



NEWS MEDIA RELATIONS 101

Getting Started:

While we all agree that face-to-face, personal interactions can be the most effective means of influencing individuals, there is no greater way of reaching large audiences than through the news media. Whether by television, radio, newspaper, magazines, or the internet, it is the news media that has the ability to tell stories to the masses.

This section is designed as a primer for those less experienced in working with the news media. Much of the information in this section deals with generating local press. National press is a different animal altogether, and will be left for another day.

Who is the News Media?

First and foremost, it is essential to understand who the media is. To answer simply – they are people. While this may sound overly basic, it is the fact most often overlooked by people when dealing with members of the media.

Whether on the front lines or behind the scenes, members of the media are people just like the rest of us, with the same hopes and dreams, driving the same cars and eating at the same restaurants. The only significant difference between what they do and what most of the rest of us do is that their deadlines are absolute. Beside the public nature of their product, having absolute deadlines is the only significant difference between our jobs. Once you come to understand this important fact, it becomes easier to understand why they do, what they do and what you can do take advantage of it.

The best thing in your favor is that the media is hungry for news. Across this country, members of the media have to create brand new newspapers and brand new television news programs every day – sometimes several times a day! And the fact is that most cities are not particularly exciting on a daily basis. So the news media outlets around the country are forced to seek out news stories to cover. That is where you come in.

Members of the media require real news, legitimate news, by their daily deadlines. If a reporter hasn't finished his or her story in time, they can't ask their boss if they can turn their story in a day late for a letter-grade off (That hasn't worked since college.) They make their deadline or they lose their job. That is the harsh reality.

Understanding this fact, reporters and assignment directors have decisions to make every day – “Which stories should we cover?” They either go out and find something, or they rely on PR people and others to provide stories to them.

This constant need for stories has given rise to a vast numbers of public relations practitioners plying their trade across the country. Here's an astonishing fact: there are more public relations professionals in America today than there are reporters. It's true. And among the two camps there is an unwritten agreement: PR professionals provide legitimate news stories to the reporter, and the reporter provides publicity for the PR person's clients. This relationship is the backbone of the news industry in America today.

But which stories get covered? When given a choice of several potential feature stories to cover, reporters will often opt for the easiest story to write – **the one they know they can finish by their deadline**. Keeping that in mind, as you go through this chapter, it is essential that you make your stories easy for them to say “yes” to.

The more information you can give members of the news media, i.e.: people to interview, statistics to validate your points, pictures or photo opportunities, background research, cases studies/examples, local angle, etc., the better your chances of getting the coverage you want. For every piece of information that the reporter has to research, discover, investigate, etc. the lower your chances are of getting coverage. Remember, they need to meet their deadline or they lose their job. Help them do their job and they will be forever your friend.

Media Research:

Read the newspaper – every day. Watch at least one news broadcast and listen to the radio everyday. It is important to know your local media and how they work. A basic working knowledge of the press is essential in planning strategies for news placement.

Become familiar with the reporters who would be covering your issues. Learn who covers the medical/health, science and sports beats in your community. Know the demographic market and the circulation (number of people who receive the publication) of the outlets within your geographic area. The questions you will always need to ask yourself is: “Am I talking to the right person and are they reaching the right audience?”

Building a Media List:

A **media list** is simply a listing of all media contacts and contact information. Creating and maintaining a media list, or database, is no easy task. It takes time, diligence and extreme attention to detail. No one wants to get mail or faxes with their name spelled wrong or addressed to their predecessor. A necessary evil, you cannot successfully practice media relations without a good media list.

Think about the newspapers, magazines, radio and TV programs that appeal to your audience and are in your demographic area. It is important to create a list or database that includes the telephone number, fax number, mailing address, email address, contact name and title of each media outlet. And it needs to be updated at least twice a year. Here is who you will want to reach:

- At newspapers and magazines your contact will primarily be the editor or reporter that routinely covers your particular area of expertise. Be sure to obtain the name of the calendar editor as well so you can routinely funnel listing info to them.
- At radio stations your contact will be the news director. It is a good idea to get the station’s studio number on file for weekend events or breaking news
- At TV stations your contact will be the assignment editor or reporter that covers your beat. Be sure to get the newsroom phone and fax numbers. Know the weekend assignment editors as well.

It is very important to keep your database current as turnover within these organizations can be very high and it is very easy to offend a reporter if you get the info wrong. As the saying goes: “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.”

Lead Time:

It is also helpful to know the media outlets’ lead-time. Lead-time is the length of time before an article or story goes to press. For example: newspaper reporters prefer two to three weeks lead-time for “soft news.” You can call them at the last minute, but chances are remote that you’ll get coverage.

Keep in mind also that the day the story is due, the reporter will spend much of that day writing. Any last minute changes will need to get to the reporter early in the day.

Television assignment editors are often “game” for a short-notice good video opportunity (such as a celebrity in town for a visit) but for a comprehensive feature, you need to begin the communication and research weeks in advance.

Local magazines have a much longer lead-time. For example: If you have an event taking place in November and you would like to get a mention in “YourCity Magazine,” you will need to contact the magazine by no later than August 1.

It is recommended you update your media database at least every six months with a telephone call. There are many services available that sell media databases and update them for you.

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Building Media Relationships:

The key to building media relationships is understanding how the media professional's day is spent. Media jobs are often fast-paced, deadline driven and can be turned upside down at a moment's notice. Media professionals spend more than half of their day on the telephone listening to pitches, finding facts, etc... They are not sitting by the phone waiting to hear from you. **That is why it is imperative that you always be extra polite, professional and concise when dealing with them during unscheduled times.**

Understanding the pressures that reporters are under, it is important to be familiar with their deadlines. Television reporters have several deadlines every day – before each newscast. Reporters that work for daily newspapers with morning delivery are considered "on deadline" after about 2:00 p.m. (different for afternoon editions) The best strategy is to spend an hour calling your local media to research their deadlines.

When making a pitch, remember that they have a larger audience to serve. Ask yourself the question: **"Is the story I'm about to pitch of interest to a majority of their reader/viewers/listeners?"** If not, **don't make the call.** All you'll do is waste their time, hurt your credibility and annoy them. Remember that they have deadlines to meet.

Also, don't leave multiple messages on their voice mail. One message per day is sufficient – they will get back to you. As the saying goes: "No one will share your sense of urgency." Be patient.

Another good relationship-building strategy is to find an excuse to call when you have no news to pitch. Reports are bombarded with requests and are relieved when someone calls them and is not looking for coverage (as long as they are not on deadline.) For example, if they have written an article that you thought was particularly good, give them a call (in the morning) and let them know. And while you're at it, introduce yourself.

Be nice to the little guys. Remember every editor started somewhere. You never know who might be in line for a promotion.

Identify your audience

Determine whom you want your news to reach. The clearer you are in your mind, the more effective your media strategies will be. Is your particular news of interest to males or females? Smokers or non-smokers? Particular ethnic groups? Age groups? Begin targeting publications and editors who cater to the audience you are trying to reach.

Is it newsworthy?

It is not about what you want to say, it is about what they want to hear. Learn the difference between hard news (disasters, crime, elections, sports scores, etc...) and soft news (personal profiles, feature stories, book reviews, human-interest stories, etc...). Hard news gets old fast, so it is important to get the word out before it becomes stale. Soft news does not have the same urgency. A soft news piece can run a week to month out from when you first made media contact and usually requires much more information.

Also, remember that the media will not act as your personal marketing department. It is their job to determine what is newsworthy on any given day and report it. On a daily basis they filter through hundreds and thousands of press releases, news advisories, etc...if you have presented your news in the most professional and timely manner, you will likely see results. Truly newsworthy material will almost always get coverage.

Accuracy

Get the facts straight. Double and triple check to make sure your message is clear and every detail is correct before you present it. You will lose credibility with the news media if you make mistakes or forget to include key information like the who's, what's, where's, when's and why's. Re-work your message until it's clear, comprehensively concise and correct.

Pitching the Media:

If you are pitching a particular event, send your information to daily newspapers, TV and radio stations about two weeks before your event. Send to weekly newspapers about three weeks before your event. Be sensitive to deadlines. Return reporters' calls quickly so you don't miss opportunities for coverage.

Always ask whether or not the reporter is on deadline. If they are, get off the phone with them right away and find out when would be a better time to contact them. They will appreciate this.

Know what you want to say before you get on the telephone. Practice it in your office. Be clear and concise. Don't waste the report's time. Keep a notebook in front of you with key facts. Practice saying a quick version in fifteen to twenty seconds. If you spark the reporter's interest, you will get more time to expand upon your pitch.

Have photos ready. Press releases are more likely to be picked up if a captioned photo accompanies them. Also, stories with pictures tend to get placed closer to the front of newspapers. If you do not have any photos, be ready to suggest photo possibilities to the editor.

Depending on who you are pitching, make sure that the local or national angles are clear. For example: Local weeklies are less likely to cover national news unless there is local angle and vice versa.

Writing a Public Service Announcement:

A Public Service Announcement (PSA) is any announcement for which no charge is made and which promotes programs, services and activities of federal, state and local government and non-profit organizations. The announcement must serve the public interest of the community and not for a profit-making venture.

The most inexpensive way to submit a PSA to a radio station is to write the information as clear and concise as possible and the announcer or disc jockey will read it on-air live.

Type the entire PSA in all capital letters.

Time it out. (Read it out loud) Make sure your PSA is within the perimeters for the most common lengths for PSA's, which are 10, 15, 20 and 30 seconds.

Send the PSA on your letterhead to the station public service director. Be sure to include a contact person and telephone number at the top of the page so the public service director knows how to get more information. Include the date you expect the spot to arrive at the station, the reading time, the word count and the very last date on which the spot could run.

For Example:

Contact: John Smith, (800) 555-5555

Date: April 9, 2000
20 second public service announcement
56 words

Last Day: May 24, 2000

Double or triple space PSA's. Underlining words to be emphasized is acceptable, but should be kept to a minimum. Keep your sentences short.

(Here is a trick: If there is a telephone number that is to be read as part of the PSA, make sure that the phone number is the last thing that is said, with no words following. Most people listen to the radio in their car with nowhere to write. This method is the best way for phone numbers to be remembered.)

Media Resources:

- Call the major daily newspapers and magazines to request a copy of their **editorial calendar** for the year.
- **Bacon's Media Guide** (available on CD-ROM and book form)
- **Parrot Media** "parrotmedia.com" (on-line media directory)
- **ProfNet** (on-line source for reporters to post requests for experts, interviews and more information on a subject they are writing about)
- **Burrelle's Clipping Service** (searches daily for newspaper mentions for your organization)

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Writing a Press Release:

You don't need to be fancy. Make it easy for the editor to find the important facts. Keep in mind that an editor may spend less than 15 seconds looking over your release and will make a quick judgment on a skim of the 1st paragraph. The 1st paragraph should say who, what, where, when, why and how. For example:

GREELEY, Colo. - "Use the tobacco settlement dollars for tobacco education and prevention." That is the message the Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Colorado will be presenting at a rally being held on Tuesday, May 14 at 3:00 p.m. at the Greeley Civic Center. The rally will take place as the Colorado State Legislature contemplates how to allocate Colorado's estimated \$2.6 billion, 20 year, windfall from the national tobacco settlement.

Other paragraphs should give more details. Put the most important information first and work down to the least important. Don't forget to include a contact name and phone number for more information.

Press releases should be written just like a news story that was appearing in the local newspaper. It is our chance to show the reporter how we see the story. In most cases, this provides a road map for the reporter and prevents them from having to "figure out" why this is news and writing it in a less-than-flattering way. Keep sentences short. Double-space. Send the release on your letterhead.

If the release spills over to a second page, type the word MORE at the bottom of the first page. At the top of the second page, put the subject matter at the upper left and then the page number below it like this "2-2-2". Remember, if the pages become separated, they need to know which release it pertains to.

At the end of the release type "-###-" or "-30-" to signal the end of the release to editors and journalists.