exhibit 17.2—NEWS CONFERENCE INVITATION This sample invitation tells reporters about the news conference without leaking advance details about the story.

LakeLand Chemicals

13 Short Street · Middletown, Xx 12345 · Juan Garcia, Public Relations Manager · (123) 456-7890 · Garcia@llc.com

To: Editors and News Directors
From: Juan Garcia
Date: April 26, 2003
Re: News Conference

Employees of LakeLand Chemicals' Middletown plant have been working without a pay increase for 19 months, since the Union of Chemical Workers of American (Local 312) and plant management agreed to a mutual wage and hiring freeze for both union and management employees. In recent months, the union and management have been renegotiating the issue.

A union-management committee is preparing a report with recommendations. This report will be finalized this week. Provisions of the report will be announced at a news conference:

Thursday, May 1
10 a.m.

LakeLand Chemicals Plant, Building G, 13 Short Street, Middletown

Speakers:
O. Sidney Morris, plant superintendent
Mildred Shay, Local 312 president

Following the announcement, Morris and Shay will answer questions. Background materials will be available.

YOU ARE INVITED to have reporters and/or photographers cover this news conference.

Contact: Juan Garcia, 555-1234

News Statement

A *news statement* is a combination of a news release, a position paper and a speech. Writing an effective, newsworthy statement for the news conference is imperative. Journalists can tell you far too many stories about the many non-news releases they have encountered, submissions from well-meaning public relations people using poor judgment about the quality of information in their releases. Journalists usually can quickly deal with non-news, but non-news in a news conference wastes reporters' time. It also cheapens your reputation as a reliable ally of the media, for you betray to journalists that you don't know what is news and what isn't, or worse, you know this isn't news but you don't care. "What Would *You* Do? Fake News Conferences" raises the issue of holding a news conference when no real news exists.

As with a news release, a news statement must present information of high news value. Consider the SiLoBaTi elements of news—significant, local, balanced and timely. A news conference is no place for gimmicks. As with a position paper, the statement must present your organization's opinion and reasons for it. As with a speech, it must be written for the ear, considering delivery as well as content. Include the following elements in your opening statement:

- Introduction of the speaker(s)
- Background information as necessary
- The news announcement
- Personal comments

What if you don't have solid news and need to rely on a created situation to generate media interest? There is nothing necessarily wrong with this, but understand that this is not a news conference. Consider two alternatives to a news conference when you're light on the news: special events and photo opportunities.

A *special event* is an activity created and/or sponsored by an organization for the purpose of attracting the attention of the public and the media.

A *photo opportunity* is an occasion, likewise created or sponsored by the organization, which offers something of particular interest to photographers with print or television media.

Exhibit 17.3—NEWS CONFERENCE STATEMENT This sample state-ment for a news conference provides important information for reporters.

NEWS CONFERENCE STATEMENT

Public relations director

Thank you for coming today. After our announcement we will respond to your questions. I am pleased to present our speaker, O. Sidney Morris. Mr. Morris is plant manager of LakeLand Chemicals here in Middletown.

O. Sidney Morris

As you know, for the last 19 months, employees of LakeLand Chemicals have been working without a pay increase. This salary freeze affected plant managers and members of the United Chemical Workers of America local 312, more than 400 employees in all.

It was a painful but necessary step to prevent layoffs while we tried to become more productive.

I am pleased to announce the following news: Beginning next month, our employees will receive a 5 percent salary increase. We expect to follow this in six months with a second-stage increase of between 3 and 5 percent.

Two factors make the increase possible.

First, business is beginning to improve for us. Sales are up, and we have just signed a two-year export agreement with Guatemala worth \$7.3 million.

Second, an unexpected benefit of our environmental commitment is saving us substantial money. The new electronic smokestack filter that we installed six months ago reduces air pollution to below federal and state levels.

It also makes it possible for us to recover a rather expensive chemical called trichlorofluoromethane. We can re-use this chemical in the production of paints. Because the filter is more efficient than we had anticipated, we find that it is saving us \$12,000 a month.

These last 19 months have been difficult for both LakeLand Chemicals and all the people of Middletown. The union has been understanding of the financial problem and committed to the long-term welfare of union members. Union President Mildred Shay has been particularly strong in the leadership she has shown and her dedication both to her union workers and to the company as a whole.

After weeks of negotiating, we have come up with an arrangement I believe we all can live with.

Exhibit 17.4—NEWS CONFERENCE NEWS RELEASE This sample news release covers the same material as is contained in the news conference statement, Fig. 17.3.

LakeLand Chemicals

13 Short Street · Middletown, Xx 12345 · Juan Garcia, Public Relations Manager · (123) 456-7890 · Garcia@llc.com

May 1, 2003

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MIDDLETOWN -- Following a 19-month wage and hiring freeze, LakeLand Chemicals will provide its 408 employees with an immediate 5 percent salary increase. O. Sidney Morris, superintendent of the Middletown plant, said an additional increase of between 3 and 5 percent will be offered in six months.

At a Thursday morning news conference, Morris cited two reasons for the salary hike.

“Business is beginning to improve for us,” he said. The plant recently signed a two-year export agreement with Guatemala worth \$7.3 million.

The second reason for the increase, said Morris, is “an unexpected benefit of our environmental commitment.”

An electronic smokestack filter installed six months ago has been “more efficient than we had anticipated,” he said. The filter recovers an expensive chemical, tri-chlorofluoromethane, which the company can re-use in manufacturing its paints. This recovery saves LakeLand Chemicals \$12,000 a month.

“These last 19 months have been difficult for LakeLand Chemicals and a hardship for all the people of Middletown,” said the plant superintendent. He thanked Local 312 of the United Chemical Workers of America for its “understanding of the company’s financial problem” and its commitment to the “long-term welfare of union members.”

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Media Kit

The better reporters understand your organization’s message, the more accurately they can present it to their audiences who comprise your target publics. Much background and detail may to be given to reporters in the form of an information kit.

Plan on presenting a media kit for every news conference, with one exception: When you are dealing with a crisis situation, especially if you are having frequent news conferences to update the media on emergency developments, you may have neither the time nor the need to prepare a full media kit. But each time you meet with the media, you should have at least an updated fact sheet or news release.

Usually, you will distribute the media kit at the beginning of the news conference. After the conference, provide the media kits to the no-shows. Even reporters who did not attend the news conference may be interested in reporting on your activity.

Q&A Responses

You have made a statement and have given reporters written information. But your news conference isn't over yet. You still have to respond to questions. This is another opportunity to present information you feel is significant and newsworthy and which serves your organizational objectives. But to do this well, you must be prepared.

Reporters will be looking for information not included in your original statement, reasons behind the information that are not apparent, and implications for their audiences. They may also probe for a hidden agenda or for information they think you may be reluctant to give them. Exhibit 17.5 is an example of a public relations writer's anticipated questions and answers to help coach a spokesperson for a news conference. Notice how this example includes guidance for providing additional information, giving forecasts and projections, and handling potentially embarrassing questions.

Exhibit 17.5—SUGGESTED NEWS CONFERENCE Q&A RESPONSES This sample memo from the public relations practitioner contains suggested Q&A responses for an upcoming news conference.

To: O. Sidney Morris
From: Juan Garcia
Date: April 26, 2003
Re: News conference

Following are some questions that I anticipate might be asked by reporters during the question-and-answer portion of next Thursday's news conference. Along with the questions are some possible answers you may wish to consider.

How many employees do you have?

Current personnel records: 56 managers & nonunion staff, 352 union members. Total 408.

How much will the salary increases cost?

Almost \$20,000 a month with the 7 percent increase.

When will you know the extent of the second increase?

Probably within the next quarter when we see exactly how strong our recovery is.

What does the chemical do?

Tri-chlorofluoromethane is a CFC, which is under government regulation because it can destroy ozone in the upper atmosphere. LakeLand Chemicals uses it in the manufacture of paint, where it is safe as a liquid. The environmental risk occurs when it is released as a gas.

How was the export agreement reached?

With help from the US Agency for International Development, as well as local and state Chambers of Commerce.

There are reports that the union was strong-armed to accept the wage freeze.

Talk to the union. I assure you, no coercion was made by company management. We all were being "strong-armed" by a poor economy and the very real threat that the plant might have to be closed. But we sacrificed together, and now we can share in the benefits.

Are any CFCs being released despite the filter?

This filter is the result of the best technology we know of to prevent CFC release into the atmosphere. Government tests show that our emissions are 94 percent free of CFC -- 2 percent cleaner than the government requires.

Following the logical steps in preparing for a news conference presented below can make you a more effective public relations practitioner. Note that each of these steps is closely linked with writing skills. “FYI: News Conference Checklist” presents a handy tool for looking at all aspects of the news conference.

FYI *News Conference Checklist*

Decision to hold a news

conference Fosters public relations objectives

- Strong news value
- Public interest
- Emergency situation
More than a news release
- More than a photo opportunity
More than a special event
- More than an open house or media tour
More than an individual interview(s)
- Appropriate for program or product demonstration
Appropriate for commentary by speaker(s)
- Appropriate for question-and-answer interchange with media
- Visual element or setting

Writing preparation

Planning sheet
 Target publics
 Analysis of target publics
 Benefit statement
 Tone of message
 Public relations objectives
 Invitation
 General topic
 Logistics: When, where, who
 No detailed information
 Travel directions (if needed)
 Entrance clearance/permission (if needed)
 News conference statement
 Anticipated questions and responses
 Primary news release
 Secondary information for media kit (bios, back-grounders, reports, etc.)
 Visual elements for media kit (logos, maps, charts, graphics, etc.)
 Participants ready
 Review anticipated questions and appropriate answers
 Research issues
 Time for news conference
 Aware of media deadlines
 Aware of previous news conference
 Vis-a-Vis media deadlines
 Aware of competition for media attention (especially with popular mid-morning time)
 Aware of media availability re: time and date
 Location for news conference
 Conference room versus office
 Appropriate to story
 Accessible for media
 Appropriate logistics to news conference
 If outdoor location is selection, indoor backup site
 Appropriate mailing list

Appropriate number of copies of media kit
 Invitations mailed a week to 10 days in advance
 Follow-up telephone reminders made one day in advance
 Physical arrangements
 Lectern or table
 Microphone feed
 Appropriate lighting
 Know location of main electrical service box
 Grounded adapter plugs (if needed)
 Access for media
 Parking
 Security clearance (if needed)
 Alert receptionist
 Professional hospitality
 Coffee or beverages
 Telephones
 Computers with/e-mail
 Extra pens and paper
 Fax machines
 Rest rooms
 Internal coverage of news conference
 Organizational video
 Audio recording
 Still photography
 Organizational newsletter
 reporter Room
 Seating to reporters
 Space for television equipment
 Lectern/table for microphones

Following the news conference

Information to invited media that did not attend
 News release
 Media kit
 Audio actualities for radio
 Videotaped segments for television
 Debriefing report

