

SAPC MEDIA KIT FOR PAGANS

CONTENT

BACKGROUND TO THE MEDIA:

What is the Media?

When is the media interested in us?

Fields of interest for the media

Basic rules when speaking to the media

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR:

A few tips

Remember

Example of a letter of complaint/letter of correction

TIPS ON WRITING AN ARTICLE

TIPS ON WRITING A PRESS RELEASE

FINAL TIPS

BACKGROUND TO MEDIA

What is the media?

One of the very things we should realise is that the media is foremost a business and every media outlet has one aim: to expand its share of the market. It does this by seeking to grab and hold onto people's attention. This is why the media concentrates so much on events rather than issues, and especially flashy and colourful events.

And this is where our problem starts for we, like everyone else, would prefer to be taken seriously.

A second problem we face is that media owners are in the business for certain very specific interests, be it political, religious, business, nationalistic, etc. This simply means that there are some outlets we simply have to avoid: there is no point for example in approaching tabloids (the gutter press) if we expect fair and serious reportage.

Newspapers are partisan, and in fact expected to be so by their readers, but in SA the broadcast media is legally obliged to be balanced and fair - although in practice this is not always the case as even public broadcasters are dependant on advertisers for income, and this often means conservatism.

A third problem that we face (yes problem) is the fact that we tend to be rather colourful, fun, outlandish and often even outrageous, television cameras may love us, but it makes it extremely difficult for anyone to take us seriously. Unluckily the mass media tends to see us as entertainment rather than news - and we can thank certain books, television series and movies for that.

News for the most is not something that just happens, it is something that is managed and manipulated, and this may in fact count in our favour. We must just learn to manage it. This means that every action aimed at altering public opinion must have a dedicated media coordinator, whose job is to ensure that our point of view reaches the wider world.

Timing, however, is even more critical. Give journalists enough notice of an initiative, but not so much that they forget about it. Two weeks prior to any event a press release should be drawn up and made available to the media. A reminder must follow this two to three days before any event. We must also learn to pick the day we wish something to appear in the press. Sundays (for the Monday edition) is best, as news tends to be rather thin on Sundays.

Journalists speak only one language, and that is their own. If you are going to reach them you have to speak their language too. This means that press releases should mimic the format and style of a news story

News, of course, is meant to be all about novelty, so emphasise what is new about your news.

We should also ensure that whatever we give to the media is concise (in most cases). Media people will read the first four or five paragraphs if you grab their attention with essential data, such as what, when and where the event is taking place. They do not want to read a long polemic about Paganism. If you send them a lengthy dissertation instead of a concise news release, it will end up in the dustbin or the email-deleted box. If they want more info, they will contact you and do an interview over the phone or in

person. This is the very reason why releases should be brief, as you want to entice media into interviewing you about the event.

Email is the best way to contact the media. But, do not keep sending it day after day if you do not get an immediate response! Doing this will make you look unprofessional and get you ignored, or worse – achieve negative publicity.

When is the media interested in us?

During the so-called “Witchy times” of the year, such as Halloween, Christmas, Easter, the Solstices - for some reason, reporters who interview Pagans about the winter and summer solstices tend to be more serious; there is less emphasis on magical powers and spells, and more on nature and the passage of the seasons.

Fields of interest for the media

The media is interested in very specific news, which they deem newsworthy. These include:

- Satanic ritual abuse scares.
- Religious-based hatred or discrimination towards Pagans.
- The Pagan origins of various holidays, including Easter, Christmas, Halloween and May Day. Also other significant dates in the calendar such as the summer and winter solstices and the equinoxes.
- Local news such as the opening of New Age bookstores and psychic fairs, annual meetings, etc
- Racial and religious tolerance
- Books and their relationship to real-life witches and Pagans.
- Statements by mainstream religious groups regarding what they term the occult.
- Religious unity
- Witchcraft laws
- Witch hunts
- Pagan weddings
- Faith-based initiatives
- Art

- Pagans in the workplace
- Community service
- Green issues
- Health
- Fortune telling
- Feminism
- Pagan traditions
- Magic(k)
- Sex
- Ethics
- Pagan unity
- Art, etc

Basic rules when speaking to the media

- **Know your field:** Always research. When writing an article on Paganism, research is a necessity. This is, likewise, true when quoting someone that says something about Pagans or Paganism.
- **Speak the truth:** Paganism may have much common ground with Christianity, as far as ethics go, but Paganism and Christianity are not the same thing. Some Pagans seek to establish common ground by saying, for example, Jesus was a great witch. But many Christians do not find this comparison flattering. Besides, witchcraft has become such a vague term that it must be defined very clearly first. Wicca and Paganism have so many positive qualities, however, that connections with mainstream religions do not need to be forced.
- **Stick to the facts:** For example: Wicca is a very young religion. That is a fact that cannot be changed.
- **Remember who your audience is:** While a local child abuser may deserve to be cursed, people tend to fear those who curse people. So instead of cursing, why not bless the investigating police officers?
- **Do the right thing:** Honesty, coupled with ethical behaviour, is the best policy.
- **ALWAYS Take credit where credit is due:** If you raised money for a good cause, have a feeding scheme, or any community centred action, do not be shy, and let the media know.
- **Be a positive presence:** Your community needs to know that it is a good idea to have Pagans and Wiccans around.

- **The words Pagan, Paganism, Wicca, etc should always be capitalised.** These words, like the words Christian, Christianity, Muslim, Jew, etc are proper nouns.
- **The terms “self-proclaimed” or “self-ordained”, etc, should be nos.** Pagan leaders, just like those of other religions, go through years of training before being granted the title of High Priestess or High Priest.
- **Paganism is a religion.** Paganism is an every day way of life. We have ethics, morals and standards, just as those of other religions do.
- **Pagans are not Satanists.** Most articles get this right, however, this statement is almost always inserted in articles, but to no avail. Personally I do not think we should even bother!
- **Paganism is not a fad or fringe movement.**
- **Pagan Sabbats should also always be capitalised.** Sabbats are to Pagans as Christmas, Easter, etc is to Christians. Failure to capitalise is bad form.
- **Terms such as Pagan and Witch, when used to denote contemporary Pagan spirituality should always be capitalised,** just as Christian, Jew, or Hindu is. Journalists rarely capitalise these terms, however, because dictionaries and stylebooks show the words as lowercase. However, capitalisation is an easy way to distinguish usage.
- **The use of witchcraft (lowercase) denotes the inherited usage, while Witchcraft (capitalised) denotes the contemporary Pagan usage.**
- **Goddess, Lady, Mother, etc. should be capitalised** in contexts where one would capitalise God, Lord, Father, etc.
- **Pagans often refer to their deities as The Goddess and The God rather than just Goddess or God.** Example: “They prayed to the God during the ritual” vs. “They prayed to the god Pan during the ritual.”

HOW TO WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Say what you mean and mean what you say. Make it from the heart and your passion will come through.

Letters to the Editor are one of the most widely read parts of a newspaper. They are a quick and effective means of communicating a message to a wide audience. They are understood to speak on behalf of a large proportion of society.

Letters to the editor can raise awareness of a problem and might convince many readers. They are also a tool to correct or clarify facts, or to oppose or support government (etc) actions.

Letters should be short and concise, about 250 words. For a news magazine or a radio news show, they should be even shorter, about 100 words. Letters should be written with passion, using strong but not strident language.

Small-circulation newspapers usually print most of the letters that they receive. It is more challenging to get a letter printed in major newspapers, as they receive a much larger number of letters. However, if you can tie your letter to a recent article, editorial or column, you will greatly increase your chances of being published.

In addition to submitting letters to your local daily newspaper, consider other newspapers in your area such as weekly community newspapers.

When submitting a letter to the editor by mail or fax, do not forget to sign it, as many newspapers will not publish a letter without a full name and signature (letters sent by e-mail obviously cannot be signed).

With a little practice, writing good letters to the editor is neither time-consuming nor difficult. Remember, no other form of communication can match the impact of a thoughtful letter written by a concerned citizen.

A few tips

BE QUICK! Newspapers rarely publish letters about topics that are not or no longer being covered in the news. Referring to a previously published article or column will increase your letter's chances of being published.

KEEP IT SHORT! Naturally, there are length limits (look at other letters for comparison). If your letter is too long, the editor might cut out what he thinks isn't necessary. Also, the shorter it is, the more likely it will be published and read.

EMPLOY A CLEAR STRUCTURE! State first: What do you relate to; Then: What you concede to; Then: Where you deviate and why.

BE SPECIFIC! Refer to any newspaper article or editorial by date and title. Once again, editors prefer to print letters that respond to a specific article. State clearly where you are going: "I strongly disagree with Member of Parliament so and so's position on this and that because..."

KEEP IT FOCUSED! State your position as succinctly as possible without eliminating necessary detail. Long rambling sentences and digressions will cause people to lose interest quickly. Stick to one subject or point.

BE POLITE: Respect the people you're talking about, even if you disagree with their position. Comment on actions not personalities.

USE ACCEPTABLE ARGUMENTS! When you think up your arguments, have the audience in a clear view. For a non-Christian or mixed audience, do not use faith arguments but argue from reason and experience. Also, do not simply restate previous points of view. Readers want quick, insightful thoughts and new perspectives.

FIND AN ATTRACTIVE BEGINNING! An interesting title and first sentence will attract readers who only skim through the paper.

FIND A PERSONAL ANGLE! Readers are more interested in an issue when they see how it affects their lives and communities. Also, personal notes (how this affects the writer) give credibility.

BE HUMOROUS, if possible! If the topic permits it, be a bit humorous or even ironic. When you can make people smile they are more prone to accept your arguments.

ASSUME NOTHING! Do not assume that your readers are informed on your topic. Give a concise but informative background before plunging into the main issue.

MAINTAIN YOUR COMPOSURE: it is okay to express outrage, but it should be kept under control. Once again, avoid personal attacks and focus instead on criticizing specific policies or ideas.

PROVIDE YOUR CONTACT INFO! Include your full name, address, phone number and occupation at the bottom of the letter. Often newspapers want this information so they can verify that you wrote the letter. Most newspapers will not publish your letter without this information, but when printed, will only include your name and city.

SEND YOUR LETTER ONLY TO ONE PAPER! Do not send the same letter to more than one paper in the same circulation area. A form letter sent to papers in different markets should look like an original and all letters should be sent individually.

DON'T FORGET THE SMALLER NEWSPAPERS! Smaller local papers are more likely to print your letter. This can spark local interest and suggest specific community action.

BE GRAMMATICALLY CORRECT: The paper will correct any minor spelling errors, but they won't edit letters where the sentences make no sense.

READ YOUR LETTER OUT LOUD: Does it sound good? Does it make sense?

SAVE A COPY: Just in case they edit it, you will know exactly how it was changed.

COUNT THE WORDS: This is just to ensure that your letter is not too long.

FAX OR E-MAIL: Postage takes too long.

REMEMBER

Plan the letter first, before you start writing. A sample plan could have the following components:

1. Introduction: lead in to the issue
2. Body text: cover all relevant points/facts
3. Summary and/or conclusion: provide a solution and/or recommendation
4. Include your name, address and contact telephone number, and sign the letter. You will probably be telephoned by the newspaper to check you did actually write the letter.

EXAMPLE OF A LETTER/COMPLAINT? ETC

Dear (**NAME OF PERSON LETTER IS ADDRESSED TO**); The South African Pagan Council (SAPC) is a body representing the growing numbers of Pagans who reside throughout South Africa. As people committed to public education and interfaith dialogue, we note with concern the following (**DESCRIBE BRIEFLY WHAT WE ARE INTERESTED IN OR RESPONDING TO**).

You may not be aware that much of the content of your (**BROADCAST/WEB SITE/ARTICLE**) is inaccurate and derogatory.

This correspondence will provide accurate information regarding (*INSERT THE TOPIC OF YOUR COMPLAINT/LETTERS, ETC*) in order to ensure your materials may be more accurate in the future.

(INFORMATION AS IT SHOULD BE – FOR EXAMPLE)...

The beliefs and practices of Pagans are still widely misunderstood. The perpetration of negative stereotypes, particularly those that reflect religious bigotry and ignorance, not only fosters erroneous beliefs, but also causes terrible consequences for the victims of these stereotypes. In a country whose bedrock principles include religious freedom, Pagan parents should not fear losing custody of their children; Pagan students should not fear expulsion from school; Pagan workers should not fear discharge from employment; and Pagan citizens should not suffer from harassment, violence, and discrimination based solely on their religious beliefs. We are sure you will agree that such religious bigotry has no place in this country.

(CLOSING – FOR EXAMPLE)

If you have any questions or would like to receive further resources, please contact (*PERSON TO CONTACT AND CONTACT INFORMATION*).

Thank you for your time and attention. We look forward to your response to our request to (*INSERT DESIRED ACTION*). We hope you will do your part to uphold South Africa's proud traditions of tolerance and religious freedom.

Yours Sincerely
(INSERT YOUR NAME)
(DATE AND SIGN DOCUMENT)

TIPS ON WRITING AN ARTICLE

The hardest part of writing is the first sentence. When you look at the whole project, it seems like an impossible task. That is why you have to break it down into manageable tasks.

You have an idea of what the finished product is going to be but you're not sure how to go about putting it all together. The first thing you have to do is to get organised.

First, figure out your article's working title. Jot down a few different titles, and eventually, you will find that one that will grow on you. Titles help you to focus your writing on your topic; they guide you in anticipating and answering your reader's queries.

Break your articles up into smaller chunks with subtitles. Readers like to scan an article to see if it pertains to what they are interested in. Aim for clarity in your titles and use subtitles that pertain to the specific paragraph.

Next, write out a thesis statement. Your thesis is a sentence or two stating exactly what problem you are addressing and how your article will solve that problem. All paragraphs spring forth from this statement. This is your foundation. This foundation is what will help keep you on track.

Once you have your thesis, before you start to write, make sure there is a good reason for writing your article. Ask yourself some questions.

- Does your article present useful information and is that information currently relevant?
- Will your article positively affect the lives of your readers?
- Is your article dynamic and will it keep the reader's attention?
- Does your article answer questions that are meaningful and significant?

If you can answer yes to these questions, you can feel confident about the effectiveness of your article. Next, make a list of the reasons you are writing your article.

- Do you want to promote your cause?
- Do you want to bring quality traffic to your website?
- Do you want to enhance your reputation?

Then write down your goals in terms of publishing.

- Do you want to add it to other articles and put together a short ebook as a product on your website.
- Do you want to offer it as a free gift for filling out a survey or for ordering a product?

- Do you want to create an e-course, or use your ebook to attract affiliates around the world?

Good writing takes a lot of practice. Make a schedule to write a little everyday. The art of writing is a lifetime process; the more you write (and read), the better your writing will become.

Of course, do not forget to run a spell and grammar check. You are judged by something as minor as correct punctuation, so do not mess up a great article by tossing out semicolons randomly, or stringing sentences together with commas.

TIPS ON WRITING A PRESS RELEASE

A press release is simply a statement prepared for distribution to the media. The purpose of a press release is to give journalists information that is useful, accurate and interesting.

Press releases conform to an established format. Journalist receive so many press releases a day, they have set standards and expectations that you must conform to just to have your release read, let alone published

Press releases should be printed on a letterhead or with a logo. The organisation's name, web address, location address and phone number should be printed clearly at the top of the page. **PRESS RELEASE** should be spelled out in all CAPS and centered in bold. The press release contact persons name should be underneath the wording and all contact numbers printed clearly underneath. If the press release is for **IMMEDIATE RELEASE**, say so, on the left margin directly above the title in all caps.

The next essential component of the press release is the Headline or Title. It should be centered, and in bold. The heading of the press release should capture the journalist. The title of the press release should be short and snappy, and hopefully grabbing the attention of the journalist and impressing them enough to read on.

You are now ready for the useful, accurate and interesting **BODY** of the press release. The body of the press release begins with the date and city for

which the press release is originated. The body of the press release is very basic; who, what, where, when and why. The first paragraph of the press release should contain in brief detail what the press release is about. The second paragraph explains, in detail: who cares; why you should care; where one can find it; when it will happen. Also, included in the second 'informative' paragraph is generally a quote that gives the release a personal touch. Touchy-feelies go a long way with journalists. Press releases and news stories are boring to journalists without a 'human interest'. The third and generally final paragraph is a summation of the release and further information on your company with the company contact information clearly spelled out.

The content of the press release, beginning with the date and city of origin, should be typed in a clear, basic font (Times New Roman, Arial, etc.) and double-spaced. If your press release exceeds one page, the second page should indicate 'Page Two' in the upper right hand corner. Journalistic standards have set basic parameters to define the end of a press release: ###. Three # symbols, centered directly underneath the last line of the release indicate the end of a press release.

The next time you are tasked with writing a press release for your company, have no fear, the basic rules are clear: useful, accurate and interesting information portrayed within the set journalistic guidelines. Click on this link to view an example of a press release that was published 'as is' by two local media outlets that you may use as a reference to the materials outlined here. Good luck! Write on!

1. **When writing a press release, stick to one subject.** It is more effective to feature a single subject rather than peppering your write up with numerous topics.
2. **You must remember that press releases are news.** Be objective in presenting your article. Don't use hype words or unnecessary adjectives. Write directly and to the point.
3. **Be factual.** Your press release must have concrete and verifiable information. You are writing a news story and not an opinion article. Keep your opinions to yourself. Just present the facts.
4. **Create an angle for your subject.** Effective press releases are those that have a very interesting angle. It should appeal to human concerns.

- Generalised information should be avoided. Your readers must get hard and specific information.
5. **Make sure that you write news worthy articles.** Editors are very keen on this. They generally publish press release that will surely pique the interest of the reading public. You must also write up to date press releases. Remember, this is news and it should tackle current events.
 6. **Keep your lead paragraph below 50 words.** It should be very short but can capture the essence of what you're writing about. Readers usually scan a page. If you can catch their attention, then your press release is effective.
 7. **You must include addresses and telephone numbers of contact persons who released the news.** In this way online or offline editors can communicate with you if they have specific questions regarding your release.

FINAL TIPS

When approaching the media - with announcements about events/meetings, or press releases about activities - it is a good idea to call the newspaper/magazine or television/radio station and ask for the name of the person most likely to use the information. What is sent to this person should always be clear, concise, and provide accurate contact information for individuals using legal names (not magickal names).

While being "pushy" with the media is a major "no no", there is nothing wrong with being certain information has been received by the proper parties. The media cannot be forced to pursue the information, but if they ignore information they are known to have received, there may be room later to inquire regarding the reason for the omission on their part.

When approached by the media - especially around Samhain - do not hesitate to ask what the focus of the article will cover, before agreeing to participate. When a journalist receives an assignment, the editor usually has a certain "slant" or "angle" they want covered. If the story is going to be about the legitimate practices of Pagans for that holiday, all for the better. If it is going to be about dispelling the "myths", it may be wise to be careful. A journalist who is covering a story on Paganism, yet who knows nothing about Paganism, may manage to - albeit inadvertently - twist someone's words and make what is light very dark, and so forth. Do not hesitate to ask

the journalist to submit a list of their questions before hand, and offer to write out your answers, so there can be no misunderstandings. In actuality, quite a few print journalists do interviews via e-mail these days, to be certain of exact quotes.

Offer to provide the journalist with background material before the interview. By encouraging the journalist to do a little research before the interview, perhaps it will come across that this is a serious matter, and not to be taken lightly by the media. The journalist may simply file the information provided, but by offering, it gives the group/individual recourse if gross inaccuracies appear in the report/story that will require a retraction or correction.

Do not let the interviewer intimidate you. Nine times out of ten, the journalist doing an interview has no personal interest in the matter being discussed. He or she may act like they do, to encourage trust with the person being interviewed. But, for the most part, they are just earning their paycheck. It is very important for you to control where the interview goes, not to let the journalist control it. If things the interviewer says or does make you uncomfortable, do not hesitate to end the interview. At all times, journalists are supposed to behave in a professional and "detached" manner. If it seems the journalist is biased against the group/individual, do not move forward with the interview.

Doing an interview is a prime chance to dispel misconceptions about Paganism and Pagans in general. If you don't feel comfortable using your legal name, better not to do the interview at all. In a lot of ways, those who ask that their last names not be used, or use a "magickal" name in an interview, come off looking like they have something to hide. This can do more harm than good for the Pagan cause.

Be comfortable with any questions asked before replying. If you are uncertain about how a question is phrased, or if it seems to have a "double meaning", do not hesitate to ask for a clarification. Better to be sure, than have your words misinterpreted.

While journalists are usually prohibited from allowing those they interview to read or preview a story before it is printed/aired, be certain he or she knows you can be contacted at any time to clarify anything prior to the story's release. And, if the printed/aired story is inaccurate or reflects

wrongly on a group/individual, do not hesitate to contact the journalist's editor to strongly, yet respectfully, request a correction.

SOURCES: 2009 SAPC AGM; 4 Principles of Pagan Public Relations; Soulcyesters.com; Boilerplate; The Sacred Hearth; Pagan Institute Report; About.com; Breadfortheworld; Committee for concerned journalists; Bartcop Entertainment; Points on How to Write a Letter to the Editor; The Witches' League for Public Awareness; The Benton Foundation; ; The Portrayal of Paganism in the Media; Paganism: A guide for the Media.