

REUTERS/ARKO DATTA

# 6 SECRETS OF PRESS RELEASE SEO

HOW TO INCREASE THE VISIBILITY OF YOUR PRESS  
RELEASES THROUGH SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

Produced in collaboration with the experts at SEO-PR



THOMSON REUTERS™

# WHERE IS YOUR PRESS RELEASE?

Millions of people use news search engines to find recent articles and press releases. According to Nielsen's NetView tool, Yahoo! News had a unique audience of 40.8 million American visitors in 2009 and Google News had a unique audience of 14.7 million visitors in the U.S. Millions more find news blended into the universal search results when searching for information on Google, Yahoo!, Bing and Ask.com.

Search engines have also become indispensable tools for journalists. According to the 2010 PRWeek Media Survey, 95 percent of journalists use search engines during the course of research for a story, compared to only 36 percent of journalists who use the website of a commercial newswire, 34 percent who use a company blog, and 33 percent who use social networks.

If an organization wants its press release to be found when either the public or the press conducts a search using relevant terms, it needs help optimizing press releases for the major news search engines. This guide explains what "press release SEO" is, why it is important, how to do it step by step, and how companies have used it to generate measurable results.

## WHAT IS SEO?

Search engine optimization (SEO) is typically used to describe the process of editing the content of a website in order to improve visibility within Google and other search engines. However, the term is also used by public relations (PR) professionals to describe the process of editing the content of a press release in order to improve search engine rank. This guide will use the terms "website SEO" and "press release SEO" to avoid confusion.

Press release SEO has transformed the PR function. It literally puts the "public" back into public relations by enabling PR professionals to manage communications directly to the public as well as indirectly through the press. This transformation began in September 2002, when Google launched Google News, a computer-generated news site that aggregates headlines from thousands of news sources worldwide, including press release distribution services. Yahoo! News followed suit when a new version of the news search engine was released in March 2004.

Today, when the press and public visit Google News or Yahoo! News, the results often return headlines and a snippet of body copy from recent, relevant press releases. When readers click on a headline that interests them, they go directly to the press release. This enables distribution services to measure the actual number of headline impressions and release views (or reads) that an individual press release has received. However, the actual number

*RESEARCH SHOWS THAT 19 OUT OF 20 JOURNALISTS USE SEARCH ENGINES OR NEWS SEARCH ENGINES DURING THE COURSE OF THEIR RESEARCH FOR A STORY, AND PRESS RELEASE SEO CAN IMPROVE THE LIKELIHOOD THAT A RELEVANT RELEASE WILL BE FOUND.*

of impressions and reads is significantly larger because press release distribution services do not currently have the ability to track headline impressions and release views on all of their partner sites or search engines.

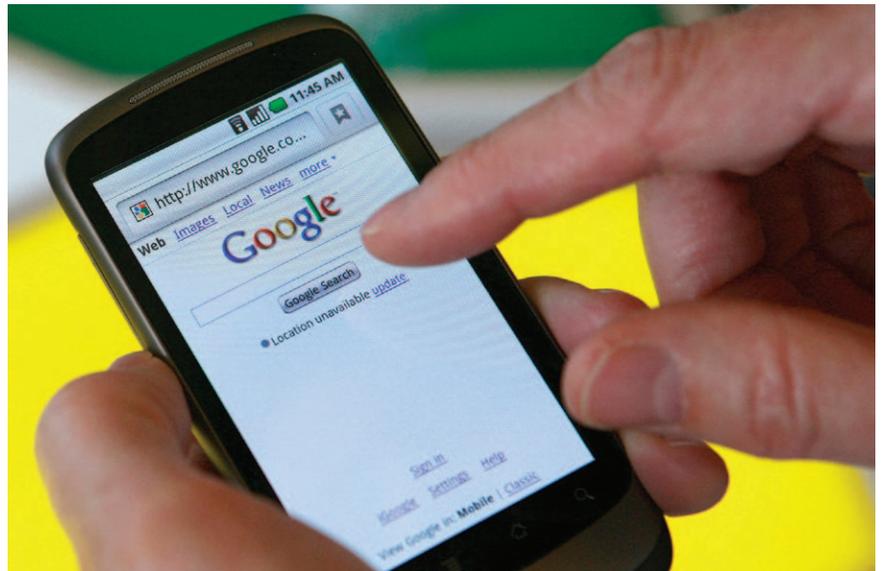
If a press release also includes links to interesting, related content, then it can drive traffic to a website. This traffic can be measured using Web analytics software and tools. Some companies have also used conversion tracking codes to measure the number of leads or sales generated by press release SEO. This transforms public relations from an "above the line" expense to increase brand awareness to a "below the line" marketing investment that can generate leads and sell products, services or content directly online.

## WHY IS PRESS RELEASE SEO IMPORTANT?

Did you know 61 percent of Americans now get their news online on a typical day, which puts the Internet just behind television and ahead of newspapers as a news source? According to Nielsen, the most commonly used online news sites, visited by over half of online news users on a typical day, are news search engines. According to Hitwise, Yahoo! News is the top news website, ranking ahead of CNN.com and MSNBC.com, while Google News ranks fourth, ahead of NYTimes.com and USA Today.com. Press release SEO is important because it can help increase the visibility of corporate announcements to this audience.

Research shows that 19 out of 20 journalists use search engines or news search engines during the course of their research for a story, and press release SEO can improve the likelihood that a relevant release will be found. Now, building relationships with journalists is still vital. According to a survey by Bennett & Company, 38 percent of journalists said the number one reason they open their email is because they know the sender. But press release SEO has become particularly important as it becomes more challenging to target journalists whose focus areas shift in an evolving media landscape.

Press release SEO can also indirectly help website SEO. Although links in a press release don't directly improve website SEO, journalists may choose to use those links in their stories. A website's ranking in Google, Bing, and other search engines is partly based on which other websites link to it. The quantity, quality, and relevance of links are important in website SEO, and press release SEO can be an effective way to get authoritative news sites to link to your site.



REUTERS/ROBERT GALBRAITH

## 6 SECRETS OF PRESS RELEASE SEO

### SECRET #1: YOUR LARGEST ONLINE AUDIENCE IS THE PUBLIC

The first secret of press release SEO is that more than 99 percent of the people who use news search engines are members of the public and less than 1 percent are members of the press.

Compared with Yahoo! News' unique audience of 40.8 million and Google News' unique audience of 14.7 million, newspaper organizations in the U.S. have a total of 41,500 journalists. There are only 528 staffers employed at network news divisions. Total staffing at the news magazines Time and Newsweek is only 300.

Although the average journalist is still significantly more influential, the typical consumer is significantly more likely to be interested in your products, services, or content.

This means the largest audience for your press release isn't the press, it's the public. However, a press release which contains news is still valuable to the public. As David Ogilvy once said, "The consumer is not a moron, she is your wife. You insult her intelligence if you assume that a mere slogan and a few vapid adjectives will persuade her to buy anything. She wants all the information you can give her."

Before moving to the next secret, let's answer a frequently asked question: "Do I need to write one version of a release for the press and a second version for the public?"

No, you don't. The press and the public are not divided by a common language. When conducting a news search, the press rarely uses journalistic jargon and the public rarely uses advertising slogans. They are both likely to use similar news search terms to find information.

### OPTIMIZING YOUR PRESS RELEASE

To learn how to optimize a press release, ask six classic questions—Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How:

- Who uses news search engines?
- What news search terms are they likely to use?
- Where do you put these terms in your press release?
- When should you add links to your press release?
- Why do you need to publish your release beyond your website?
- How do you measure the results of press release SEO?

The surprising answers to these questions, which have been developed since Google News was launched, constitute the six secrets of press release SEO.

**SECRET #2: USE KEYWORD RESEARCH TO IDENTIFY RELEVANT, COMMONLY SEARCHED TERMS TO INCLUDE IN YOUR RELEASE**

Keyword research is the most strategic phase of press release SEO. The foundation of the strategy is a list of prioritized keywords, organized in themes corresponding to the needs of your target markets. This provides a focus for writing the press release and keeping the links in it to a reasonable number.

There are more than one billion unique keywords. So without a strategy, you'll quickly get lost in a sea of options. But if you know your target markets, what you want to achieve and the amount of competition you face, then you have an excellent opportunity to appear in news search results for relevant keywords.

Getting into the mind of the customer is the first step to keyword research. As mentioned above, most jargon and slogans are not search terms. How do you discover the phrases that news search engine users might use? This process begins by:

- Brainstorming keyword categories that address your customers' needs and those of journalists.
- Compiling the brainstormed keywords for further review of traffic potential, competition and other factors.

The next step is conducting keyword research using one or more of these free tools from the major search engines (see sidebar below).

**SEARCH ENGINE TOOLS**

**Google News Autocomplete:** In August 2009, Google enabled *Suggest* in Google News. The feature provides real-time suggestions as you type into the search box on Google News. In October 2010, *Suggest* was renamed *Autocomplete* as part of the launch of Google Instant.

As you type, Autocomplete returns search queries based on other users' search activities. These suggestions are determined objectively using an algorithm, and are based on a number of factors including frequency of the searched terms.

**Yahoo! News Search Assist:** Yahoo! first introduced this feature on Yahoo! News in November 2009 and an enhanced version rolled out in July 2010 that provided near real-time suggestions in Yahoo! News Search. Although similar to Google News Autocomplete, Yahoo! News Search Assist will often make different suggestions.

For example, start typing *press release* and Google News Autocomplete suggests *press release distribution*, *Google press release*, *Apple press release*, *UFO press release*, *fake press release*, *White House press release*, *Samsung press release*, and *HP press release*. Start typing *press release* and Yahoo! News Search Assist suggests *acquisition press release*, *bond press release*, *Citigroup press release*, *Volkswagen press releases*, and *Beam Global press release*.

The best strategy is to use both tools and note any relevant terms that both suggest.

**Google Trends:** Compare the world's interest in different topics by entering up to five topics and see how often they have been searched on Google over time.

While these tools will help you identify and analyze search terms, keyword research involves more than looking up search frequencies. You should also consider other relevant factors in choosing which keywords to include in your release, including conversion potential, marketing strategy, legal issues, competition level, traffic potential and alignment with your website content.

**SECRET #3: INCLUDE YOUR RELEVANT KEYWORDS IN THE HEADLINE, SUBHEAD AND LEAD PARAGRAPH OF YOUR PRESS RELEASE**

For many who learned website SEO before 2000—when AltaVista was still a major search engine—changing meta tags was the most popular method used to improve rankings. This practice, however, made them a magnet for search engine spam. That's why Google never supported the keywords meta tag and most other search engines had dropped their support for it by October 2002.

In other words, you can't submit a list of preferred keywords for which your press releases will appear. The news search engine algorithms scan the title, headline and at least the first hundred words or so of news articles and press releases. The best way to ensure your press release appears for particular keyword searches is to include the most relevant and popular search terms and phrases in your headline, subhead and lead paragraph.

According to Google News, you should be sure that your headline

Use commas to compare multiple search terms. For example, type in *press release*, *news release* to compare interest in these two terms. The results will be displayed in a Search Volume Index graph. It's worth noting that press release is the more popular term.

Located beneath the Search Volume Index graph is Google's News Reference Volume graph. This graph shows you the number of times your topic appeared in Google News stories. When Google Trends detects a spike in the volume of news stories for a particular search term, it labels the graph and displays the headline of an automatically selected Google News story written near the time of that spike.

**Google Insights for Search:** This tool lets you compare search volume patterns across specific regions, categories, time frames and Google properties.

For example, Insights can be used to determine seasonality. A ski resort may want to find out when people search for ski-related terms most often. According to this tool, the results are fairly consistent throughout the years: interest picks up in August and peaks in December and January.

In addition, the average search term is currently three words long, so don't be afraid to use longer phrases, particularly if they include shorter terms within them. For example, the five-word phrase, "Russian nesting dolls for sale," includes the three-word phrase, "Russian nesting dolls," as well as the two-word term "nesting dolls" within it.

**BONUS SECRET: WRITE FOR HUMANS FIRST**

While the goal of press release SEO is to appear high in news search engine results, don't miss the mark by writing copy that's overly repetitive or unreadable. Try to strike a balance. Write press releases primarily for humans, with search engine considerations a secondary concern.

Also, avoid using puns and double entendres in headlines. Humans have trouble with clever headlines and, as Steve Lohr of *The New York Times* noted in "This Boring Heading Is Written for Google" (Apr. 9, 2006), "There are no algorithms for wit, irony, humor or stylish writing."



REUTERS/DARREN STAPLES

is not too long or too short. Currently, a headline is required to be between 2 and 22 words. Although the typical headline is 7-10 words long (42-60 characters), a longer headline that's 14-20 words long (84-120 characters) can be more effective for press release SEO. Why? A longer headline can include more search terms.

A study of more than 500 optimized press releases conducted by SEO-PR found that the headlines which were above average in getting people to read a full version of a press release were an average of 14 words long. The top five headlines were an average of 16 words long:

- "Jay Leno Opens Up to CarTV, AutoBytel's Car News Channel, About His Newest Love Interest – A 2005 Ford GT"
- "Halloween Pumpkin Carving Stencils and Thanksgiving Pumpkin Pie Recipes Featured in *Better Homes and Gardens Magazine*"
- "Search Engine Marketing Organization (SEMPO) Announces Three New Members of Advisory Board"
- "Click Fraud, an Industry Crisis, or Blip on the Search Engine Marketing Landscape?"
- "BHG.com Holds Straw Poll for Halloween Pumpkin Carving Stencils of Barack Obama, Joe Biden, John McCain and Sarah Palin"

Another study conducted by SEO-PR for Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, compared the results generated by a normal news release with an optimized press release. Both releases included links to a page on the Rutgers website with more information about the digital marketing course.

On April 20, 2010, the university distributed a news release with a headline that read: "Rutgers to Put iPad to the Test in New Digital Marketing Program."

A week later, SEO-PR distributed an optimized press release with a longer headline that read: "Apple iPad Tablet to be Tested in New Rutgers Mini-MBA Digital Marketing Executive Education Courses."

The longer headline included additional keyword phrases, including *Apple iPad*, *Apple iPad tablet*, *mini-MBA*, *Rutgers mini-MBA*, *executive education*, and *executive education courses*.

The news release which was not optimized generated a story on NJ.com and a modest spike in page views. The optimized press release

generated a blog post in Search Engine Watch, 225 tweets about *Rutgers mini-MBA*, a spike in page views that was twice as large as the un-optimized version, and the first registration for the course. The \$4,995 registration generated by the optimized press release also gave Rutgers a 3x return on its marketing investment of \$1,665.

**SECRET #4: ADD LINKS TO HELP PEOPLE FIND INTERESTING CONTENT RELATED TO YOUR RELEASE**

There are two reasons to add links to press releases. The first is to drive traffic to your website. Driving traffic is one of the primary objectives of search engine marketing (SEM) along with generating leads and selling products, services or content directly online, according to the SEMPO State of Search Report 2010, published by Econsultancy. Increasing brand awareness is a secondary SEM goal.

Driving traffic is also one of the primary objectives of press release SEO and we're seeing evidence of budget shifting from public relations activities to search engine marketing. According to SEMPO, companies re-allocated 17% of their public relations budgets to SEM in 2009.

There is a second reason to add links from your press release. The more useful the content you link to, the greater the chances that journalists and bloggers will find that content valuable to their readers and also link to it. The sites that link to your site can provide context about the subject matter of your site, and can indicate its quality and popularity. The most effective way to get other sites to create relevant links to your pages is to create unique, relevant content that can provide value to your online audiences.

Before we move to the next secret, let's debunk a common myth about adding anchor text links to your press release. According to Wikipedia, anchor text "is the visible, clickable words in a hyperlink. The words contained in the anchor text can determine the ranking that the page will receive by search engines." However, the anchor text from a press release to a landing page on your website will not improve that page's ranking in Google.

In December 2005, Matt Cutts said in his Gadgets, Google and SEO blog, "I'm not against doing press releases; press releases can be a useful part of getting traffic and building a brand. For ranking in Google, however, the main benefit of a press release is not direct links or PageRank from the press release directly; it's primarily the people who decide to write an article and link because of that."

## INCREASING BRAND AWARENESS, DRIVING WEBSITE TRAFFIC, AND GENERATING LEADS ALSO MATTER. BUT THE CLOSER YOU CAN GET TO MEASURING THE VALUE OF PRESS RELEASE SEO IN SELLING PRODUCTS, THE BETTER.

### SECRET #5: YOU NEED TO PUBLISH YOUR RELEASE BEYOND YOUR WEBSITE

Google News and Yahoo! News find articles by crawling thousands of online news sources (e.g. Reuters.com)—many of which display press releases in addition to editorial content. All of this content is collected by the news search engines, synthesized, and ranked in search results. While it's a best practice to publish your releases on your corporate website, it's important to note that neither news search engine crawls your site to find press releases (nor are they able to manually add releases that are sent to them). For this reason, the only way to take full advantage of press release SEO is by using a solution—such as Thomson ONE Public Relations—that allows you to publish your release to the most prominent online news websites.

### SECRET #6: USE WEB ANALYTICS TO MEASURE THE SUCCESS OF YOUR PRESS RELEASE SEO

The sixth secret represents both a challenge and an opportunity for PR professionals. It requires learning to use new PR metrics and Web analytics to measure the results of press release SEO.

The Institute of Public Relations publishes a large volume of papers related to PR measurement and evaluation. Katie Delahaye Paine's book, "Measuring Public Relationships," is also worth reading. However, as MarketingSherpa has observed, "You can hand your CEO a pile of clippings and estimated reach counts, but at the end of the day, proven sales are what matters."

Increasing brand awareness, driving website traffic, and generating leads also matter. But the closer you can get to measuring the value of press release SEO in selling products, the better.

To do that, you need to learn how to use Web analytics to get rich insights into your website traffic and public relations effectiveness. Google Analytics, Adobe SiteCatalyst, Webtrends, and other Web analytics software allow you to analyze your website engagement in an entirely new way. This includes how much referral traffic came from news articles, blog posts and press releases.

For example, Google Analytics lets you isolate and analyze subsets of your traffic. You can create new custom segments such as "PR Traffic" and select predefined custom segments such as "Visits with Conversions" with a flexible, easy-to-use segment builder. You can apply segments to current or historical data and compare segment performance side by side in reports.

This may appear to be "terra incognita" for some PR professionals. However, most organizations are already using these tools to measure the results of their marketing programs. The ability to track ROI from PR activities is a realistic and quantifiable process.

In 2003, SEMPO generated 21% of its leads for new members and sponsors with three optimized press releases. In 2004, Southwest

Airlines sold \$2.5 million in tickets using press release SEO. In 2005, Superpages.com got 1.3 million more searches for florists in a week with one optimized press release. In 2006, The *Christian Science Monitor* drove 450,000 unique visitors to its website in 24 hours using press release SEO.

More recent examples include:

- **Increasing awareness:** *Better Homes and Gardens* increased brand searches by 36 percent, according to a case study presented at SES Chicago 2008.
- **Driving traffic:** The Wharton School hosted the biggest business event in its 125-year history, according to a case study presented at SES Toronto 2007.
- **Generating leads:** *Parents* magazine generated 129,155 entries into its cover photo contest, according to a case study presented at SES San Jose 2009.
- **Selling products:** Piper Aircraft sold \$2.1 million of new planes, according to a case study presented at the PRSA 2010 International Conference in Washington, D.C.

This best way to begin exploring measurement is with two new friends. First, find out who is responsible for website SEO in your company and take them to lunch. They understand keyword research, content development, and the importance of links. Next, find out who is responsible for Web analytics in your company and take them to dinner. They know a lot of what you need to learn about which Google search queries drive traffic to your site, and exactly how users arrive there. But, they probably don't know you want to learn it.

Together, public relations, search engine optimization, and Web analytics professionals can harness the potential of press release SEO to drive business results.

**PRESS RELEASE SEO TIPS**

Here are some additional press release SEO tips to help improve visibility within Google News, Yahoo! News, and other news search engines.

- **Avoid Keyword Stuffing:** “Keyword stuffing” refers to the practice of loading a press release with keywords in an attempt to manipulate its ranking in news search results. However, using keywords too frequently results in a negative user experience and can harm your press release’s ranking.
- **Company Names:** When referring to a company name for the first time, be sure to refer to the name correctly, and include the ticker if the company is listed; e.g., Thomson Reuters Corporation (USA) (Public, NYSE:TRI).
- **Visibility:** Emphasized text with bold and italics may help a press release stand out and can positively impact search engine results; however, don’t overdo it.
- **Relevancy:** Keep your headline relevant: “Acme Inc. reports 3rd quarter profits exceeding analyst expectations” is ideal.
- **Links:** Using links in a press release judiciously can provide SEO benefits. Too many links can quickly mark a press release as spam. One link per 100 words is recommended.
- **Consistency:** Words with multiple spellings, such as *website* and *web site*, should remain consistent throughout the release. Choose the more frequently searched spelling.
- **Campaign:** Press releases tend to sink lower in ranking as they age. News search engines stop indexing a press release after a month. Creating a campaign of several press releases that are distributed a week apart will drive better results.

## SHARING THE SECRETS OF PRESS RELEASE SEO

A survey of 1,900 business technology marketers by MarketingSherpa rated press release SEO as the most effective emerging market channel. It enables you to “close the loop” by measuring the traffic, leads and sales generated by public relations campaigns. These are the ways that senior marketing executives want to measure success, and these are the kind of statistics that can re-launch careers in public relations.

Learning the six secrets of press release SEO isn’t difficult. Then why haven’t more public relations professionals seized this opportunity? Press release SEO represents a shift in the PR paradigm. That explains why so few innovators and early adopters have started exploring this new tactic. Nevertheless, this is a voyage that you won’t want to miss.

As Columbus discovered, training the crews of the Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria how to sail west was a relatively straightforward task. The real obstacle was convincing Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand that they wouldn’t fall off the edge of the world.

In short, there are tremendous benefits to those who learn press release SEO. The only challenge involves convincing your clients or colleagues that press release SEO is a more rewarding route to success.

## ABOUT SEO-PR

### SEO-PR

SEO-PR is a search engine optimization firm and public relations agency with offices in Greater Boston and San Francisco.

Greg Jarboe, president and co-founder of SEO-PR, has been called: “A pioneer in the field of using search engine optimization in combination with press releases,” by Lee Odden, CEO of TopRank Online Marketing; “The guru of cranking up web visibility through effective optimization of press releases and leveraging news search,” by Gord Hotchkiss, President and CEO of Enquiro Search Solutions; and a subject matter expert in “online public relations” by Andrew Goodman, founder and Principal of Page Zero Media.

Greg has more than 25 years of experience in corporate communications, marketing, and search engine optimization at Lotus Development Corp., Ziff-Davis, and other companies.

## ABOUT THOMSON REUTERS

Thomson Reuters is the world’s leading source of intelligent information and workflow solutions for businesses and professionals. **Thomson ONE Public Relations (PR)** is a customizable Web-based platform containing tools designed to help you more effectively manage your communication activities:

- Identify key contacts
- Reach your target audiences around the world
- Measure the impact of your communications

LEARN MORE AT:

[thomsonreuters.com/prservices](http://thomsonreuters.com/prservices)

