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# PRESS CALL

## Aims

- ◆ To develop an understanding of PR strategies.
- ◆ To develop presentation skills.

## Outcome

- ◆ Participants realise how ideas and information can be presented to support one cause or perspective against another.

## What you need

Copies of the **Actionpages: Press call, How to do a press release and An exchange of words** participants to prepare for role play by researching on internet; flip chart paper and pens.

## What you do

- ▷ Divide group into two. Explain that the activity is a role play based on a press briefing involving two sides of the genetically modified organisms debate.
- ▷ Group A will play the role of press officers of TNCs who are defending themselves against criticism from NGOs (if necessary explain TNC and NGO – see *Glossary*). They will be questioned by Group B who will take the role of the press. Roles will then be changed – Group B assume the role of press officers from the NGOs, while Group A take on the part of the press.
- ▷ Each group must research the arguments put forward by both sets of protagonists using the internet sites listed. They should decide how they should present their own case in the best possible light, and what questions they will ask when they take on the role of the press.
- ▷ If time allows, each group should prepare a press release using the guidelines. Press releases are a popular means of communicating an organisation's point of view without filtering by anyone else.
- ▷ Set up a press conference – a brief presentation of the main arguments from TNC representatives, followed by questions from the press; same format for NGO.

## Whole group discussion

- ▷ While remaining in role.
  - ◆ How did it feel to be members of each group? Why?
  - ◆ What techniques did you use to simplify the issues so they could be understood by the press and general public?
  - ◆ How did you try to emphasise your strengths and address criticism of your case?
  - ◆ How effective was this in the press briefing?
  - ◆ With the benefit of hindsight how might you present your case differently?
- ▷ Role plays can generate strong emotions. It is important that these feelings do not carry on into real life, so the groups should 'de-role' by moving to another chair while declaring out loud "I am not a press officer....".
  - ◆ Was it difficult to assume roles? Why?
  - ◆ Who had most power – press or press officers? Why?
  - ◆ How accurate was the evidence presented in the briefings?
  - ◆ How can journalists check on the information they are being given?
  - ◆ How difficult is it for the media to present a balanced view of an emotive issue such as genetically modified food?

## Key ideas

- ◆ In a confrontation between different perspectives, PR involves trying to make the case for your point of view. This may involve drawing attention to evidence which supports your argument, trying to move the debate to your agenda, putting your interpretation to ‘facts’, answering the questions raised by your critics, and undermining their credibility.
- ◆ PR practitioners (from both TNCs and NGOs) are often accused of being highly selective of ‘facts’, using emotive language, using poorly researched ‘evidence’, using ‘experts’ who will support their views, and putting their own ‘spin’ on reality.
- ◆ PR consultants sometimes set up ‘grassroots’ organisations – often paid employees – to represent their clients’ arguments in public enquiries and press conferences. This tactic is used in contentious issues such as environmental destruction.
- ◆ Press releases are popular with PR practitioners because their perspective is presented without being interpreted by anyone else. A 1990 study found that almost 40% of the news content in a typical US newspaper originates from press releases, story memos and suggestions.
- ◆ It is difficult to check the accuracy of information presented to us as ‘facts’. Research may be poorly conducted, and ‘experts’ often disagree on how evidence should be interpreted.
- ◆ You can try to make your own mind up by doing your own background research, although this takes time. The internet can be a goldmine of information, but must be treated with caution – it generally reflects the views of the publisher. Consider both sides of the argument, what each has to gain from promoting their point of view, and try to find out their past record.

## Follow-up

- ◆ Each group uses notes from the press briefing and their own background research to prepare a front page article in the style of a daily paper. Make up a headline, strapline and sketch a photo which will make a suitable piece.
- ◆ Hand out the **Actionpage: An exchange of words** which has two real press releases which provide very different interpretations of the same event.
- ◆ **Appendix 1: PR for beginners** provides more detailed analysis of corporate PR methods.



illustration: Greenpeace (UK)

### “ RULE FIVE

**Treat the media as conduits, not enemies. Again, they've got a job to do. You can do one of two things. You can hunker in the bunker and let them use other sources, hostile third parties, people with axes to grind, bones to pick, people who have an interest in giving you trouble – or you can deal forthrightly with the media yourself. We advise the latter. ”**

Harlan Teller, Executive Managing Director, Hill & Knowlton in *Ten Crisis Rules of the Road*

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# Actionpage: Press call

Organisations such as transnational corporations (TNCs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often hold press briefings to present information to the media. This might be to draw attention to a new product, initiative or campaign, answer criticism or satisfy public concern. They hope that the media will present their perspective to the general public.

The issue of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) has generated a great deal of media coverage – from all sides of the argument: the agro-chemical companies, food manufacturers and retailers, consumers, environmentalists and government. This role play will enable you to investigate the issue more closely, and to look at ways in which the arguments can be presented most effectively.

The role play will take the form of two press briefings between press officers and journalists. The first will involve press officers from companies who are involved in researching and developing genetically modified seeds. They will make a brief summary of the main arguments in favour of this new technology, and then answer questions from journalists (the rest of the group). The second press briefing will involve press officers from NGOs who are campaigning for tighter controls on the use of GMOs on British farms and in food manufacturing. They will also make a brief summary followed by questions.

You need to:

- ▷ Find out the arguments for and against GMOs, using the websites listed as a starting point
  - divide the sites amongst the group, each person should make notes on the arguments.
- ▷ Each person to feedback to the group; summarise main pros and cons on flip chart paper.
- ▷ Consider these arguments from the point of view of the role you have been given:
  - which are the strongest arguments in your favour and what evidence do you have to support them?
  - how can you present these in a form that the press and their audience will be able to understand?
  - how can you counter the arguments made by your critics?
- ▷ Decide how you will conduct your press briefing – you may want to use audio-visuals to help communicate your ideas.
- ▷ (Optional) If you have time, prepare a 3-400-word press release using the guidelines:
  - briefly state your position
  - include short quotes from ‘experts’ who support your point of view
  - sketch photos which would be included in a press pack and could accompany a favourable article.
- ▷ When you are playing the role of the journalists, make notes of the main points during the press briefing, including short quotes which can be used in an article.

## Websites

Links within websites are often changed and some of the specific pages listed may not be accessible. In this case, you could try accessing the home page (the first part of the website address, eg [www.foe.org.uk/](http://www.foe.org.uk/)) and trawl for the information.

- ◆ [www.novartis.com/biotech/index.html](http://www.novartis.com/biotech/index.html)
- ◆ [www.biotechknowledge.com/](http://www.biotechknowledge.com/)
- ◆ [www.biotechbasics.com/](http://www.biotechbasics.com/)
- ◆ [www.nestle.com/all\\_about/insight/genetech.html](http://www.nestle.com/all_about/insight/genetech.html)
- ◆ [www.iceland.co.uk/](http://www.iceland.co.uk/)
- ◆ [www.oneworld.org/guides/biotech/index.html](http://www.oneworld.org/guides/biotech/index.html)
- ◆ [www.greenpeace.org/~geneng/](http://www.greenpeace.org/~geneng/)
- ◆ [www.foe.org.uk/campaigns/food\\_and\\_biotchnology/](http://www.foe.org.uk/campaigns/food_and_biotchnology/)
- ◆ [www.soilassociation.org/](http://www.soilassociation.org/)
- ◆ [www.which.net/campaigns/gmfood/gmcontents.html](http://www.which.net/campaigns/gmfood/gmcontents.html)
- ◆ [www.christian-aid.org.uk/indepth/9905suic/suicide1.htm](http://www.christian-aid.org.uk/indepth/9905suic/suicide1.htm)
- ◆ [www.actionaid.org/pdf/bio.pdf](http://www.actionaid.org/pdf/bio.pdf)

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# Actionpage: How to do a press release

- ◆ The press release is one of most important means of communication with the media. News editors and journalists like press releases because they save work.
- ◆ Press releases give their senders the chance to offer their selection of facts and views without these being filtered through anyone else.
- ◆ Press releases have different functions:
  - give advance notice of an event
  - deal with criticism of your organisation
  - convey decisions and provide progress reports
  - give general background information
  - give details of a report or meeting.
- ◆ A press release is aimed at press reporters, radio presenters and producers, TV producers. It is not aimed at the public, so don't copy a newspaper style. You should provide clear, concise information – about one side of A4 – which a reporter will use. You can provide additional background information at the end in a note to the editor.

## The format of a press release

Use a type writer or word processor on A4 headed paper or press release paper; double spaced to make room for reporters' notes; only use one side of the paper; number the pages; never split a sentence or paragraph over two pages.

### **Date for release** (in capitals)

eg FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE or EMBARGOED UNTIL 4TH FEB

The embargo – you can send news to the media in advance, but stipulate when you want it to appear. This means an article can be prepared for publication but will not spoil the impact of the event.

### **Headline** (keep it simple – nothing lurid)

### **Opening paragraph**

5 W's – **what** is happening, **who** is doing it, **where**, **when** and **why** it's happening – the reason for the press release.

### **The 'intro'**

The most interesting fact about the issue or event. This must catch the editor's attention... otherwise it will be binned!

### **Main body of press release**

- ◆ your style should give a confident, easy-to-read impression
- ◆ concentrate on facts in descending order of importance; give the number of people involved, spell out first names, quote statistics...; do not use bold or underline
- ◆ use the active voice; don't write: "a new campaign to control GMOs was announced by Greenearth director, Joan Smith..."; do write: "Greenearth director, Joan Smith, announced a new campaign to control GMOs..."
- ◆ use quotes; news is about people – people describing what they have seen, feel and think; every press release should include direct quotation – you can even make up your own.

### **ENDS** (below the final sentence)

(use the word 'MORE' if you continue onto another page)

### **Contact details and availability of other material**

eg For further information or to arrange an interview...

Photos of (...) are available on request.

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# Actionpage: An exchange of words

These examples of press releases from Nestlé UK and Baby Milk Action illustrate how press releases can be used to put a different interpretation on the same event.

## Nescafé to support four national charities

Embargo: 00.1 hours, Thursday 28th October 1999

Nescafé, Britain's best-loved coffee, has announced a £1 million partnership with four leading charities to celebrate its 60th anniversary.

The branded community investment programme **Nescafé Getting Together to Help** will support Kids' Clubs Network, Shelter, Macmillan Cancer Relief and the British Red Cross to the tune of £250,000 each. The money will go towards new projects in local communities over a two year period to make a real difference to people's lives.

**Nescafé Getting Together to Help** will kick-off with the **Nescafé Kids' Clubs Challenge** – from January 2000 a grant will be awarded every day for two years to out-of-school clubs most in need of a refurbishment or new equipment. Kids' Clubs will be invited to apply for up to £500 and encourage parents, children and volunteers to get involved.

Harriet Harman, MP, children's TV artist Mark Speight, and Gerhard Berssenbruegge, Managing Director of Nescafé launched the scheme in Southwark, South London today by helping to create a literacy corner at a local Kids' Club.

Over the next two years Nescafé Getting Together to Help will also help Shelter reduce the number of people sleeping on the streets; Macmillan Cancer Relief with their 'A Voice for Life' campaign which aims to reduce the unnecessary fear surrounding cancer; and the British Red Cross's tracing and message service.

Gerhard Berssenbrugge, Managing Director of Nescafé, said, "We wanted to celebrate our 60th anniversary by giving something back to our customers and supporting causes that are close to their hearts. We are delighted to be getting together with Shelter, the British Red Cross, Macmillan Cancer Relief and Kids' Clubs Network to help those in need".

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## Charities benefit from Nestlé's public relations disaster

5th November 1999

Nestlé has announced it is entering into "partnerships" worth £1 million with four UK charities: Kids' Club Network, Macmillan Cancer Relief, British Red Cross and Shelter. Without wishing to undermine the work of these charities, Baby Milk Action notes that Nestlé appears to be acting on advice from Saatchi & Saatchi following a "damning" ruling against it by the UK Advertising Standards Authority. In May this year, after one of its longest ever investigations, the ASA upheld all of Baby Milk Action's complaints against a Nestlé anti-boycott advertisement in which Nestlé claimed to market infant formula "ethically and responsibly." Nestlé's Chief Executive, Peter Brabeck, flew into London the week before the publication of the ruling to take personal charge of the damage limitation exercise. Nestlé is the target of a boycott in 19 countries because of its continued violations of the marketing requirements for breastmilk substitutes. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has stated that reversing the decline in breastfeeding could save the lives of 1.5 million infants around the world every year.

Marketing Week (11th February 1999) described the ASA ruling against Nestlé as: "a first-class public relations disaster" and asked Marjorie Thompson of Saatchi & Saatchi what Nestlé should do: "She suggests the way to counteract the bad publicity is to go on the offensive by using advertising showing the benefits of Nestlé's financial contributions to charities, such as Kids' Club Network which provides after-school care for children."

Mike Brady, Campaigns and Networking Coordinator, Baby Milk Action said: "While we value the work of the beneficiaries of Nestlé's Public Relations strategy, we would much prefer that Nestlé responded by putting infant health before its own profits and ended all baby food marketing malpractice."

Nestlé appears to react to each wave of bad publicity arising from the baby milk issue by handing out more money to worthy causes. Churches in York have received substantial donations following the Church of England Synod's examination of this issue.

From 1993 to 1994 Nestlé donations to charities increased from £847,000 to £1.035 million. Peter Anderson, Nestlé UK Community Relations Manager, was asked by Corporate Citizen magazine to explain the increase and said it was "because a lot of people think we're killing babies in the third world."

Nestlé is also promoting cereals in school through its box-top scheme. Nestlé's Junior Range baby foods are sponsoring Tumble Tots children's clubs.

Mike Brady said: "However worthy the recipients, these tie-ins are ultimately self-serving promotions for Nestlé and its products."

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### Notes

- 1 Marketing Week (11th February 1999) said: "The Advertising Standards Authority appears poised to publish a damning verdict on Nestlé, which effectively brands the global corporation a liar, insofar as it claimed to have marketed infant formula products ethically." Nestlé appealed against the ruling. Its appeal was rejected and the ruling was published on 12th May 1999.
- 2 Where water is unsafe an artificially fed child is up to 25 times more likely to die as a result of diarrhoea than a breastfed child.
- 3 The risk of HIV transmission through breastfeeding requires further independent research and careful consideration of risk. Mothers require accurate and independent information. While replacement feeding may be advisable in some instances, the World Health Organisation has stressed that the International Code and Resolutions must be respected. These measures aim to ensure safe use of breastmilk substitutes as well as to protect breastfeeding.