

## **An Informal Peek into Press Releases**

*The following is taken from Brian Elmer's email discussions with Yvonne LeDuc - a dancer in Vernon. Yvonne was able to successfully place an article in her local newspaper following Brian's helpful information, as was Mary Anne Turner in Williams Lake.*

*If you don't know who Brian is, he is - and has been for over 20 years - the Chairperson of SquareupBC - the advertising arm of the Federation.*

*Brian is incredibly knowledgeable about advertising and is ever willing to help all of us with the best way to advertise through various Media. He is also the Federation's expert on Twitter and Blogging and, again, is always willing to help you with understanding how social media works.*

*Brian dances with the Westsyde Squares in West Kelowna. You can contact him at:*

[brian@squaredance.bc.ca](mailto:brian@squaredance.bc.ca) or [dancinglikethestars@gmail.com](mailto:dancinglikethestars@gmail.com)

### **Newspaper Publicity - General Background Information** by Brian Elmer

Our intent, in the Westsyde Squares, in seeking publicity in the newspaper has been driven by the need for square dance clubs to promote the year around, not just at the time of new dancer sessions. The purpose is to maintain an awareness--a sort of "top of mind" familiarity with our dance club and our many events, highlighting the fun and laughter that we enjoy. In a way, through the year we're "cultivating" people toward getting involved in our recreation.

2012 has been a fabulous year of obtaining such publicity. We've had material appear in the Central Okanagan's "Capital News" (serving Lake Country to Peachland), the West Kelowna and Peachland's "Westside Weekly" (sometimes featuring a 2-page spread with colour photos) and even the Okanagan Saturday/Sunday newspapers (published in Kelowna by the Daily Courier) that are distributed in Kelowna and Penticton (not Vernon) by subscription (and occasionally sent to homes as promotional "freebies").

What's been most wonderful is that **it can all be done by e-mail** where the press release, with photos attached to the e-mail, is sent to the editor of the chosen newspapers. That's the easy part. Taking photos, gathering information about an event and writing the release is the hard part.

You might like to 'phone, or visit in person, the newspaper editor(s) (or a reporter) and inquire if they'd welcome from you virtually ready-to-print press releases with photos and if they have any suggestions. It can't hurt to establish a good relationship with the press.

I don't think that you need to ask for placement of your material in a particular section of the paper such as the "Travel Section" or "About Town." That's perhaps more for the really big city papers where they have multiple editors for the various sections. I generally leave it to them and often find that they publish the material in better applications than I had imagined. On two occasions, they've featured full-colour "teasers" on the front page, directing readers to our article inside.

You have to start by asking yourself in what newspapers the content of your press release (& photos) will be most relevant, then send the material only to those papers. You have to learn what communities the paper serves as their "footprint"-- basically, where it's distributed. For example, when we've held a dance at Westsyde Squares and dancers from Penticton have attended, I've written a press release that mentions them,

preferably with quotes, and included photos. Then I'll submit that to the more regional newspaper that reaches into Kelowna and Penticton. Generally, though, I concentrate on the papers that serve the immediate community where the dance club operates and its members live.

My effort has been made with the understanding that, in seeking free publicity, we have little control over what the paper's editor will actually publish, if anything. Regardless, we know that what every community newspaper needs to identify with their local readers is LOCAL CONTENT. To that end, we've given it to them "on a silver spoon" many times and they're using the material. I've found that by writing the press release as if it were a reporter commenting, they'll often re-print it word-for-word. The great thing about that is we get to say what we want in the way we want, rather than have an event reflected through the eyes of a non-dancing individual.

Also, they want photos that relate to the subject matter of the press release but they need them in a quality of resolution that's at least 300 dots-per-inch. Generally, most of today's digital cameras shoot in higher resolution and create photos that are about 1 megabyte in size. That's acceptable to a newspaper. A photo that's posted on the internet is generally of very LOW resolution (100 kilobytes or less) and that is not acceptable to the newspapers.

Furthermore, to accompany the photos sent to the newspaper, I compose a separate information sheet suggesting captions and generally explaining what's happening or who's in the picture. You should credit the photographer, such as "All photos taken by Jane Smith except #DSC-0084: Dancer doing handstand, by Brian Elmer."

In the published newspaper, you'll probably see under the photo "Jane Smith/contributor" or "Jane Smith/Special to the Morning Star."

Over the past year, the specific topics about which I've issued press releases with photos (or sometimes just a photo with a caption) on behalf of the Westsyde Squares dance club have included:

- November fundraiser (caller Dustin solicited bids at the dance to have his moustache shaved off in support of prostate cancer research)
- Christmas (dancers dressed in holiday attire gathered in front of the club banner to wish the Central Okanagan a "Merry Christmas")
- Leap Year (other Valley clubs attended a special dance in honour of the year)
- St. Patrick's (the dancers, clad in green, gathering in front of a big shamrock symbol to wish a happy "St.Pat's." Also, a couple from Germany were visiting that evening and their photo was taken in front of the club banner. Both shots were reproduced in the newspaper)
- Pedometer night (many club members brought and wore pedometers to calculate the distance they travelled while dancing)
- Graduation (shots used in the paper included receiving graduation diplomas, gathering around the grad cake, caller performing)
- Display dance at a retirement facility (including how the dancers sang Happy Birthday to a resident and danced a wheelchair-bound resident. Also, the caller and his girlfriend sang "Edelweiss" and other songs with guitar accompaniment during a break)

--Dancers attend 61st U.S. National in Spokane (one particularly great shot depicted a member couple in the foreground, smiling in front of a "sea" of hundreds of dancers)

--21 year old caller-teacher, Dustin McGifford, instructor at upcoming new dancer sessions, promises loads of fun and laughter at the sessions (this release will feature fun photos taken of Dustin over the past year such as him with a face full of shaving cream, wrapped as an Egyptian mummy, calling with a Leap Year frog on his shoulder, wearing a sombrero, singing and playing guitar with his girlfriend, etc.)

## **Designing a Press Release**

A press release is generally kept to 1 page. At the top of it you can have a letterhead of the originating organization or, to save space, just have something like "Star Country Squares - Vernon's non-profit square and round dance club." Then, with a left margin, it should read "Press Release" and specify the release date. Most read: "Press Release - for immediate distribution, July 25." If you'd like the information withheld for later release, such as the day that a special event launches, you can state, for example, "Press Release - embargoed until August 15, 2012."

If you wish, you can supply a "by-line," meaning a credit to the writer, such as: "By Jane Smith, contributor." The newspaper likes to differentiate you from staff, so the word "contributor" helps do that. Otherwise, the editor often adds the word "Contributed" or, for example, "Special to the Morning Star" to the release material.

You should suggest a heading for the release before the text body, such as: "Cariboo Square Dancers Ramp Up the Fun!"

The text body in the release should be kept to a third person perspective, quoting people (with their permission) when you interview them for the article. Also, once a person has initially been identified in the release, only use their last name for any further references, such as "Jane Smith is incredibly enthusiastic about today's style of square dancing. Jumping up and down, Smith couldn't contain her excitement." Reverting to use of the last name, after giving the full name earlier, is a newspaper reporting style and, I'm sure, is meant to avoid confusion over use of more common first names and to stay objective (not getting too personal on a first name basis).

A dance press release should give specific dancer names relative to the topic or event because that's what makes the story "local" -- these are the people who live in the area that the newspaper serves. Also, state what city they live in (i.e., Jane Smith of Vanderhoof or, perhaps for others in your club, of Prince George). Relay the comments of those individuals, showing what they said in quotes or re-worded summaries.

You have to try to put the most important material in the first half of your press release because editors might chop off the remainder if they have space issues. Unfortunately, we often save our details about new dancer sessions and contact information for the close and it sometimes doesn't get published. If it can be introduced earlier in the press release, there's a better chance that it will appear.

A professional-looking press release should close with the centered notation "- 30 -"

It means "the end" and is actually a traditional notation established by a press reporter who started using it to mean he was taking 30 minutes out for a break. It came into common usage to mean "done--finished--the end."

After that, as writer of the press release, you show your name, title, address, phone number and e-mail address. That shows the editor the source of the material and allows him or her to follow up if necessary.

Regarding photographs, there is much that can be said but the important elements are good subject matter, good lighting and good shot composition. For instance, a square dance shot should depict action. The dancers should be smiling--preferably laughing. A flash should be used if the subject is in a dark area. When a picture is framed, it should only include relevant elements in the shot--vast areas above the head are probably not necessary and, unless the feet are important, a tighter shot featuring people's upper body and faces is probably best. Sometimes, the captioning text can explain what's not evident in the picture. Many times, photos are snapped in settings where there is "junky" material (clutter) in the background. A bit of careful shot composition or even moving the subject to a better setting can result in a much nicer picture. Of course, if you must shoot candidly, you have little or no control.

I have used features like "quick fix" in my photo editing software to enhance pictures but that can only do so much. It generally improves colours and lightens or darkens.

You can use editing software to crop a picture but it can often result in a very odd size. It's best if the shot be taken by the camera the way it will look best in the newspaper. That also saves loads of time later.

#### **From Other Sources:**

Don't forget to check your article for:

SPELLING (Have you spelled everyone's name correctly?)

GRAMMAR (agreement of subject and verb and complete sentences)

PUNCTUATION (Don't use use multiple exclamation marks unnecessarily)

COHESION (Does it hang together in an orderly fashion)

**Have someone else proofread your article before submitting it - remember, you want this to be "print ready."**

If more assistance is needed, free Press Release Templates can be found at various places on the internet.