

9.

Information Releases

How to meet the
editor's requirements

CHANCES ARE that as a home economist in business or extension, you will find yourself responsible for preparing regular or occasional information releases for use by newspapers.

What is a release?

In this connection it is thought of as a brief article on a single subject, planned and written in such a way that it can be reproduced in the homemaking sections of daily or weekly newspapers.

Why such releases?

They are designed to spread the word about new and worthwhile ideas, methods, or product uses. The underlying aim is, of course, to interest homemakers in investigating and trying the food or household product that is involved.

Such releases may take the form of a semi-exclusive article (with or without photographs) for city newspapers, or they may be done in mat form to fit the needs of small-circulation papers. They may be sets of mimeographed or printed pages from which the editor selects the recipe she wishes

*Before your recipe release
can reach the homemaker,
it must go through
the Food Editor's sieve!*



to feature and requests the photograph to accompany it. They may be done as clip sheets filled with brief paragraphs.

Whatever the format (which is usually dictated by one's company or association or advertising agency) the object of any release is to have it reach as many readers as possible. The advantages and disadvantages of each type of release, as to cost, flexibility, and other factors, must be debated within the company. Never is it left to a young, inexperienced home economist to decide such a weighty problem all by herself.

Planning and preparing good, usable releases, regardless of subject matter and format, require some special know-how, special techniques. But these are not too difficult to acquire. Help is given in the pages that follow. And if you are very inexperienced, you'll find that food editors and experienced heads of home economics departments are happy to help a beginner learn the ropes of this specialized type of writing. Don't be hesitant about asking for help.

Before exploring techniques, visualize the home department editors to whom your release will be hopefully offered. What are their problems, their requirements?

Every homemaking editor has one big aim: to pack the columns of her department with fresh, dependable recipes, useful information, and new ideas, all presented in ways that will attract and hold the homemaker's attention and tempt her to action.

Every editor is faced with the problems of space and of time. She has room in her pages for only a small percentage of the stories and pictures the mail-boy piles on her desk each week. And she rarely has time to rewrite an awkwardly written story, even though the idea in it is well worth using.

When there is more than one daily newspaper in a metropolitan area, the foods page editor of each paper quite naturally demands an exclusive release, entirely different in idea and handling from those offered the other papers in the area.

Most syndicated writers on food or homemaking subjects utilize some release material from business home economists. Like the metropolitan dailies, they expect "exclusives."

Your offering must compete with those dozens of other releases for the editor's approval before it has a chance of reaching her readers.

The more editors you get to know personally, and the more you read and study homemaking pages in newspapers and other publications, the better insight you will have into what editors want to publish and readers like to read.

Your work, then, is cut out for you. Your question is, "Where do I start?"

Let's discuss the recipe release first, since more releases of this type are distributed than of any other one kind. They are issued not only by processors or packers of food products and associations of food producers, but by manufacturers of large and small appliances, utensils, and gadgets used in home preparation of foods.

Start with Fresh Thinking

First of all, figure out a good recipe-idea — one that will do something for your product because it will do something for homemakers. Better yet, think up an assortment of possible ideas from which to choose.

Such recipes must be fresh and newsy to appeal to editors and their readers. They must come through quickly and clearly in words and photographs.

They must be soundly practical from the homemaker's point of view — not too expensive, too elaborate, too exotic. They must not call for unusual supplies and special skills which the run-of-the-kitchen homemaker doesn't have. Yet they must not be too plain and ordinary!

Getting a recipe-idea that lives up to all those musts is not a matter of merely picking one out, but of thinking one out. That is hard work. It calls for mind-digging, not just thumbing through the

WHAT IS NEWSWORTHY?

An idea may be fresh and interesting, yet not have enough depth to be really worth publicizing. When you have figured out something you think might make a release, it's wise to write it out, set it aside a few days, then read it objectively. For further testing, try it out on someone (your boss, perhaps) who can be counted on for a sensible and frank opinion.

files for "something that will do." At first you may feel completely baffled. But put your mind seriously to work, and you'll find you *can* think out a new and different answer to some common problem of homemakers. Never be guilty of taking an old standard recipe and substituting your food product for the one usually called for.

It's encouraging to know that originality can actually be cultivated. Just keep practicing! You'll be surprised at the ideas you are able to generate. It's encouraging, too, to realize that often the problem itself prompts an original solution. (Remember the Jelly Bean Salad in Chapter 8.)

Work for a Strong Lead Paragraph

MAKE IT CLEAR

In sending out any food release, make it clear that the recipes have been tested by a qualified home economist. Make clear whether or not the release is exclusive. See that the source and date are stamped on the back of every publicity photo.

NEWSLETTERS

Many foods editors look forward to receiving breezy newsletters from home economists in various fields. Such letters contain not only news of some product, but make good reading as well. There's a knack to writing these — a knack that can't be described but that can be learned.

Now that you have worked out three or four fresh ideas and have developed them into good recipes, select the best one. Narrow the "selling point" of the recipe-idea down into a single sentence. Look at it. Would that sentence be a good one to lead off with? If not, how will you begin your story?

The important thing is to make that first sentence, that first paragraph, a forecast of what your story is about. Don't stall around with a lot of pointless words that lead the reader away from rather than into the story. Discussions of log fires and candlelight as a preamble to a recipe for bean soup or bread pudding is evidence that either an amateur or an old-fashioned writer has turned out the piece.

Take a tip from the jet pilot. Make sure you are all set to go, then get off the ground fast, and move right along.

You may center your lead on your big idea or you may swing it around and apply the idea to the homemaker, using that wonderful little word, "you." Whichever way you start out, keep that homemaker always in your mind. After all, she is the one you hope ultimately to reach.

Now follow up that lead with your recipe or recipes. Include such things as warnings and comments, if needed, or suggestions as to how to serve the dish or what to serve with it, or other helpful notes. But beware of letting the copy grow too long and wordy!

Write in Newspaper Style

Study newspaper foods pages. Use them as guides in figuring the length your recipe release should be. Count the actual number of words in some of those typical recipe stories. You will find that few recipes exceed 100 words.

Use plenty of verbs. Remember you are doing more than merely giving women a recipe. You hope to entice them into putting that recipe to work in their own kitchens. Verbs can help you to do just this.

Choose meaningful words, not empty ones. Make every word count. Specialize in short, uninvolved sentences averaging not more than 17 words each. Use brisk, short paragraphs, preferably not more than 5 to 7 newspaper-lines long. Watch particularly that your lead paragraph does not exceed the line limit.

Edit Your Copy Sharply

When you have written your recipe release as well as you think you possibly can, set it aside to "get cold." Then go back over it. You'll be amazed to see how much still needs to be done to make it strong and good. Don't for a minute take the attitude, "Oh, well, the head of the department will rewrite it anyway, so why should I struggle any longer!"

Instead, study it paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase, word by word.

Reread that lead paragraph. How does it sound

PUT IN MORE "WHY'S"

In writing all types of product releases, tuck in an occasional "reason why" a particular process is important. The editor will appreciate your doing this — provided the additional words do not make the copy too long.

TIMING

Send out holiday ideas early — at least six weeks in advance. In writing timed releases, try to stretch their seasonal use. Make a holiday turkey release fit not only Thanksgiving, but the winter season of home entertaining. Just suggest the holiday season in general, without pin-pointing it to Thanksgiving, Christmas, or New Year's Eve.

ASK THE FOOD EDITOR

Most food editors of city newspapers receive hundreds of phone calls, asking questions on a variety of subjects. In talking with editors, find out what types of questions homemakers are asking. This gives you a clue to current homemaking interests and trends.

compared with other recipe leads in the food section of your newspaper? Is it better than most of them? If not, try a different approach.

Are some of your sentences long and unwieldy? Cut them up into shorter ones. Are some of those words empty, meaningless generalities? Replace them with words that convey the exact meaning you have in mind.

Finally, consider the title of your story. It need not be written as a newspaper headline, but it should sound newsy and inviting.

Use Worthwhile Photographs

Are you including a photograph with your release? Make certain that it gets across one interesting idea. Make certain it is dramatic. Avoid heavy colors and shadows that come out black in newspaper print. Make it live up to the standards of good photography discussed in Chapter 3.

When is it wise to include a photograph with a release and when is it better not to do so?

There is no ready-made answer to this question. Common sense tells one that it is a waste of money to send photographs to publications that do not wish to go to the expense of having cuts made. Such papers may, however, be quite willing to use releases without photographs. Observation tells one that for metropolitan newspapers, photographs should usually or occasionally accompany releases. In general it is better not to send a photograph than to send one that does not measure up to standard. Here, again, frequent and frank conversations with newspaper food page editors will guide one as to what and what not to do.

What About Other Types of Releases?

Much of what we've discussed applies not only to writing the recipe release, but to all releases,

regardless of subject matter. Now for a closer look at those other types.

THE COLUMN

If you are a county home advisor in extension work or a district home economist with a utility company, you are likely to be faced with putting out a weekly or monthly release in the form of a signed newspaper column. In such a column you have the advantage of continuity, but you also have the problem of finding something new and interesting to write about each time. By keeping a notebook and jotting down questions and comments of homemakers you will never run out of fresh ideas from which to select!

There are two ways to approach writing a column feature. You may do each one as if you were writing a brief article for a magazine, swinging the entire column around one subject. (The marginal notes about writing for magazines — page 117 — will provide some guidance on this.) In other instances your column may be made up of short or longer paragraphs on a variety of related subjects, written in chatty, informal style. All newspaper column features will be something of a guide as to format and style.

FILLERS AND FACT SHEETS

Every filler that you send to an editor should contain a worth-printing idea put into the fewest words possible. It is the custom to send several such fillers at one time, so that they can be set in type and used when space permits.

"FILLERS"

If you are working with a nonfood product or appliance — one in the home laundering or household cleanser classification, for example — you have a specific problem, because trade names of products and equipment are not ordinarily used in newspaper columns.

Whatever releases you do along this line will probably consist of short but helpful household notes, free from trade names, which can be tucked in as "fillers" on the homemaking pages. The more such fillers can be made timeless, the better. If an editor has had a number of such shorts

set in type, she likes to select one that fills an exact spot. She prefers not to stop and weigh whether or not it is suited to the season.

In addition to preparing such fillers, you may very well need to do a sort of broadside information release about your product and its usefulness, to be sent to home economics teachers, magazine and newspaper editors, and home economists in public utility companies and other related fields. Such fact sheets should be complete, yet broken down so that the information is easy to read.

DOUBLE CHECK

Be sure that recipes in your product release are absolutely right. When checking the copy, check ingredient list against method, and vice versa, to make sure that each item listed is accounted for, and each item mentioned is listed in the ingredients.

Spotlighting the New Product

Your company is putting a brand new product on the market. It may be a new fast-cooking rice or a new type of rolling pin, a new detergent or a new dish-washer. Your job is to publicize such facts and relate them to the lives of people. Here you do it by writing straight news releases, following these rules:

First, before you begin writing the actual story, make a list of all the important points about the product. Sort them mentally. What is the big idea — the big news? Which points will have the greatest meaning and appeal for readers generally?

Put the important idea, the strongest points of interest, in your lead paragraph. Say what you have to say in a lively way, not in dull statements of dull facts. You are enthusiastic about the product, you feel others will be when they know about it. Work to communicate that enthusiasm in subtle ways — not by “rave” comments.

Tell the news simply. Keep the story, the paragraphs, the sentences short.

Along with the news story, it's a good idea to send a fact sheet or fact file about the new product, for future reference by the editor.

Keep the homemaker always in mind in preparing product releases. If food prices are high, or if there is a hint of hard times in the air, give her recipes that are thrifty but good. At holiday time when she feels like splurging, give her fancies that will make meals glamorous.

The recommendations for writing news about a new product apply also to writing a release about some new finding in the field of research. The results of a survey of the breakfast habits of teen-agers; new conclusions regarding marriage failures or successes — this type of story likewise is handled as a news feature.

Here, again, begin the story with an arresting statement of or about the discovery or conclusion — not with a chronological account of the events leading up to it.

Then, in following paragraphs, develop or discuss the important and interesting points in the order that serves best for the particular subject.

Summing up. In any type of release make clear in the first paragraph what you are going to talk about . . . Get that first point across quickly . . . Give information in clear, complete, orderly fashion and in as brief form as is sensible . . . *Work for a friendly, informal, direct style of writing — one that makes for easy reading.* Avoid technical words and scientific phrases . . . Put up your release in a form that is easy to recognize, easy to clip and use . . . Send it out. If it is well received and rather widely used, your pattern must be a good one. If it is not used, figure out why. (Another time, try harder!)

So much for the planning and writing of the various types of product and information releases. Another and unrelated type of release has to do with publicizing an organization. This is discussed in Chapter 18.

Here's Something To Think About

Here is a list of a dozen criticisms which food editors make regarding some of the product releases that cross their desks. Do any of these criticisms apply to *your* material?

1. Too many recipes for complicated dishes —

NOTE TO EDITORS

Outstanding among newspaper food pages are those that tie good national releases in with local situations, local notes and recipes, so that every story seems to have been written especially for that particular paper and town.

HEADLINES

Headlines on product releases are important. Big thing is to promise something, rather than merely to state a fact or use catch phrases. When a photograph accompanies a release, it's a good idea to tie the headline into it. Helps bring the picture to life at first glance.

Before you criticize product releases written by other home economists, remember there may be problems behind the scenes the outsider does not know.

mixtures that would take a homemaker a lot of time to put together, and that her husband would undoubtedly rebel at eating if she did.

2. Too many ingredients, and too expensive and unusual ones called for. Most items listed should be available on average home kitchen shelves.

3. Too long, wordy introductions, ambling and rambling all around the subject, instead of leading directly into it.

4. Too long sentences — sometimes averaging as many as 40 to 50 words, instead of the recommended 17 or so. Too long paragraphs, also.

5. Too much raving in introduction; too lavish praise of the product or the dish in question.

6. Too technical terminology used — chef's terms or laboratory words in place of common kitchen language.

7. Too commonplace ideas, lacking in news value. Some reminder copy is acceptable if written from the news angle of the season or the weather or the like.

8. Too fancy, elaborate photographs, not in line with trends in modern living, and not suitable for good reproduction.

9. Too commercial.

10. Too old-style in terminology and methods.

11. Too long and too dull.

12. Too late. This is especially the case with seasonal or holiday ideas.