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## The media release

D.R. SCOBIE

AgResearch, PO Box 60, Lincoln, 8152, New Zealand.

### The first step

Most important in the process of releasing many science stories is the media release. A clear and simple statement of facts in the form of a media release will reduce the errors in the final story. It provides the opportunity for input from scientists, colleagues, collaborators, managers and the all-important investors (who may not want the story or their involvement released). The media release could also be directly circulated to Members of Parliament or Ministers of the Crown, advisory committees and other scientists and non-scientists within the organisation including members of the board of directors.

The help of a journalist to translate it into layman's language will also increase the chances of publication. Wilson (1977) warned that items may be rejected because of insufficient interest to the readership, or they are in a form and language that might cause the reader to lose interest (jargon and abbreviations are a trap for scientists), or they contain ambiguous statements that may mislead the reader. Wilson (1977) also warned that a bias in the writer's viewpoint might prejudice the reader's ability to make an objective assessment of the subject, and could also cause the editor to reject the article. Johnstone (2001) and Taylor (2001) present evidence above that this may no longer be the case, indeed some media sources might welcome bias to create debate.

Just as scientific writing has a regimented structure, so does a media release or news story. A media release is equivalent to a conference abstract in that it will have to get the reviewers attention. Most of the members of this society will know that an abstract should contain a title, the authors name(s), address and a contact number, a hypothesis (hopefully), possibly methods, and a summary of results with statistics and statistical errors (although some seem to forget a few points when creating their own!). Finally the conclusions will reward the reader for having read critically through all the details.

A media release will contain a title or headline, a person or persons and the conclusions. Almost without exception these will be contained in the title and first paragraph of the media release. A paragraph to the media is one sentence, at most two, with 12 words or less! It is in this brief first or 'lead' paragraph that the journalist will decide whether the submitted story is interesting, the editor will decide whether to run the story and the reader (audience) will decide whether to read (listen to) the story. After the headline and first paragraph the media release will become more factual and inevitably less interesting. The reason for this structure is that the whole story may make it into the local news, while only half of it may make it national, and the headline and first paragraph might make it into an overseas newspaper. Various 'segments' might be used for television or radio coverage. A media release should be written by putting yourself into the audience's shoes, and remember what is 'sexy' to a scientist may be very 'boring' to the audience.

**The media release will not contain statistical errors and the differences between means will be reduced to percentages (e.g., 75% less fat).** Mean values may be cited, but it is often better to translate these into mental images (e.g. a swimming pool full of milk) or dollar values that inevitably create mental images.

The media release must include the contact numbers for the scientist, their address and perhaps a map if follow-up interviews and photographic or filming opportunities are provided.

The media release should contain facts such as what, when, where, who, why and how. It should emphasise the more important facts. Scientists should be aware that the 'how' is usually technical and boring and should be translated or even omitted before release. The 'what' and 'why' are the most interesting.

## CONCLUSIONS

If any members of the New Zealand Society of Animal Production wish to contribute to the last three objectives expressed on our website, then these Proceedings are not the most appropriate medium for achieving that. Rural media outlets are the conduit to approach the outside world with a story, not just a statement of scientific observations of what, how and why, but the personal side of the story including, who and where. Photographic and filming opportunities should be regarded of equal importance to graphics and tables for a journal paper, a picture tells a thousand words and care should be taken in preparation and planning. Be aware that journalism has its own format, just as science does, but that the two are very different. The language that the media uses is the common language of the layperson, science may need translation and for rural media that is 'the man of the land'. When approaching the media contemplate what Fernandez (2001) has said above because you not only risk the reputation of the company you work for, but also those of your colleagues and indeed all scientists or 'boffins'. Furthermore, I would urge you not to force issues as Taylor (2001) suggests scientists might, but to be guided by the comments of Johnstone (2001) and be ethical, responsible, committed and communicative citizens who earn and keep the trust of the public. To do so you must communicate, and if you cannot explain your work to the person on the land, then by Ernest Rutherford's rule of thumb you probably don't know what you are doing.

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