
Book review:

Diggs-Brown, B., & Glou, J. L. G. (2004). *The PR style guide: Formats for public relations practice*. Belmont, California; Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.

Reviewed by:
Jane Johnston
Griffith University

This book, published in spiral-bound format with a glossy soft cover, is a no-fuss, quick, and easy reference guide. The authors make the point in the preface that they think “it’s time our profession had its own *styleguide*”, and they set about to create the first. Thus the book has made forays into uncharted waters, although previous public relations writing books such as Newsom and Carrell’s *Public Relations Writing Form and Style* and Bivins’ *Handbook for Public Relations Writing* cover some similar territory. The Guide is divided into 15 chapters and two appendices. The 15 chapters, beginning ‘Annual Reports’ and concluding ‘Web Pages’, are arranged alphabetically. The two appendices deal with a Public Communication Toolbox, which includes an additional 13 public relations items, dealt with summarily and averaging a page each, and Organization Profiles, which provides a short profile of the three organisations which are used as examples throughout the book. It then provides a glossary and list of sources used in each chapter (although there is no referencing within the text itself) and an index.

On first glance the alphabetical order of the contents, which includes ‘Audio News Releases’, ‘News Releases’ and ‘Video News Releases’ as three separate chapters scattered throughout the book, seemed rather confusing. Once I became aware that the chapters were listed alphabetically it was easier to follow. (It is noted on the back cover but you don’t always read the book blurb before scanning the contents page). However, I would wonder about the need for an alphabetical listing of 15 chapters, which is a fairly short list to work through. While this has no doubt been

chosen to enhance the reference-style approach of the book, a content-grouping of chapters might have been simpler.

Public relations, as we know, is blessed (or beleaguered) with a massive collection of tools and tactics. The decision in the book then, to cover only 15 in any detail, must have been a challenging one. Any reviewer can only comment on whether the inclusions cover the territory **they** believe should be covered. I believe this book is two chapters short: one covering email, (it is mentioned in passing in the web pages chapter) due to the massive importance of this medium and the scant understanding of the protocols and etiquettes associated with it, and one covering news conferences, still a central media relations tool. Both of these tools are dealt with summarily in the ‘Public Communications Toolbox’, but this is not sufficient for such important items in the public relations swag. The alternative would have been to extend the ‘Media Tours’ chapter to include ‘and News Conferences’ and the ‘Web Pages’ chapter to include ‘and Email’. In addition, Chapter 11 on ‘Opinion-editorials’ is short and print specific. It could well have included some discussion on the value of ‘Letters to the Editor’ as a forum for expressing opinion and the use of expert opinion on talk back radio.

An Australian reviewing an American text will always be on the look-out for its application and usability in Australia. Despite some initial concerns when, on page one, the focus moves to 1995 changes to the Securities and Exchange Commission in the United States, the book is largely without North American-specific references. The authors have obviously been

Careful to use generic references, which will enhance its usage outside the US. For example, the three organisations which are used throughout the book as case study examples have universal application: 'Each one Teach one' is a program aimed at dealing with youth violence; 'Formative Enterprises' is a company that develops youth fitness products; 'City of Emerald Heights' is a fictitious (disappointingly) local government.

Careful thought has gone into the readability of this book. It is simply, clearly, and concisely written and each chapter follows largely the same format dealing with the following headings: 'What are they?', 'Who gets them?', 'What do they do?', 'How do they help?', 'What are the pitfalls?', 'How should they look?', 'Where should they go?' and 'Did they work?' (a tense change here didn't seem necessary). This standardised template for each chapter makes it very easy to read and follow. However, while examples are used at the end of many chapters, drawn from the three organisations mentioned above, it is disappointing that this is not a consistent element of the book. Thus, there are no examples of annual report writing, communication audits or opinion-editorials, and only one used in the news release chapter. In contrast, some chapters such as the 'Video News Release' chapter include two lengthy examples. The examples that are used are strong, with clear explanations in point form. This only serves to highlight the need for examples in every chapter.

One brief but significant weakness of the book is how it deals with legal issues. These are discussed very superficially in two paragraphs in the 'News Release' chapter. The brevity is, however, less of an issue than reconciling the author's description of libel as one of public disclosure. The argument is made that: "The issue of libel is a major concern to news release writers. It is very tempting for a company to trumpet the good news and try to ignore or whisper the bad. However doing so has serious legal consequences". To flag the importance of not creating "a misleading representation of the company" is very important, and one that should

be considered as an ethical proposition as well as a legal one, however this description is not one of libel. Furthermore, it seems unclear as to why the authors chose to include the two sole paragraphs of legal warnings in the context of news releases alone. Surely the same warnings of "withholding certain information, misleading the public, using extravagant claims, and making unfair comparisons" apply equally throughout all public relations materials. Perhaps an introductory chapter that dealt with legal **and ethical** pitfalls could have provided a specific and factual point of reference for this material in which issues could be dealt with in some detail. Alternately, legal warnings should be applied equally throughout the book.

In general though, this book is a solid and information-packed reference. It will indeed serve as a handy manual for its chosen target market of students and professionals. I'm sure it will also find a well-used niche with advocacy, community, and not-for-profit groups keen to use the tactics of the public relations professional.