

Las Vegas Quill Keepers Lesson 15: Press Packages 101

By Cathe Jones, (cathejones.com)

One of the most requested bits of writing I've been asked to do over the last fifteen years is Press Releases. Since I have extensive experience as a radio host, I've read my share of them. As a designer of nearly three hundred websites, I've reworked press blurbs into enticing visual pictures. But, today's author needs to know more than selling herself with just a single page of catchy words. She has to market herself. To do this, she needs to have a press package.

The Basics

New writers need to present themselves in the best way possible to educational institutions, periodicals, or even a local speakers' group. Experienced writers want to wow those who run conferences. Any writer seeking employment as a freelancer should know what a Press Kit is. For plentiful reasons, the woman who presents herself as a professional will be treated as one.

Press kits for the literary audience contain three basic components. You need a head shot, a biography, and clippings. You can customize your kits to your intended audience.

A head shot, or even a very nicely composed photograph, gives your intended recipient an idea of your personality. If your picture shows you warmly smiling, the editor will assume that your writing is friendly, or warm-hearted. Give a stern stare directly at the lens and you are perceived to be serious, directed, and without forgiveness. The personality presented in the image becomes the first face, the first impression, your editor sees. My headshots range from goofy to

downright sincere. The photographs are used in press materials for trade shows, marketing materials for my books, and as inserts on websites carrying articles.

You can find a great photographer as close as your local community college. Place an ad on Craigslist.org or even by tacking an index card on the community board at the local library, coffee house, student center, or community center requesting the skills of a photographer. Most students trying to build a portfolio will take pictures for the cost of film, and developing. With digital photography replacing film in many colleges, students may request digital media, such as Smart Cards or Flash Drives. Some will barter with photographers. You can offer to write text for her website, in exchange for photographs for your press package. IF you are a member of a creative household, your own children might have the right skills. The headshots that appear in my press kit were taken by a student who only asked that I record some commercials for his company. (Sometimes a radio background is worth something!)

A biography, explained in depth in Lesson 5: Who Am I? (<http://www.vegasquills.com/articles.html>), is a brief history of your literary life. For each recipient, you may wish to customize how you present yourself. The editors of Playboy probably aren't interested in the newsletters you write for a grade school soccer team. They may perk up when reading about your stand-up comedy routines. The biography included when I send book proposals to the publishers reading my Grief work differs drastically from the one I send to film companies seeking my skills in rat training. Keep your reader in mind, and try to think of the things in your life and background that would interest him specifically. The less generic you sound, the better you'll come across.

Your biography for a press kit often includes a Curricula Vitae, but unless it is specifically requested, don't bother. New writers often make the mistake of adding a standard resume containing minimal literary experience. Although a press package could lead to jobs, don't treat it as a job application. Biographical information written in the third person SELLS you. A resume, which is a document putting you in first person, spreads your work out for analysis.

A substitute document is a basic page of bullet points highlighting your writings. Outline your unpublished novels, published poetry, contest awards or anything that shows you as an active writer. A student I had in New Mexico spent most of her adult life raising children. At the age of fifty-one, she started her college career in communications. As part of her scholarship application, the press package required included a resume. Because she had never published yet, we highlighted all of the children's stories she wrote for her kids. Her scholarship carried her through until graduate school, and now she reads some of those stories published through Scholastic Books to the kids she teaches in her second-grade class.

The last part of a basic press kit for writers is the clippings section. "Clippings" is a fancy word meaning copies or originals of published work. New writers include newsletters, corporate copy, and even web text. The work you present doesn't have to be from the New York Times. More seasoned writers include by-lined material. Freelancers often add stringer articles. Stringer articles are those small two or three paragraphs of filler found in periodicals. The author's name doesn't appear anywhere on the article, but beware! Most editors know their stringers' works. Do NOT try to pass off non-bylined materials off as your own.

Clippings also include published pieces which appear in journals, ezines, or any legitimate publishing resource. Keep the clipping down to less than three pages per item. When you consider how many press kits an editor reads in a day, it is safe to assume he won't spend more than ten minutes going through yours. Limit these samples of your best work to five or six at the most. Use fewer if you have established yourself.

The Format

Today's press package exists in more formats than were available even ten years ago. At CES, the consumer electronics tradeshow held in Las Vegas annually, I read fifteen different formats of press kits.

EPK: An Electronic Press Kit reaches out to the digital savvy. All of the work is placed on a CD, DVD, or CD-business card. Some companies are putting entire annual reports, press kits, and marketing materials out on other forms of digital media, including flash drives, and smart cards. The recipient opens these through a computer. The kit is often designed to run as a stand-alone application, such as a flash presentation. Other versions of EPK's are opened through web browsers, and appear as web sites, although no internet connection is necessary. Adobe Portable Document Files, (PDFs), work on any platform computer, and are a terrific method of presentations.

High Gloss Media Kits: Often costly, the materials are printed on glossy or high quality print paper. The kit is a presentation in itself. Items are placed in a folder, which often has a logo or business card embedded on the front. Some enterprising organizations even use folders printed with logos or company colors. Because of the expense involved, those who elect to use this form of press information package include an EPK.

Standard Media Kits: A no-frills, but pragmatic approach is to combine a biography, headshot, and clippings neatly in standard pocket folder. You can one with ready-made business card die-cuts. In the left pocket, place your headshot, your biography, and curricula vitae. On the right hand side, place your clippings. Any press releases should be placed in the right pocket, in front of the clippings. The English reading audience naturally looks to the right when opening a file, book, or folder.

The press kit is a marketing tool. It is vital to place any clippings you have ABOUT you into it. A reporter took time to tell the world about you, so you in turn can incorporate this. If you are giving a lecture, presenting a paper, or even appearing at a book signing, then a press release about the accomplishment must be included in this ensemble. Every time I send a press release about the Las Vegas Quill Keepers to any periodical, I include that release in the EPK for the organization.

Sell yourself as a marketable writer. Put together a press package as if you were asking your favorite author to interview you for your favorite magazine. Any package you send may lead to increased work as a writer, public speaker, or even instructor. When you look at your press materials, you should think "THIS is a writer I'd like to read more about!" As the package sits on your kitchen table, guests should wonder, "Wow, someone important must have left this here!"

Naturally, we want editors to view our press kits gladly. It's not a good idea to use cute little stickers or scrap book images in a press kit, unless it's going to a greeting card company or that type of effort is specifically requested. Your press package is business related materials designed to lure an editor into your world. Assume that everything you present will be used in television, in print, and on radio when describing you and your work.

If you feel it necessary to send gimmicks out along with proper materials, send it under separate cover. Publicity stunts might help you to get more press ABOUT you, but don't fail yourself by overdoing it. A smart marketing idea for a singer was to send out a food item along with his records to radio stations. His name was Peter Lemongelo, and you can guess what he sent. A poor idea: A woman, whose name was shared with that of a common household implement, sent plungers to editors at Time magazine. Her greatest mistake was not sending out a press kit explaining her work. She served as a sewer planner for a major US city, and wrote a story about corruption underground. No one correlated the friendly letters with any story to be told. Had she sent a press kit there may have been more interest in what she had to say. It wasn't until the Los Angeles subway was built, eleven years later, that some of the whistle blowing she had done came to light. By this time, she had died, and the story all but died with her. Granted these are two extreme examples, but they are two to learn from.

Here are some great sources and samples of press kits:

Marketing Your Children's Book

http://www.suite101.com/discussion.cfm/childrens_writing/67829/latest/2

Writing World Self Publishing Success (press kit)

<http://www.writing-world.com/jud/jud15.shtml>

Creating a Press Kit Online

<http://www.targeting.com/Press.html>