

62: How to Write a Press Release that Gets Media Attention with Mickie Kennedy

Janice Hostager: 0:04

I'm Janice Hostager. After three decades in the marketing business and many years of being an entrepreneur, I've learned a thing or two about marketing. Join me as we talk about marketing, small business and life in between. Welcome to my Weekly Marketing. Hey, and welcome to another episode of my Weekly Marketing.

Janice Hostager: 0:36

Several years ago, my husband Todd, who is a college professor and a researcher, and a colleague of his, had some research featured in a local Minneapolis newspaper. The next day it was picked up by USA Today. The day after that he got calls from CNN, voice of America and many other news outlets, not to mention that the article was picked up by several newspapers who republished the original USA Today article. It was the pre-social media version of going viral, all because of one newspaper article. It was incredibly exciting for them, since they were just starting out in their careers, but it also gave their research something that they couldn't have bought credibility. A positive story about you or your company in the media has the same effect. It can open doors for more business and will help shape the perception of you to your customers. It's so much cheaper than advertising and has a much longer life cycle, not to mention the ripple effects of the information being redistributed by others. I've never heard anyone quote something they heard or read in an ad, but I've quoted plenty of articles I've read in the New York Times.

Janice Hostager: 1:42

You might be thinking it's only the big companies who get covered by the media, but my guest on today's episode disagrees, and he would know. My guest is Mickie Kennedy, and he's the founder of eReleases, the only nationwide press release distribution partner for PR Newswire. What makes Mickie unique is that he's an expert at helping small businesses, authors and startups. Mickie founded eReleases 25 years ago after realizing that small businesses desperately needed a press release distribution service that they could afford. While working in PR, Mickie came face-to-face with customers that wanted to use PR to bring in business but couldn't afford to pay the extremely high startup fees that most agencies charged. Mickie saw an opportunity to help and eReleases was born. In this episode, you'll learn why PR is so much more powerful than

any other type of marketing, and you'll also learn how to write a press release that gets picked up by the media and the best way for a small business owner to start their PR efforts. Here's my interview with Mickie. Well, hey, Mickie.

Mickie Kennedy: 2:47

Hi, how are you?

Janice Hostager: 2:50

Good Thanks for being here today. I am curious about your background. How did you get involved and how did you start eReleases?

Mickie Kennedy: 2:57

So it's a weird story. I graduated around 27 years ago with a master's of fine arts and creative writing, with an emphasis in poetry, and my career plan was to wait tables and write poetry. And so I did that for a summer after graduating and, I'll be honest, my back never stopped hurting, my feet hurt, my knees hurt, and I was so just psychologically zapped. At the end of the day, I never read a word that summer and I didn't write anything, and I just decided I needed to find a safe office job. And so I got hired at a telecom research startup in DC and I was employee number three, and because my resume had writing on it, they said, hey, figure out press releases and write them and send them out for us. And so that was my side project there, and I sent out some releases with data, because we published all these numbers that no one else had access to and the media didn't care. And so I made it my mission to figure out how to get it to work, and what I realized is the journalists were interested in stories, and so I looked at some data in the Caribbean, and one country had more inbound and outbound traffic to the US than all the other countries combined, and I was like, why is that? So I looked into it and discovered that that was the call center of 1-900 numbers which were extremely popular 27 years ago. People would pay 75 cents a minute to get their horoscope or, you know, 50 cents a minute to be on a party line with a bunch of other people and just sort of talk. And you know, I don't know, it was a strange time. So, anyhow, I did a press release about that and that press release immediately got picked up by the Economist, Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post and three trade publications and I was just like, wow, okay, I may have figured this out.

Mickie Kennedy: 4:59

So I continued to sort of pull out the stories behind the numbers and the media loved it and I saw an influx of sales. We started getting sales from hedge funds and investment firms that we had never gotten before. All of our customers were previously the telecom carriers, of which there were plenty, then pre-mergers for a lot of companies, and so I just realized that it was such a great opportunity and I felt like I could do that for other people. And what sort of instigated it was, as I was faxing these press releases,

because that's what I was doing 27 years ago, several journalists started to call and say, could I just start emailing them? And I was like, oh yeah, I do have an email address and that's kind of new. And so I then thought about, you know, I could get a, you know, a connection with all these journalists, get their email address and just send them press releases. So I spent my evenings and weekends and in my downtime of which there wasn't much working for a startup just connecting with journalists, mostly at the time on AOL and some message boards. And they said sure, feel free to send me releases on MyBeat and what I write about.

Mickie Kennedy: 6:20

And I launched a little over 25 years ago, in October of 1998, and I had almost 10,000 journalists in my database and so I was just a matchmaker, sending press releases to these journalists. And you know a lot of the journalists were responsive and wrote about my clients and it was just great. And after a while, pr Newswire reached out to me and said hey, we like what you're doing, helping small businesses. Have you considered maybe adding a wire distribution to it? And I'm just like you guys charge \$1,600 to go out nationally and my guys are paying a few hundred dollars and they tried to push me to a local or city distribution and I really maintained that these guys deserved a national distribution.

Mickie Kennedy: 7:13

And I think what really finally clinched it was when I was visiting them, and noticed that they had an editorial team that they said was there overnight. They didn't do very much, but they had to be there in case there was breaking news or recall or someone needed to get some news out to the Asian markets from the US and they needed to coordinate that. So I suggested that I start scheduling my press releases for next business day so that their editorial team could set them up overnight when they weren't busy and it wouldn't incur any additional labor charges. And so that's finally what did it, and they finally agreed to offer me a \$1,600 distribution for substantially less. And today, over 10 years later, my clients are still getting with every distribution a national distribution of a PR Newswire that includes all the industry-specific trade publications and targeting that you get with a national distribution of a PR Newswire that includes all the industry-specific trade publications and targeting that you get with a national distribution without having to pay \$1,600.

Janice Hostager: 8:13

Oh, I just love that story. I mean, like you, I started in PR. It was for a big retailer in the Midwest and this was like the early 90s, so it was. I had this giant list of media contacts, you know, and it was a matter of going through and looking through and figuring out which ones I should be contacting and it was so arduous. I mean, it was also good

because you had relationships with this, this list of people. But, um it, it was it. It's made so much.

Mickie Kennedy: 8:50

Everything is so much easier now that we have the internet and we have things like email and with a, you know, press release company like yours yeah, every time someone just hits send and it goes on the wire, I have to tell them about programming 100 numbers into a fax machine that only held 100 numbers and so, yeah, that took like five or six hours talk about the story and what it was, because I think oftentimes when small businesses do a press release, they maybe want to announce a new location that's opening or some event that's going on, and they put it out there and don't get a lot of traction from it, right.

Janice Hostager: 9:39

So I love that you took something that was kind of boring, like numbers, and made it super interesting by adding that story. Is that something that small businesses can replicate when they do a press release?

Mickie Kennedy: 9:55

Absolutely. As a matter of fact, the biggest mistake that I see coming through my business are press releases that are just devoid of any elements for journalists to build a story. I get product announcements, you know I get it. A product launch is so important and the goal here is to like, get articles to sell the product, but they just say, you know new product, here's a list of features and here's a page to learn more and buy it.

Mickie Kennedy: 10:26

And a journalist? There's very little for a journalist to do to turn that into an article. What I tell people to do is you know, I assume that this product didn't just happen. You had people try it out and test it. Give us a use case study. You know someone who had a problem. What was their experience using it? What were the outcomes?

Mickie Kennedy: 10:50

Ideally, if you have data and numbers and then get a quote by them, you know about using it and that sort of allows a journalist who likes a story arc you know, and all journalists like a story arc.

Mickie Kennedy: 11:03

Even if it's a small article, it really allows it to flow naturally in a way that they know is going to educate and entertain their audience, and that's their goal is to have content that they present that their audience is going to be entertained or educated with or both,

and in these instances, so many people forget that what they're writing is good for them but it wasn't necessarily written good for the journalist, and so you have to take into account what a journalist is looking for and what are the things that you can put into that press release that will raise the stakes and make it more educational and more vital for the audience to read.

Mickie Kennedy: 11:48

For example, if you have a logistics software solution, what's the importance of this in your industry? And you're like well, a lot of people fail because they can't get these costs under control. What's those numbers? They're probably out there, they're probably publicly available, having something that says 73% of new businesses in our industry fell in the first five years, largely because they can't contain their cost, and our solution addresses one of the biggest costs for people in our industry. The stakes are now there in a way that the journalist immediately recognizes, and they know that their audience is going to recognize hey, this is important, this affects such a large amount of new businesses, and so those are the types of things that you can put in there to really make it more important and to give more of the drama that's needed for stories.

Janice Hostager: 12:43

Yeah, that's a great point, because oftentimes we think of a press release from what it's doing for our business, right? Rather than it really is selling a story to the journalist first, because they have not only a deadline to meet, but they have to produce something that is interesting to read, otherwise they're not going to have a job either, right have a job either, right, right, I mean, there's a lot of us who've given pills to dogs, so we find it a lot easier when you wrap it in cheese.

Mickie Kennedy: 13:10

And I'm telling you that you have to do the same thing with what you want. Your message is the pill, but you got to put some cheese around it, some elements to build a story, because then it will be appetizing to the journalists and the journalists will take it and build the article out of it that you want them to do.

Janice Hostager: 13:28

I love that analogy. So, besides a story arc or something of meat in the press release, so what are some other key elements that small business owners can put in their releases?

Mickie Kennedy: 13:40

So you know. One of the important things is, you know, what they're about. What's their unique selling proposition? What did they do that's different from everybody else? So people always say I'm too small to matter, but really, journalists don't care about your

size. In fact, they love to put the spotlight on new small businesses, mom and pops, side hustle businesses. What they're looking for is something that's unique and different, and so own what your differentiating aspect of your business is, and if you don't have one, you need to address it and create one, because I'm telling you, if you're just a commodity in a commodity business, eventually you're going to have to compete on price to the point that there is no profit, and that is the same model that happens with every business. So you know what your unique selling proposition is.

Mickie Kennedy: 14:34

I tell people that the customers that I love they're probably the most short-lived customers, but they're startups, and startups do a lot of PR and press releases when they first start because they want to build a basis of earned media and get articles written about them, and then they move on to paid advertising because they realize that once they get articles written about them and they put them on another website and people know about them and there's logos on their landing pages and things like that, that their conversion rate will drastically increase and they'll be able to close more sales for less.

Mickie Kennedy: 15:16

So one of the first things that I see every well-funded startup do is turn to pr before they turn the spigot on with advertising, and that's because they recognize the value of earned media and people are like what do you mean? Increased conversions? And what I'm saying is that when a journalist writes about you and there's an article, it's like third-party corroboration. A journalist has chosen you and written about you Huge credibility boost. I mean, it can't be replicated with any amount of paid advertising. It almost acts like an implied endorsement, and so this is a huge signal of trust around the business, and that trust radius can be amplified by putting logos on landing pages, building out a newsroom and sharing on social media again and again these little mentions of you in the media and as a result of that, it makes it so much easier to do business because people feel very comfortable pulling out their credit card and working with you, because you've been vetted, you've got the clout and the currency and, as a result, you're going to find it a lot easier to close sales.

Janice Hostager: 16:30

Not only that, but when one news outlet picks up your story, others will also follow suit. Right? So if you show up in USA Today, for example, you might get a call from CNN or something like that.

Mickie Kennedy: 16:43

Yes, and there are particular industries where nobody wants to be the first person to cover you. But once someone has a lot of people then will cover you. Their curriculum is

one of those things where people seem, if it's a new curriculum and a new program, especially in school systems, and you're trying to promote yourself, it's very difficult to get that first mention, but generally once you do, everybody else feels comfortable covering you after that, and so it is something that sometimes is difficult to get through, that first hurdle, but once you do it gets more comfortable because even the journalists see that credibility has already started to be established and they feel more trusting of writing about you.

Janice Hostager: 17:28

That's super interesting. So a small business owner, let's say all right, so they write a press release about something. Maybe it's a new product launch or something like that. Should they reach out? Should they go on Twitter or X and reach out, or LinkedIn, to journalists that are covering articles in their area? Tell me a little bit, too, about how it works with e-releases. Do you select who they're going to be sent out to, or how does the whole process work or how should it work?

Mickie Kennedy: 18:01

Right With e-releases. Everything goes out through the wire wire and it goes to the appropriate trade publications and circulates there. I have heard of people in the past who've had success reaching out to people with Twitter, but I also know a lot of people have left Twitter because of the new ownership and I don't know where they all are anymore. I know that a lot of them are just sitting behind screens being bombarded with off-targeted emails. I started my business emailing a journalist and I don't really do that. There's a little bit of email that's available to people on our higher-end product, but it's very difficult because, like I said, there's so many databases that are available, and when someone buys a database, they feel entitled to email every journalist even though they're not in their industry, and so it's created a really terrible situation. If I went to 10,000 journalists today and said could I send you email, I bet you I would have the exact opposite of what I experienced 26 years ago, and that's most would just say absolutely not. My email is a mess as it is, and so I think that you have to sort of get a feel for what's the best approach for reaching out to people. I think local media email is appropriate. They're probably getting a bit of spam, but reaching out to them locally is appropriate, and I do think that's the one area where I recommend people don't use e-releases. If you're only looking for local media, perhaps you're starting out in your local business. Local media is the easiest media for you to cultivate yourself. If you think about it, there's probably less than 10 people who would cover you in your local market. It's very doable to find out who those 10 people are and then email them. And again, it's as easy as doing your research on who writes about you in the local paper, your industry and figuring out what their email address is. If it's not posted somewhere online, you can call and ask and everybody is like really, you can just call. Yeah, these are not celebrities, these are people that are supposed to be accessible in your community, and

so if they don't give it to you, maybe you just need to provide more information saying hey, I'm a local business, I would like to send them a pitch. Is email not the best way to reach them? And they might tell you oh well, you're not going to believe this, but this guy still believes in faxes. He's the one guy that does, but they might say he prefers a phone call, but most of the time they'll give you the email address.

Mickie Kennedy: 20:42

If you're lucky enough to have a business magazine or a business newspaper in the Baltimore area we're fortunate to have both Again, who covers your industry there? Find that journalist, get their email address and do the same thing with TV and radio. That's also an opportunity for you. Are there sometimes segments where they put a spotlight on a business? Most of your TV is going to be like news segments. Most of your TV is going to be like news segments. So if you see something in the morning news or the evening news that looks like it covered an industry and you could see them covering your industry, call them and just say hey, I saw you guys covering this in a recent segment. Do you know who the producer or booker of that type of segment would be? Because I have a fascinating pitch for them that I think they would love in a completely different industry. And again, they should be willing to give it to you.

Mickie Kennedy: 21:33

And then you have your little database. It might be as small as four or five contacts, but generally it's usually never more than 10. You may even want to consider free weekly papers as well. Don't discount them, because they do have reach and I've had many customers be able to actually negotiate a column. And I do suggest that you don't do a weekly column but do a monthly column. It's less of an ask for you and they're going to want as much content as they can get, because the weekly ones are usually focused on selling advertising and then trying to scramble to find content. So it's not just ads and things. So if you come to them and you're a local fitness instructor and you say I want to create a column to give people wellness and health and fitness tips once a month, they'll say send me an example and I'll take a look at it and if they like it, they'll run with it. It's a great way to get a mention for you and your business as the author. And again, get a little bit of authority locally. So this is very doable. Again, get a little bit of authority locally. So you know this is very doable.

Mickie Kennedy: 22:53

And then, as you have newsworthy announcements, you know, just stay in contact with your local Rolodex of media and just reach out to them. What you may find is that nothing may happen the first six months, but most of the people who stick with it for a year do notice that they begin to get articles or they begin to get contacted themselves. So a journalist is working on a story and they remember you and they're like ah, I

wonder if I could plug this company in here. I think they would be the right fit. Let me call them and see if they would be willing to give me a quote or want to be in this article.

Mickie Kennedy: 23:26

And that's generally how it happens. You just stay in the front of their mind and after a while they'll just start using you and incorporating you and you'll be their go-to person. In the Baltimore Sun there is one company that I have just sat and watched. Every year they get at least three articles mentioned. It might be about corporate wellness programs and all of a sudden they're using them as an example. It could be talking about the difficulty of getting people to come back into the office and how they're dealing with it, and showing pictures of a mostly empty office with two or three people working. And so it's not because those people are advertising or influential. They're just people who've gone through the work and established a relationship with a journalist, and a journalist knows that he can count on them whenever they need to plug someone into a story.

Janice Hostager: 24:19

Oh, I love that you brought that up because that is so true. It really is that relationship, and I mean it is great when they have a deadline to meet and they need to get their story published and they need quotes and photos and all of that. So that's why I love that you brought that up because, yeah, you want those relationships with those reporters. That's really going to make your job a whole lot easier, really going to make your job a whole lot easier. So what kind of tips do you have for picking media outlets? Or is that something like with e-releases that you already do for them?

Mickie Kennedy: 24:53

Right, yeah, so all of our stuff is sort of contained. Everything goes out nationally and there are certain people who will get that just like everybody. But you also get to choose targeting. So you get to pick your industry or parenting, as well as women's interest and whatever is appropriate to you, and when you do that, it opens it up to more people who are more specialized in what their beat or the area that they cover is. So, yeah, that's all there and it is pretty easy to understand and it's pretty transparent with the example of sources listed on our website. That sort of shows a sample of the types of publications that are included with each target that you do and it is basically systematic.

Mickie Kennedy: 25:50

And the real value of being on the wire is it's one of the places that busy journalists go to in the US. There's basically a duopoly of news wires in the US. There's basically a duopoly of newswires. I think it's mostly been that way for 70 years it's maybe 60. But it's BusinessWire and PR Newswire, and PR Newswire is the oldest and largest and that's who we work with. All of our releases go through. But basically it's the two ponds

where most journalists get to fish and it's made it very difficult for new people to enter. Globe Newswire has been trying to get market share and they've done really good with publicly traded companies that are just looking for SEC compliance and don't really care about reaching journalists. Because, as it is right now, there's just not a lot of journalists that go to that third pond, so the majority is PR Newswire and Businesswire and the value of it is right now, there's just not a lot of journalists that go to that third pond, so the majority is PR Newswire and BusinessWire and the value of it is it's not an inbox with off-targeted messages. When they go into their newsroom, they can look at the feeds for their industry. They can also set up customized keywords that are always excluded, so they can actually refine it even more, so it's very fine-tuned to what they cover and, as a result of that, that's the real value of the newswire in an area where there's so much spam. Because, uh, it's. It's a place where journalists can just look at these headlines as they come in and they're very specific and very likely to be about the types of topics that they're interested in and, uh, you know what that means is.

Mickie Kennedy: 27:29

Uh, in the. You know I have a case study on my website. It's the top one called the dining bond initiative, which is a very short-lived effort set up during the pandemic to help restaurants that were closed, uh, while we were sitting home for two weeks to flatten the curve. And it was basically you would go nominate your favorite local restaurant and if they were able to get in touch with them they're volunteers you could give money that would go directly to them to help them out during that time and it was sort of held by a dining bond or gift certificate arrangement. And, uh, you know, did one release, you hit send and we quit counting at 100 articles, uh, that were picked it up, uh, all the major ones, wall street journal, uh, washington post, all of them ran with it, and so many daily papers, and those were the ones we quit.

Mickie Kennedy: 28:22

We can't, we quit counting. There are so many small little city newspapers, but they all ran with it. And before it was all said and done, over 10 million dollars was raised from just one. You know, 349 press releases that we donated to their cause. And that shows the real value of a wire that if you have a meaningful message, it can really leverage and go far and have the availability of a lot of places to pick it up.

Janice Hostager: 28:52

That is a cool story. You brought up keywords and there is a hidden value to any press release you put out there and that's SEO right. Are there specific SEO strategies to keep in mind when you're writing press releases?

Mickie Kennedy: 29:07

I say you know, check to make sure you're not using shorthand. I'm guilty of always referencing releases and not really putting press releases in there. So if press releases are what I'm interested in, make sure that I'm not using shorthand and just mentioning releases without the word press in it. So I would check for that. I wouldn't worry about anything else. I think anything else runs the risk of not being natural and organic. I think that I shouldn't try to game it. What's going to matter more than your press release is the actual articles and that you don't control, because that's written by the journalist. And so I think that it's not worth putting too much considerable effort into the actual you know, keyword stuffing a press release or anything like that, because you run the risk that it's going to appear I don't know awkward and therefore turn off a journalist, and then you don't get the goal of the earned media. So I tell people you know, enjoy the SEO that happens from these articles that get published.

Mickie Kennedy: 30:17

The surprising thing that a lot of people don't realize is you get SEO benefits from articles that have no link to your website.

Mickie Kennedy: 30:25

Uh, google has uh not been quiet about the fact that there's something called an implied link and they actually have a patent on it that if they can contextually tell by the content on the page that mentioning e-releases press release service, uh, is the company behind e-releases press release service is the company behind e-Releases.com. e-Releases.com will get the credit for that article and there's no link to me. And so I see clients all the time. They get lift when there's a New York Times article or they get lift when a major trade publication or somebody picks them up and there's no link to them and they're always asking about that and I always have to explain the implied link. That happens with article mentions and it's the best kind because Google knows that that can't be manipulated easily. These authority websites that are like the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal you're not going to pay to get an article written organically on their website, so they feel very comfortable giving a very authoritative implied link to the company that's mentioned within those articles.

Janice Hostager: 31:36

Love it. Well, you have given us some really great information today, Mickie. I really appreciate all of this. Is there anything else that small business owners should know before they put some time and effort in a press release?

Mickie Kennedy: 31:48

I think the best thing is just to sort of educate yourself, and to that I do have a free masterclass about strategic types of press releases.

Mickie Kennedy: 31:57

There's several examples that I didn't get to go into, but these are the types of press releases that do get picked up. And I tell people, if you were to go through this free masterclass and walk away with six to 12 ideas for your business and I guarantee that you'll walk away with at least six that you didn't realize were even available to you. If you focused on those and did a PR campaign of six to eight releases, you're more likely to have more hits than misses when you send those out. And that masterclass is at ereleases.com/plan, P-L-A-N. It's completely free and it is not a class like the classes. I used to pay for 12 hours, 20 hours of videos. I never finished them, so I kept this one less than an hour long video and it's very digestible and I guarantee you that it sounds so simple. But yet many people aren't taking advantage of these little simple tweaks and changes and types of releases that the journalists are actively looking for.

Janice Hostager: 33:02

All good stuff and, of course, I'll put the links to that in. Journalists are actively looking for All good stuff and of course, I'll put the links to that in the show notes for today. Well, thanks so much, Mickie. I sure enjoyed learning, getting a refresher about press releases for sure, and I know that the audience will find it valuable as well.

Mickie Kennedy: 33:18

You're welcome.

Janice Hostager: 33:20

So what'd you think? My interview with Mickie reminded me of the power of PR that so often gets overlooked in marketing plans, including by me. We instead jump right into ads or social media. I know that I'll be rethinking that after today. You can get the show notes about everything we talked about in today's episode by going to myweeklymarketing.com/62. Thank you so much for joining me today. I'll see you next time. Bye for now.