

The Press Office Playbook for Founders

How to prepare your message, your interviews and your bad days, the way
a government press office would

A free guide for founders of AI, tech and fintech startups

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Before you start

I worked in the No 10 Downing Street press office before going on to lead communications teams in companies across the Nordics. The thing I've carried with me from government into every job since is quite simple. A good press office does most of its work before anyone calls. It decides what it wants to say, it writes down the answers to the hard questions in advance, and it makes sure everyone speaking for the organisation is saying the same thing.

Most founders I meet don't have a press office, and at seed to Series B they probably shouldn't. But I think they can borrow the habits. That's what this guide is for.

It's written mainly for founders of AI, tech and fintech companies, including Nordic founders who are starting to speak to investors and journalists in the UK, US and wider Europe. Each section ends with something you can use. If you only fill in Sections 2 and 3, I think you'll already be better prepared than most companies your size.

A note on the examples: they are hypothetical, made up to show how a template works. The companies and people in them don't exist.

1. Why founders should think like a press office

People often picture a government press office as a place of spin. In my experience the day-to-day work is much more practical: a small team trying to make sure a large, complicated organisation says clear, accurate and consistent things, often under time pressure.

Three habits do most of the work.

Message discipline. You decide in advance what the few things are that you want people to understand, and you keep coming back to them. That can feel repetitive from the inside. From the outside, it's usually the first time anyone has noticed.

One voice. Everyone who speaks for the company, from the founder to the person answering the support inbox, should describe it in roughly the same way. They don't need a script, just the same core facts and the same sense of what matters.

Preparing before you need it. The worst time to work out your answer to a hard question is when a journalist or an angry customer is asking it. Press offices prepare on quiet days so that busy days are manageable.

In 2017 I was sent from No 10 to support a minister doing live broadcast interviews in the middle of a national tragedy. On the ground, they were confronted by angry local residents on live TV, and their answer came across as defensive at exactly the wrong moment. My job then was damage control: handling the press pack and preparing them properly for the follow-up interviews, with lines that were calm, empathetic and honest about what was and wasn't known yet. It taught me that you can't be reactive. You map out the hardest questions and agree your lines before anyone steps in front of a camera, because once someone goes off-script on live TV, you've already lost control of the story.

For a founder, I think the payoff is mostly about trust. When your message is consistent across your pitch deck, your LinkedIn posts and your interviews, it quietly suggests that the company is well run.

Takeaway: pick one week this month to do your preparation, before you have a launch or a funding announcement to deal with. The rest of this guide gives you the documents to produce.

2. Your core message on one page

In my experience, most press offices keep some version of a core script: what the organisation is, why it matters and what it wants people to remember. Some call it a message house. I'd keep it to one page, because if it doesn't fit on a page it probably won't fit in anyone's head. Write it as you'd say it to a smart friend outside your industry.

Template: the one-page message

1. What we do (one sentence, no jargon)

Who you help, with what, and how. If a word would need explaining to your parents, try another word.

2. Why it matters now (two or three sentences)

What has changed in the world that makes this problem urgent or solvable today.

3. Three things we want people to remember

For each one, write the point in a single sentence, then add one piece of evidence underneath: a fact, a customer outcome you're allowed to share, or a short example.

- Point 1, plus evidence
- Point 2, plus evidence
- Point 3, plus evidence

4. What makes us different (one or two sentences)

Be specific. "We're faster" is weaker than saying what you do that others don't.

5. The proof we can say in public

Numbers, named customers or investors you have permission to mention, awards, partnerships. If something isn't public yet, leave it off.

6. Words we use and words we avoid

For example, you might always say "customers" and never "users", or avoid "revolutionary" altogether.

7. Who speaks for us

Who is allowed to talk to media, and on which topics.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a fintech founder in Stockholm whose company helps small exporters get paid faster in other currencies. Her first attempt at line one reads: "We provide an AI-powered cross-border payments infrastructure layer for SMEs." After a couple of rewrites, it becomes: "We help small exporters get paid by overseas customers in days rather than weeks, without losing money on exchange rates."

The second version is longer, but I think almost anyone could repeat it back to her after hearing it once. That's the test I'd use.

Takeaway: draft the page in one sitting, then read line one aloud to someone outside the company. If they can't repeat it, rewrite it.

3. The "lines to take" document

This is the press office tool I'd most like every founder to have.

In UK government, "lines to take" are short, agreed answers to the questions you expect on a given topic. They are written in advance, checked by the people who know the facts, and shared with anyone who might be asked, so that nobody has to improvise on something important. You use them as a guide when you speak, rather than reading them out.

For a startup, they're useful whenever people will have questions: a funding round, a launch, a senior departure, a price change, layoffs, an outage, or a sector story that drags your name in.

Template: lines to take

Topic: what this document covers

Date and version: lines go out of date, so keep track

Approved by: usually the founder, plus legal or finance where relevant

Who can use these: for example, founders, leadership team, investor relations

Top line (one or two sentences): the thing you most want said, whatever the question.

Key facts we can confirm: the numbers, dates and names that are public.

Questions we expect, with suggested answers:

- Q: ...
 - A: ...
- Q: ...
 - A: ...

If pushed: a short fallback for the hardest question, which is often the one you'd rather not answer.

What we will not discuss: for example, individual employees, investor terms, or customers who haven't agreed to be named. Having this written down makes it much easier to say "I'm not going to go into that" calmly.

Bridge back: one sentence that takes you from a difficult question back to your top line.

A few principles I'd hold to: never write a line that isn't true, keep each answer short enough to say in about 20 seconds, and write the way you speak.

Example lines (hypothetical)

A fundraiser

- Top line: "We've raised new funding to help more small exporters get paid faster, starting with expanding into Germany and the UK next year."
- Q: How much did you raise and at what valuation?
 - A: "We've raised [amount, if public]. We don't discuss valuation, but I'm happy to talk about what the money will let us do."
- Q: Isn't this a tough market to be raising in?

- A: "It's been a demanding market, and I think that's made investors look harder at whether a business really works. We were able to show them that customers stay with us and grow with us."

Layoffs

- Top line: "We've made the difficult decision to reduce the size of the team so that we can focus on the parts of the business our customers rely on most."
- Q: How many people are affected?
 - A: Give the number if you're going to share it at all. Vague answers on this tend to create a worse story than the number itself.
- Q: Does this mean the company is in trouble?
 - A: "It means we're making choices about where to focus. We've done this so we can keep serving customers well and give the business the runway it needs."
- What we will not discuss: individual names or roles, and anything that hasn't yet been communicated to the people affected. In my view, the team should always hear it from you first, before any public statement.

A product failure or outage

- Top line: "Some customers couldn't [use X] for [period]. That's not good enough and we're sorry. It's now fixed, and here's what we're doing to stop it happening again."
- Q: Was customer data affected?
 - A: Only answer this with facts that have been checked. If you don't yet know, say so and say when you'll know: "We're still confirming that, and we'll update customers directly by [time]."
- Q: Why did it happen?
 - A: Give a plain explanation if you have one. If the investigation is ongoing, say that, rather than guessing.

From my own experience. The line I still think about most is from the Maersk Honam fire. I was at Maersk in March 2018 when one of our container ships caught fire in the Arabian Sea, and five crew members sadly lost their lives. Our social channels, with more than 4 million followers across the Maersk Group's channels, were already filling up with comments, and the family of one of the sailors was starting to speak publicly about how the company was handling it.

The instinct in a lot of rooms, I think, is to say "let's hold off, no comment until we know everything." That line would have shaped the story, but in completely the wrong way. It would have meant silence while families were grieving.

So one of the first things we agreed was a holding line that wasn't a non-answer. The idea was pretty simple, really: treat this as a human tragedy first, not just a corporate incident. Say what we knew, be open about what we didn't, and keep the families at the centre. That line became our north star. Every post, every reply and every updated statement had to pass through it, and if something sounded like corporate boilerplate, it didn't go out. It didn't make the story go away (nor should it have), but it did stop the vacuum, and people could see we weren't hiding behind process. It was noticed in corporate comms circles for being direct and human.

The lesson for me is that the first usable line often matters more than the perfect line three hours later, because everything after it follows its lead. "No comment" is still a line, but it isn't yours to own.

I saw something similar at SimCorp, where I was head of PR when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. We had colleagues in Kyiv, so I drafted a holding statement overnight and had it cleared within about an hour. The deliberate choice was to call it an invasion and a war from the start, while many companies were still saying "developing situation". It felt like a bit of a risk, but hedging would have been the line that shaped the story, and probably badly. Once we'd taken that position, everything that followed stayed on the human side.

Takeaway: write one lines to take document this month for whatever is coming next for you, even if it's months away. Then share it with your co-founder and see where your answers differ.

4. Prepping for an interview or podcast

In my experience, most founders under-prepare for podcasts because they feel like a friendly chat, and over-prepare for journalists in a way that makes them sound stiff. The checklist below is the one I'd use for both.

Before you say yes

- Who is the audience, and are they people you want to reach?
- What is the format: live or recorded, edited or not, quoted in print or broadcast in full?
- Have you listened to or read at least two previous pieces from this host or journalist?
- Is there a topic you need to avoid right now, for legal, investor or customer reasons?

Two or three days before

- Re-read your one-page message (Section 2) and pick the two or three points you want to land.
- Prepare one short story for each point. Stories tend to be what people remember and what gets quoted.
- Write down the three questions you'd least like to be asked, and practise answering them out loud.
- Check any number you plan to use. If you're not sure it's public, leave it out.

On the day

- Have your three points on a card or a sticky note. Nobody minds.
- Answer the question, then bridge to your point. In my experience, a dodged question is what listeners and journalists notice most.
- Keep answers short. They're easier to quote and to edit well.
- If you don't know, say so. "I don't know, but I'll find out and come back to you" is a perfectly good answer.
- Assume everything is on the record, including the chat before and after the recording.

Afterwards

- Send anything you promised, quickly.
- Thank the host or journalist.
- Note which answers worked and which didn't, and update your lines to take.
- Share the piece on LinkedIn with a line about what you learned in the conversation.

A note for Nordic founders speaking in English: I think accents matter much less than people fear. Slowing down a little and using plain, concrete words usually helps far more than trying to sound British or American.

Takeaway: before your next interview, do a 15-minute practice run with a colleague asking your three least favourite questions.

5. Turning company news into a story people care about

Something I think every press officer learns quickly is that the announcement you care about is rarely the story anyone else cares about. What tends to interest a journalist or a LinkedIn reader is what your Series A tells them about a problem, a market or a person.

Here are the questions I'd ask of any company news before it goes out.

1. **Who is affected, and how?**
2. **What has changed?** What is now possible, cheaper or faster?
3. **Why now?** Is there a trend or a regulation this connects to?
4. **What's the human part?** A customer, a team member, or your own reason for building this.
5. **What's the one number that matters?** Usually one is plenty.
6. **Could you say it in a sentence at a dinner?** If not, keep simplifying.

A funding round, said in plain words (hypothetical)

Here is a typical first draft for an imaginary Nordic AI company (Northlight and its investor are made up):

"Northlight AI, a leading provider of next-generation AI-powered compliance solutions, today announced the close of a €6 million Series A round led by Example Ventures, with participation from existing investors. The funding will accelerate the company's growth and product roadmap."

There's nothing wrong in it, but there's also nothing anyone would repeat. Here's how I might rewrite the opening for a journalist:

"Compliance teams at mid-sized banks spend much of their week checking transactions by hand. Northlight, a Stockholm startup, has raised €6 million to help them do that work in hours instead of days, and plans to use the money to open in London next spring."

And here's how the founder might say it on LinkedIn, in her own voice:

"When we started Northlight, I spent a month sitting with compliance teams. The thing that stuck with me was how much of their week went on checks a computer could do, and how little time was left for the judgement calls only people can make."

Today we can share that we've raised €6 million to keep working on that. A big part of it will go towards opening in London next spring.

Thank you to the customers who trusted us early. I'll write more soon about what we got wrong along the way."

The facts are the same in all three versions. What changes is who the story is about.

Takeaway: for your next announcement, write the press version and the LinkedIn version separately. Start each one with the person or problem, and put the company name second.

6. Building a LinkedIn voice that sounds like you

For most founders at seed to Series B, I think LinkedIn has become the closest thing to their own newspaper. Investors, candidates and journalists all read it, so it's worth some of the care you'd give a press statement. Three things matter most, in my view.

Consistency. People get to know you through repetition. Posting once a week for six months will usually do more than ten posts in a burst and then silence. It helps to keep returning to the three points on your one-page message.

Judgement. Much of a press officer's value is knowing what not to say, and when. Before you post, ask whether you'd be comfortable seeing it quoted in a news article, and whether it reveals anything about customers, investors or staff that they haven't agreed to.

Sounding like a person. AI tools can be genuinely useful for research and for getting started, but I'm cautious about posts that are published more or less as the tool wrote them. Readers have become quite good at spotting the patterns, and once they suspect a post wasn't really written by you, I think it becomes harder for them to trust the rest of what you say. Your specific experiences, opinions and turns of phrase are the part nobody else can produce.

A simple voice check

Before posting, read the draft aloud and ask:

- Would I actually say this to someone across a table?
- Is there at least one detail only I could know?
- Are there words I'd never use in conversation? Cut them.
- Is there one clear point, or have I tried to make five?
- Is the first line something a busy person would stop for, without being clickbait?

A starter voice note

It can really help to write a short note for yourself, or for anyone who helps you write: your three themes, how you sound (for example, "direct, a bit dry, never hype"), phrases that are genuinely yours, words you avoid, and topics you never post about.

From my own experience. My first real C-suite ghostwriting was for the CEO at Maersk, back when I was Head of Digital Media. What I learned pretty quickly is that it's mostly subtraction. I'd listen out for a sentence that was already his, something he'd said in a meeting or over a coffee, and build the post around that. Any line that another CEO in the sector could just as easily have signed got cut. Over time he went from dormant on LinkedIn to genuinely active, and the measure I cared about wasn't virality. It was whether someone who'd met him would read it and think "yep, that's him".

Takeaway: write your voice note this week and keep it next to wherever you draft your posts.

7. When things go wrong: a first-hour crisis checklist

Most companies have a bad day at some point: an outage, a data issue, a critical article, a post taken the wrong way. In my experience, the first hour shapes a lot of what follows, because it's when people are most likely to say something they later have to take back.

This checklist is for that hour. It isn't legal advice, and for anything involving personal data, regulators or employment law, I'd bring in your lawyer straight away.

The first hour

1. **Pause before anyone posts or replies publicly.** A short delay is almost always better than a fast, wrong answer.
2. **Get the facts.** What happened, who is affected, and what do we know for certain versus suspect? Write it down in one shared place.
3. **Pull together a small group.** Usually the founder, whoever owns the technical side, and someone who can advise on legal and regulatory questions.
4. **Decide who speaks.** One spokesperson, and tell everyone else in the company to point questions to them.
5. **Check your obligations.** Fintech and data-heavy businesses in particular can have legal duties to notify regulators or customers within set timeframes, for example under GDPR if personal data is involved. Find out early.
6. **Tell the people most affected first.** Usually customers, then staff. Staff shouldn't learn about a problem from social media.
7. **Write a short holding statement.** Something you can say within the hour, even before you know everything. For example (hypothetical): *"We're aware that some customers are having trouble accessing their accounts this morning. Our team is working on it now and we'll share an update by 11:00. We're sorry for the disruption."*
8. **Commit to a time for the next update, and keep to it.** Even if the update is "we're still working on it".
9. **Log everything.** What was said, to whom, and when.
10. **Monitor, but don't argue.** Correct clear factual errors calmly and stay out of public back-and-forths.

After the first day

- Update your lines to take as facts become clear.
- When it's resolved, explain what happened and what you're changing, in plain words.
- Hold a short, blame-free review. What would we do differently next time?

From my own experience. In my No 10 and Cabinet Office years I worked through the Westminster and London Bridge attacks and the Grenfell Tower fire, and the first hour always looked much the same. You have fragments of information, an audience that's growing by the minute, and a strong pull either towards silence or towards a tidy line you'll probably have to walk back later. (There's more on how one holding line shaped the whole response in section 3.)

My advice to founders is pretty simple, really. Write the holding line yourself. Say it out loud as if you're speaking to the person most affected. Get one other person to clear it, then publish. Silence gets filled by someone else, and a slogan gets screenshotted!

Takeaway: write a draft holding statement now for the two incidents you think are most likely for your business, and save them somewhere your team can find them.

8. A 30-day starter plan

Here's how I'd spread all of this over a month, in an hour or two a week.

Week 1: your message

- Draft your one-page message (Section 2).
- Test line one on two people outside the company, then agree the three points with your co-founder or leadership team.

Week 2: your preparation

- Write one lines to take document for your next likely moment: a raise, a launch, a hire (Section 3).
- Write two holding statements for your most likely incidents (Section 7).
- Agree who speaks for the company, and on what.

Week 3: your voice

- Write your voice note (Section 6).
- Draft three posts, one for each of your three points, each with a real detail from your own experience.

Week 4: going outward

- Publish the posts, about one a week from here on.
- List five podcasts or journalists whose audience you'd like to reach, and read or listen to their recent work.
- Run a 15-minute mock interview with a colleague using the checklist in Section 4.

By the end of the month you'll have a small press office on paper. In my experience, that's more than many companies have when they first need it.

9. About me, and how I can help

I'm Alex McNab. I'm a ghostwriter and executive communications consultant based in Stockholm, and I run Ehwaz & Othala Media.

I worked in the No 10 Downing Street press office, then spent the following years leading global social, PR and comms teams at Maersk, SimCorp and Phase One, before becoming Chief Communications Officer and Head of Marketing at Handiscover. I went independent in 2022. Today I write LinkedIn posts, op-eds and keynotes, and help with media preparation, for startup founders, corporate leaders and leaders in higher education.

Most of my work is confidential, which is how ghostwriting should be, so I don't name clients without their permission.

If this guide has been useful and you'd like a second pair of eyes, I offer a one-off, fixed-price **LinkedIn Voice Audit** (6,900 SEK). We have a 45-minute call, I look properly at your profile and recent posts, and within a week you get a rewritten headline and About section, a one-page note on your voice and themes, and five post ideas to start from. There's nothing ongoing.

If you'd like to go a step further, the **Narrative Sprint** (14,900 SEK) is a one-week project. We start with a 90-minute workshop, and by the end of the week you have a voice brief, a story and content plan for your next quarter, and your first three posts written in your voice. If you then decide to carry on with a monthly retainer, the fee comes off your first month.

Or if you'd simply like to talk through your own message or an upcoming announcement, do feel free to [book a short call](#) or send me a message. No pressure either way.

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