

Backgrounders

Although sometimes interchangeable with fact sheets, backgrounders have more defined purposes and audiences. Backgrounders are written for people who want or need more information on a subject. They typically include more details, statistics, and possibly technical jargon if your target audience will understand it.

From the public relations writer's viewpoint, backgrounders are often written for reporters seeking additional information to understand your industry or as background for a story. For example, FEMA supports each of its "hazards" fact sheets with a backgrounder on the hazard itself. Whereas the fact sheet on "terrorism" focuses on preparation and response, the supporting backgrounder deals with terrorism in general, including facts about chemical and biological weapons, terrorism prior to September 11, 2001, and terrorism in the United States. Reporters might easily seek such information to flesh out articles they are writing. Similarly, they might turn to the tables of statistics on recycling aluminum cans provided as backgrounders by the Aluminum Association.

Backgrounders may also take a more historical slant than fact sheets to explain how the organization, product, or service has evolved and to help the reader understand the relationship of the new product or service to the industry or society. Historical backgrounders are often developed as time lines. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) distributes a historically oriented backgrounder, "Milestones in Food and Drug Law History." It reviews legislation from 1820 and could be easily used as an index of laws by writers seeking an understanding of the topic.

Fact sheets and backgrounders as public relations documents. While grounded in information, both fact sheets and backgrounders are part of an organization's persuasive strategy to develop relationships. Even when you are providing information, you are doing so with a purpose related to the organization's goals. It is your choice, for example, what topics to include and what facts and examples you choose to support them. As important, it is your choice to use words that support the organization's image and overall message.

Fact sheets typically focus on organizational strengths and identify unique attributes to differentiate the organization from its competitors. Choose examples that position the organization as uniquely worth developing a relationship with.

As important as choosing examples is your ability to organize them effectively. Even multipage fact sheets address only three or four key issues. But if the issues are clearly identified (by headings and graphic treatments) and the examples are convincing, the fact sheet will have done its job of providing basic information. Remember, fact sheets are generally not aimed at the already committed but rather at newcomers to the organization. And since information (knowledge) is the first step in the process of persuasion, the role of the fact sheet as an introduction should not be underestimated.

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