

## Dealing with the Press

*By Richard Beamish*

If you know how to work productively with the news media, your organization can gain wider recognition, attract more supporters, and raise more money.

Good publicity can also bolster your organization's membership efforts. If you figure in the news at regular intervals in a favorable way, your members will likely renew and even increase their support when the time comes to do so.

In addition, the right publicity at the right time can help you influence public policy and enact (or defeat) a particular law. Politicians tend to be most responsive to the public interest when they are being watched, and evaluated, in the press.

And yet, despite the multiple benefits to be gained, your organization--like most nonprofits--probably isn't taking full advantage of its publicity opportunities. For example:

- You may shy away from the news media because you are not sure that your story is newsworthy. You don't want to "bother" an editor, reporter, or program director with something that might not interest them.
- You may not recognize a publicity opportunity when it comes along, or you fail to create such an opportunity when it is staring you in the face.
- You may sense that you have a good story for a newspaper, radio or television audience, but you don't know where to go with it.
- You may have approached the wrong person with the right story, gotten a negative response, and you are hesitant to try somewhere else. Or you went to the right person with the right story idea but you didn't present it the right way.
- Maybe you went to an editor or news director with a good story that they "bought" and then botched. Perhaps they misquoted you or misrepresented your organization's objectives. You are reluctant to go back to that newspaper or station and risk further misunderstanding and embarrassment.
- You may push too hard and too often for publicity when you have nothing newsworthy to publicize and thus wear out your welcome. You may be too demanding of the news media and expect too much of them. (They have no obligation, after all, to publicize your activities no matter how worthy your organization and your cause.)

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If you are guilty of any of these transgressions--and who among us is not?--it's possible to mend your ways. Keep in mind that no matter how small or hungry your nonprofit organization happens to be, you have a real advantage when it comes to getting free space in newspapers and free time on the airwaves. Because your work is truly in the public interest, you can gain access to the news media in ways that others cannot.

Take the example of Ray Castellani, an actor and reformed alcoholic who was heading north in his old pickup truck on a Los Angeles freeway one day, wondering what to do with the rest of his life. Then the idea hit him. He would go back to his old haunts on LA's Skid Row and try to feed some of the hungry people he had come to know during his own hard times there.

With the help of his grown son and a few friends, he started out serving peanut butter sandwiches from the tailgate of his truck. But just as their food service began to gain momentum, disaster struck. Ray's truck was stolen. Without that vehicle to pick up food and serve meals from, the project seemed doomed.

Enter the news media. Realizing that his only hope was publicity, Castellani visited the local paper and told a reporter about the stolen truck and the endangered meal service. The paper ran a feature story about the plight of the Good Samaritans. A disc jockey on a local radio station read the story, and he was sufficiently moved to adopt this cause as his own.

In a short time, the radio station had raised enough money from listeners to replace Castellani's stolen truck with a new one. Since then, this inspiring venture, now known as Frontline Foundation, has served more than 500,000 meals, together with equal portions of love and friendship, to thousands of residents of Skid Row. This would not have happened if a local newspaper and a local radio station had not picked up the story--and if the news media had not continued (with Castellani's skillful encouragement) to cover the work of the organization.

### **What's News?**

My first publicity job involved copy writing for the San Francisco Sports and Boat Show. My boss would feed me an idea for a lead sentence, which I would turn into a news release. One such lead, which he batted out on his portable typewriter and handed to me with great enthusiasm, went something like

this: "New innovations were introduced for the first time at the 10th Annual San Francisco Sports and Boat Show."

"It's still a little rough," he admitted, "but you get the idea. Just flesh it out."

Although it was probably as redundant as any one sentence can be, and a little short on substance, my boss's instincts as a press agent were impeccable. The news media thrive on that which is new, innovative, and a first for your cause, community, city, state, or country.

So develop a nose for news. Be alert to potential news stories when they come along. When it doesn't occur naturally, help to create news by organizing rallies, press tours or previews, award presentations, and anniversary ceremonies. Your organization will be newsworthy if you

- do things that are interesting and socially useful;
- dare to be outspoken--even boldly confrontational--as needs dictate and as opportunities arise;
- conduct and publish interesting studies, exposes, reports, analyses, critiques, and opinion surveys;
- serve as a quick, dependable source of accurate information.

### **Compiling your press mailing list**

In preparing your mailing list of news media, first identify the market you want to reach. Ask yourself:

- What geographical area do I want to cover?
- Who is my audience? Where are the potential members and letter writers, the legislators, public officials, and voters I want to inform and influence?
- Which news media will best reach this market? Weekly and daily newspapers? Magazines and wire services? Radio and television outlets? All of the above?

The best way to begin compiling your press mailing list is to write down the names of reporters, editors, and other news people who have shown an interest in your organization or field of endeavor--and whose readers, listeners, and viewers you want to reach and motivate. Next, list all of the towns and cities whose residents you want to target, and then identify the news media most likely to carry your message to them.

*Gale's Directory of Newspapers and Magazines* (formerly *Ayers' Directory*) will serve you well in this process. It provides names and addresses, telephone and fax numbers for newspapers and magazines, and it gives daily and Sunday circulation figures. You can find this essential reference work in most libraries, along with a companion directory of radio and television outlets.

Your list may be slender at first, but it will expand rapidly as you cultivate the news media in your market area and learn more about their needs and interests. Keep a clipping file of news and magazine stories, editorials, and columns by writers who show an interest in your field, and add these names to your list.

### **Getting Acquainted**

Your organization's relationship with the news media should be symbiotic--that is, mutually dependent and mutually beneficial. They are looking for news. You are looking for a way to be part of that news. If you can give them something interesting to convey to their readers, listeners, or viewers, you both win. If, over time, you become an accurate and dependable source of information for them, so much the better.

Approaching people in the news business is much easier than you might think. Whether they are managing editors or cub reporters, you will find that most of them are accessible and receptive. Why? Because they have to be. Journalists need fresh story ideas and new information every bit as much as you need to get your message out. Journalists search endlessly for that which is new, different, and interesting. Busy as they are gathering and reporting news, these folks will usually welcome suggestions about noteworthy people, places, and causes.

So you shouldn't hesitate to contact editors, writers, or producers, whether you know them or not, about a story you believe will appeal to their audience. If you have something interesting to convey, you are doing them a favor. If your approach is right--if you are brief and to the point, enthusiastic without gushing or exaggerating--everybody will win.

As long as what you are doing is worthwhile and fills a public need--and why else does your organization exist?--you probably have an interesting story to tell. How successfully you sell your story idea depends, more often than not, on how you present it to a particular editor, writer, or producer. Whenever

you can, recommend a photo opportunity or furnish some illustrations yourself. The prospect of good pictures will help sell your story idea to the media, and good pictures will give your story greater impact when it appears.

A personal visit to a writer, editor, or producer is helpful initially because it enables you both to put a face to a name and voice. The visit will also give you a stronger sense of the journalist's special interests and needs. After that, most of your contact can be by mail, phone, and fax.

Journalists are most receptive to a factual, reasoned, well-documented approach; they tend to be skeptical of anything that smacks of extremism. If events warrant it, however, do not hesitate to express heartfelt feelings in a controlled manner. It's fine to show a passionate commitment to your cause, as this will add force and human interest to your story. Just be sure your passion is based on facts and well-reasoned arguments.

### **How you can help the media**

The most productive way to approach a journalist is to ask, or at least keep in mind, this question, "How can I best serve your editorial needs?" You might say something like this in your initial phone call: "If you have a few minutes [on such-and-such a day], I would like to stop by and talk with you about two matters. First, I'd like to find out how our organization can best provide information that is useful to you and your readers. The other matter involves our plans to picket the governor's mansion on Earth Day."

Thus, you are proposing something more productive than a mere get acquainted meeting. You are showing an awareness of the newspaper's needs and you are offering the journalist a story as well.

When you call a reporter, editor, or producer, keep in mind their tight schedules. As soon as you identify yourself and your organization, be sure to ask, "Is this a good time for me to call, or are you on a deadline right now?"

When you make your visit, keep it brief, and get right to the point. Try for an immediate, productive result by having something new and interesting (newsworthy) to pass along. In your meeting with a journalist, keep your discussion a two-way street. When you are talking about your organization and presenting a story idea, don't lapse into a long monologue. Be aware of the reaction of your listener to what you are saying, and gear your

presentation accordingly. Ask for his or her opinion on certain key points. Listen carefully to any questions, and answer them directly and succinctly. Don't get bogged down in overly detailed answers. If the journalist wants more information, he or she will ask for it.

It is also helpful to have a press release, fact sheet, letter to a public official, or other concise statement or background information that you can use as a guide and leave with the journalist. To provide something in writing makes the job easier for the reporter, producer, or editor, and it increases the chances that your story will be reported accurately.

If they ask for information you don't have, admit that you don't have it and try to get back to them, as soon as you can, with whatever they need.

### **The Press Release**

The press release is the standard device for conveying the basic who, what, where, why, and when of your story to the outside world via the news media.

If your release is clear, straightforward, and free of unnecessary words and details, it may be printed verbatim by a small, short-staffed local newspaper. In most cases, however, an interesting press release will serve as a point of departure for the journalist. It arouses curiosity and furnishes the basic information for a good story. So that a reporter can call you for a quote or other help in writing the story, be sure to put your name and phone number at the top of the page "for further information."

It's equally important to know when you should not issue a press release. Think twice when someone in your organization, in a rush of enthusiasm or in the heat of panic, announces that "we need to get out a press release on that!" Before you race to your word processor to share some allegedly earthshaking news with the rest of the world, stop in your tracks, take a deep breath, and ask these kinds of questions:

- What do we hope to accomplish by getting out a press release?
- Who, outside our organization, really cares?
- Is it truly newsworthy?
- Will the resulting press coverage (if any) help us?
- Can we accomplish our purpose better in another way?

The problem with sending out a humdrum press release, and most of them fall in this category (and into the wastebasket unread), is that you are not only wasting your own time, paper, and postage. You are also wasting the time of the person on the receiving end who opens and scans such mail. In so doing, you deflate your organization's currency with the news media. If you cry *News!* too many times when you have no real news to report, you may not get the attention you deserve when you do have something significant to say.

### **The Press Event**

If you want press coverage from a variety of news outlets simultaneously you can schedule a special event.

Consider what the Adirondack Museum did in this regard. From a publicity standpoint, this institution is highly salable. Its exhibitions, which have helped to give the Adirondack Park a cultural and geographical identity, have great visual appeal. The setting for the museum, overlooking Blue Mountain Lake, is unusually beautiful (even for the Adirondacks).

What the museum does not have, for purposes of press coverage, is easy access. It is situated in the center of a sparsely populated park the size of Vermont and almost a two-hour drive from the nearest newspaper of any consequence.

The papers in the small cities around the edge of the park--in Plattsburgh, Glens Falls, Albany, Schenectady, Amsterdam, Gloversville, Utica, and Watertown--reach an important audience for this particular institution. Many residents in and around these cities who know nothing about the museum would probably be inclined to visit it if they did.

So in order to attract the news media from these population centers the museum decided to hold a press preview for the coming season. As the first step in staging the press event, the publicist called a few editors and reporters and sounded them out. He did this to be sure that there was enough interest there in the first place to justify all of the preparations.

The next step was the written invitation. In this case, the publicist sent a one-page memorandum to metropolitan editors, art editors, outdoor writers, feature writers, and assorted columnists. The memo presented the vital statistics of the event: the who, what, why, where, and when. Being as



concise and specific as possible, the publicist stressed what was new and different.

The memo went out about three weeks before the event. A week later, it was followed up with this kind of phone call:

"Hello, this is Margot McCarthy with the Adirondack Museum. I'm calling to be sure you got the information we sent last week about our press preview on May 6. (Pause.) We hope you'll be able to cover the event. The exhibit draws on the museum's collection of boats, perhaps the finest collection of small, non-motorized watercraft in the country. The photographic possibilities--including use of historic pictures in the exhibit--are extraordinary. If you're interested, we can get prints of the pictures for you. The exhibit evokes a wonderful era--from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century--in the Great North Woods."

Then, a few days before the event, Margot called around one last time. She focused on the journalist's need to find a good story and the reader's need for interesting and useful information.

Each time you make one of these phone calls, you can answer questions and "talk up" the event. It is equally important, however, not to overdo or prolong your selling job.

When you prepare the memo inviting journalists to your press event, consider what else you might send in the way of interesting background information without overloading the circuits. As always, THINK GRAPHICS. Stress the photographic possibilities of your press event. Good photo opportunities will get you the kind of press coverage that attracts the widest possible attention.

Mindful of this guiding principle of press pageantry, the museum's publicist made available to reporters a selection of historic prints from the museum's archives, including pictures of old-time Adirondack guides, ladies being rowed to church in guide boats, and a turn-of-the-century regatta on Big Moose Lake.

Was the press preview worth the expense and effort? You decide.

Six of the eight daily newspapers invited by the museum sent reporters and photographers. The two papers unable to attend did stories based on pictures and information provided by the museum. Most of the coverage appeared in the Sunday editions on the weekend before the museum opened for the



season. All were front-page spreads, either page one of the newspaper or the front page of inside sections. All displayed photographs in a way that attracted widespread attention.

Together, these stories reached millions of readers in central and upstate New York, of which thousands probably visited the Adirondack Museum as a direct result of this coverage. Many of the visitors probably told others about their experience (word-of-mouth advertising), which further increased attendance. A certain percentage of these visitors will become dues-paying members of the museum, and some will emerge as prospects for major contributions.

The advantages of publicity over advertising are clearly seen in this case. Consider how much this nonprofit institution would have to pay for newspaper advertising to produce similar results. And could any amount of paid advertising have the appeal and credibility of this kind of press coverage?

### **The Press Conference**

Press conferences are geared to the release of "hard news" and involve a fairly formal give-and-take between the spokesperson for your organization and reporters. They tend to be relatively brief, lasting from thirty minutes to an hour, because those who attend must hustle back to their studios or newsrooms to prepare the stories.

Be sure your news justifies a press conference. Before you go to the trouble of setting it up and risk the embarrassment of a poor turnout or a limp performance by the person representing your organization, first discuss the idea of a press conference with one or two reporters in whom you can confide. Would they attend such an event? Do they think others in the news business would attend? If your confidants see merit in the idea, ask how you can make the event as interesting and useful to them as possible.

### **The Feature Story**

Feature stories usually focus on people, including (if you sell your story idea persuasively) the people who lead your organization as it reaches new pinnacles of achievement or faces formidable new challenges. Feature stories tell about people being appointed, giving or getting awards, retiring after

distinguished service. . . of people celebrating anniversaries, leading legislative or legal battles, launching fundraising campaigns, embarking on or completing an important new study or survey...of famous people embracing and speaking out for your cause.

If you can persuade a reporter to look at your organization or cause through an individual associated with it, you will often end up with a feature story that attracts more attention and stays with the reader longer than straight news.

It will help you in developing your own feature ideas to analyze the kinds of stories that run in your local newspaper. Pay particular heed to the weekend edition, which usually comes out on Friday, and the Sunday edition. These are often your best bet for available space, generous photographic treatment, wide readership, and the longest attention spans (from more relaxed readers).

## **Editorials**

By the nature of their work, editorial writers tend to be both practical and idealistic, opinionated yet open-minded. The best editorial writers want to know all sides of an issue--and understand all of the forces at work--before taking a position. Unlike reporters and editors who must maintain some objectivity, editorial writers tend to be activists and advocates. Their aim is to influence public opinion and help shape public policy, and nothing gives them greater professional satisfaction than succeeding in this endeavor. If they believe yours is a good cause, they will probably be delighted to back it.

Put yourself in their place. Every day you must find something interesting and timely to acclaim, denounce, expose, analyze, evaluate, or otherwise comment on. Wouldn't you welcome a new idea for an editorial from a citizen group doing worthy work in your community?

For all of the above reasons, you will probably find editorial writers to be very approachable. To arrange a meeting, call the editorial page editor several days in advance of your intended visit. Identify yourself and your organization. Explain briefly what you have in mind and why you want to meet. When you have your meeting, keep it small and informal. Go alone, or with no more than one colleague.

Have a brief written statement that contains the points you want to make. This handout can be a press release, fact sheet, newsletter, letter to a public official, or action alert to your members. It can serve as a guide in your discussion, and it will also be useful to the writer when he or she sits down to do the editorial.

After you introduce yourself, get to the point. Describe again--in two minutes or less--what your organization is and does. Explain your need for an editorial, and why such an editorial will be particularly helpful at this time. Be specific about the measure you are promoting, but don't get bogged down in legal or legislative details unless the writer asks for them. Then bring your presentation to a close.

If the editorial you suggest does appear, write a brief note of appreciation to the writer. If the editorial helps to produce a favorable outcome a few weeks or months down the line, let the writer know about it in another note or phone call at that time. Editorial writers especially appreciate a word of thanks now and then, since their usual response from readers (when they get any response at all) consists of complaints and indignation.

### **Op-Eds and Letters to the Editor**

Op-ed is short for opposite the editorial page. This is where your commentary (or op-ed piece) may be published if the editor thinks it will be of interest to readers.

The advantage of doing your own commentary is that you can make your points exactly as you want to. That your views appear as a guest column in a reputable newspaper also helps to give your organization credibility and stature. The disadvantage of doing it yourself is that you can spend a lot of time writing something that may never see the light of day.

So before you sit down to compose an op-ed piece, first be reasonably sure you have a market for it. Call the newspaper you have in mind and ask to be connected with the person in charge of guest commentaries and op-ed pieces. Present your idea briefly. If there is no interest, the editor will tell you. If the editor likes the idea but prefers a different approach, you will be so informed.

A simpler way to get your message out in your own words is to write a letter to the editor. This section of a newspaper is well read, and your letter stands a good chance of being published and widely noticed.

You do not have to be a professional to produce publishable letters. Writing style matters much less than what you have to say. It is also true that a letter you write quickly and spontaneously often turns out to be fresher and more interesting to read than a letter you labor over for hours.

Find out the word limit and conform to it. A weekly newspaper or small daily will often run letters of 400 words or more. Larger newspapers prefer shorter letters and often limit them to 350 words. Brevity has many benefits. If you restrict yourself to just one point and make it concisely, your short letter will take less time to write, stands a better chance of being printed, and is more likely to be read.

Although you can make your point and attract more attention by using catchy phrases and colorful language, don't let your phrase making detract from or distort your basic message. Be vivid when you can, but above all be factual, rational, and even handed. Express anger and outrage when appropriate, but be sure, when you do, that such emotions are controlled. Avoid an impression of bitterness, rancor, or petulance. Such elements might make interesting reading, but they reflect badly on your organization and are self-defeating in any effort to influence public opinion.

## Magazines

There's a magazine for almost every conceivable audience and geographical area. Familiarize yourself with the ones whose interests coincide with yours. Where your publicity needs seem to dovetail with the editorial approach of a magazine, write a letter to the working editor highest on the magazine's masthead. (Check your library's magazine rack and *Gale's Directory of Publications* for such information.) In your letter, touch briefly on the ingredients that will make for a lively and colorful story, such as:

- controversy, conflict, confrontation;
- heroes and antagonists;
- threats and opportunities;
- urgency and immediacy;
- inspiring, outrageous, scandalous, or violent behavior;
- public values jeopardized, trampled on, or upheld.

It is fine to portray your organization as the champion of a worthy cause, but any time your story idea involves conflicting points of view, be as balanced as possible in describing the opposing forces at work.

You are most likely to ring a bell with a magazine editor (or writer) if you can show that your organization's efforts are at the cutting edge in your field, reflect a pioneering trend, and have national implications.

In your letter to the magazine editor, you should state, early on, that yours is not a query letter from an aspiring writer. Be clear that you are suggesting a story for the editor to assign to a staff member or freelance writer.

Why shouldn't you try to get the writing assignment yourself?

1. Because you probably aren't a professional writer. Even if you succeed in convincing the editor that you should write the story, you will be writing it on speculation. There is a good chance that once the editor sees the story, he or she will decide not to use it. Thus, you will have wasted a lot of time that you might have applied to other publicity opportunities.

2. Even if you are a professional writer with the right credentials, the time you spend researching and writing (and rewriting) an article could be better used persuading other editors, writers, or television producers to do stories about your organization.

Think of it as leverage. As a publicist, you multiply your effectiveness by furnishing ideas and information to others who will, in turn, devote their time and skill to producing a story that serves as useful publicity for your group or your cause.

## **Radio and TV**

Much of what has been said about approaching the print media applies equally to the electronic media. Of course, in approaching a television news director or producer with an idea, you should give even greater emphasis to the visual possibilities of your story.

Get to know the appropriate correspondents, program directors, and producers on your nearest public radio and public television stations, since these are often the people most inclined to publicize your nonprofit cause in a sympathetic and thoughtful way. Listen to, and watch carefully, what they produce. Then consider how you can mesh your interests with theirs. Think of how you can help them by providing interesting news and feature coverage for their audiences.

And don't overlook the ever-popular radio talk show, one of the easiest and most effective ways to get the word out. The talk show is the electronic equivalent of the letters to the editor page, with the added benefit of dialogue in which you can develop your case more fully. Most local radio stations have talk shows that reach their faithful listeners at home, in transit, or at work.

First, approach the talk show host or producer with a letter. Briefly explain your organization, your cause, and why you believe that what you do and have to say should be of interest to listeners. Follow up with a phone call to schedule an interview date.

For short sound bites, be pithy, direct, to the point. Use a sharp, vivid image or catchy phrase. Make sure that you rehearse beforehand to be certain that you can fit your message into a 15-second slot.

You will be most productive as a publicist when you begin to think like an editor, writer, or producer; when you start to sniff around and develop a nose for news; when you make it a habit to be looking out for the offbeat, colorful, funny, heartwarming, outrageous things that editors and writers (and their readers, listeners, and viewers) thrive on.

How will you know that you are on the right track?

You'll know it when you find yourself thinking, as you are reading a memo, looking at pictures, talking with a colleague, attending a staff meeting, driving home, having a beer, or soaking in your bathtub, "Hey, there's a great story in that!"

## **Who Does What**

With individual variations, almost every newspaper and magazine, radio and television station has the following sort of editorial lineup. Use it as your guide to "pitching" your idea.

### ***DAILY NEWSPAPERS***

**Editor, managing editor, or executive editor.** Determines overall editorial stance of the newspaper (in conjunction with editorial page personnel) and the general thrust of news gathering.

**Metropolitan or city editor.** Makes day-to-day decisions on what to cover and who will do it. Can refer you to the reporter who covers your beat.

**Editorial page editor.** Writes some or all editorials. Supervises any other editorial writers, and those responsible for selecting op-ed pieces and letters to the editor.

**Sunday editor.** Assigns and oversees feature articles and other soft news in the Sunday paper, including sections on art, entertainment, life style, nature, outdoors, sports, and travel.

**Feature editor.** Assigns and often writes human interest stories.

**Life style editor.** A good prospect for stories on people in your organization who are doing interesting things.

**Columnist.** Many tend to be generalists. Most have special interests as well, such as the environment, politics, or the arts.

**Beat reporter.** Specializes in a particular field, such as energy, education, labor, medicine, or government.

**Feature writer.** Specializes in stories about people (human interest stories).

**Correspondent/stringer.** Covers a geographical region in the outlying circulation area of a newspaper.

### ***WEEKLY NEWSPAPERS***

**Editor.** In addition to traditional duties, usually writes editorials, some stories, and maybe a column.

**Correspondent.** Reports on your town, village, or region.

**Columnist.** May also be the editor.

### ***NEWS BUREAUS AND WIRE SERVICES***

Similar to large newspapers in many of their editorial functions, the weekly news magazines (*Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*) also maintain editorial bureaus in key cities. (Check mastheads for names of key staffers.) Ditto for Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI).



Newspaper chains such as Gannett, Newhouse, Knight-Ridder, and Ottaway also maintain news bureaus in some major cities, as does the *New York Times*.

Many newspapers and radio and television stations have correspondents in your state capital. For example, the *Tuscaloosa News* has a correspondent in Montgomery whose columns appear regularly back home and statewide.

### ***TELEVISION AND RADIO***

**Executive producer.** Top banana for a particular program or series of programs.

**Producer.** Responsible for certain segments of a news program or a specific program in a series.

**News director.** Responsible for overall tone and content of news programs and, on smaller stations, assigns crews to stories.

**Assignment editor.** On larger stations makes day-to-day decisions on what to cover and who to send.

**Station manager.** On smaller stations sets policy on news coverage and supervises overall operation.

**Program director.** May determine content and select participants of talk shows. (Or you can deal directly with talk show host.)

**Public affairs director.** In charge of public service announcements (free commercials) that you provide, usually aired during off hours.

### **Press Release Guidelines**

- Keep it simple, clear, and direct. That's a lot easier said than done, but it can be done if you put yourself in the place of your reader.
- Try to engage your reader from the start with a catchy lead paragraph.
- Get to the point and then elaborate on it, with increasingly less important details in the paragraphs that follow.
- Be sure of your facts. A reporter, columnist, or editorial writer must be able to depend on you for accurate information.

- If you can do so legitimately, convey a sense of urgency without being histrionic, perhaps through a quote from the head of your organization.
- Go easy on quotes, however, and if you use them, be sure they sound like something a real person would say. (Most quotes in press releases are preachy and stilted.)
- Avoid jargon of any kind, especially legal and computer jargon.
- Leave no important question unanswered. Assume that your reader has never heard of your organization or cause and has little or no familiarity with your subject.
- Favor short sentences over long ones. When you do use a long sentence, try to follow it with a short declarative one.
- Stick to the essential details. Don't try to be all-inclusive.
- Be sparing in the use of acronyms. When you do use one for the first time, be sure it appears parenthetically after the full name of whatever it represents.
- Limit your release to one or two pages, preferably double spaced for easy reading and editing.
- Include visual aids when you can. A photocopied map, photograph, or other illustration can add interest to your release.
- Have a friend, preferably one not involved in your organization, read the release to be sure it is interesting, understandable, and free of typographical errors and misspellings.

Be neatly professional (not sloppily amateurish) by producing a clean, clearly printed, easy-to-read press release.

### **How to Conduct a Press Conference**

- Convenience counts. Hold the press conference as close as possible to most of the news media you invite. The less time they have to spend in transit, the more likely they are to cover your event.
- Find the right setting. Suitable locations include a meeting room in a press club, state capitol, hotel, town hall, the steps of your county courthouse, or sometimes in the field itself (if the field isn't too far away) to help picture and dramatize your message.
- Send a one-page memo to the media announcing the event. Time your memo to arrive about a week before the press conference. Send it to the appropriate editors, reporters, bureau chiefs, news directors, producers, and assignment editors. Be sure to contact all media: newspapers, wire services, news magazine bureaus, radio and television stations (including college or university stations). State

- briefly the reason for the conference, who will preside, and the points to be covered. Note any outstanding credentials of your spokesperson. Stress the newsworthiness of your announcement or disclosure, and note any colorful, controversial, or adversarial elements involved.
- Follow up with a phone call three days later to be sure the right person at each news outlet received and read your memo. Reiterate in 30 seconds or less why you believe the news will interest his or her audience. Call again with a brief reminder the day before the event.
  - At the press conference, stay near the door and welcome attendees as they arrive. Ask them to sign in (position a pad or guest book for this purpose) so you will have their names for future reference. Give them any brief and useful background material you have prepared--for example, a news release and a one-page fact sheet on the issue and your organization.
  - Start the press conference no later than five minutes after the scheduled time as a courtesy to those who arrive punctually and in recognition that these are busy people who have stories to prepare and deadlines to meet.
  - Begin by thanking those present for coming (maximum of ten seconds). Introduce the spokesperson (maximum of 20 seconds).
  - The spokesperson should make an opening statement of no more than ten minutes and then invite questions from the audience.
  - The spokesperson should answer questions briefly and pointedly. Long, rambling answers tend to deaden a press conference, as do speeches, sermons, and any extended monologue. For best results, make your press conference a lively give-and-take.
  - As soon as things seem to be winding down, step in and formally conclude the proceedings. (Don't let your press conference drag on and fizzle out.) Step up to the front and say something like, "We appreciate your questions and comments, and we thank all of you for coming. If you need any other information, please let me know."
  - Television reporters will want to get your spokesperson aside for some on-camera comments. Announce beforehand that this can be done after the press conference (so as not to distract from or prolong the proceedings).

Send a note of appreciation to those who did a creditable job of covering the press conference. Thank them for keeping their readers informed about these important public issues or for clarifying a complex matter or for approaching the subject in a fresh and interesting way. Whatever you do, though, do not thank them for being advocates of your cause. By commending a reporter for

espousing your organization's point of view, you are implicitly calling the reporter's objectivity--and thus his or her professional integrity--into question. (Editorial writers and columnists are a different matter, of course. Their job is to express opinions. When they champion your cause, you should thank them for doing so.)

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*Richard Beamish is a communications consultant who formerly served as director of communications for the National Audubon Society and for New York State's pioneering Adirondack Park Agency. This article is excerpted, with permission, from his new book, Getting the Word Out in the Fight to Save the Earth, published by the Johns Hopkins University Press. Copyright © 1995 by the author. The book costs \$24.95 and is available through your local bookstore or directly from the publisher by calling (800) 537-5487. Mr. Beamish's consulting firm, Getting the Word Out, Inc., specializes in media relations, newsletters, membership building, and fundraising. It is located at 28 Munsill Ave., Bristol, VT 05443; phone (802) 453-6448.*