

PUBLIC RELATIONS HANDBOOK

Working with the Media

The local newspapers, radio and television stations, magazines and wire services are the major sources of information in any community. They are there to serve you, and you can help them by suggesting newsworthy topics for their coverage. Never be hesitant about contacting the media with an interesting story. They often rely on the public to provide them with information of interest to their readers, listeners and viewers.

The continuation of good press relations depends on the accuracy of the stories provided. All names, dates, facts and figures should be double checked before any story is released to the media. When you are asked questions, be sure any information provided is absolutely correct. Be aware at all times that whatever you say to a media representative is subject to being quoted.

To be able to put together a story, the media must have all of the relevant facts. The most common way to put those facts together concisely is in news release form. The following are some guidelines to remember when writing a news release:

- < All news releases should be typed clearly and accurately using double spacing.
- < The name and phone number of the person submitting the information should be at the top of each release.
- < All pages should be numbered in sequence with the end of the story noted. Traditional newspaper practice calls for the end of stories to be noted by “###” or “30”.
- < The date the news release may be used should be included. If it may be used as soon as it is received, “For Immediate Release” should be typed on the release.

The first paragraph of a news release, called the “lead”, should answer the basic questions: who; what; where; when; why; and how. The lead should be as concise as possible and be able to catch and hold a busy reader’s attention. The body of the story should support the information given in the lead and contain answers to all reasonable questions that readers or listeners might ask. The language must be clear and concise, with no editorial comment unless it is attributed to a legitimate source who is named in the release.

It is often desirable to send a photograph to the newspaper with your news release. This is especially important when the paper cannot send its own photographer to cover an event. Always supply good quality, glossy prints with a caption attached. Describe the action shown in the picture and provide names, date and location of the event. For major stories, consider hiring a professional photographer to cover an event if the newspaper is not able to be there.

When dealing with the media, the person you contact is as important as the content of the news release. Determine which department or editor would be interested in your story. At a large daily newspaper, the science, food or features editor would be contacted, depending on the content of the article. At a smaller paper or a weekly publication, the editor or a reporter should be called. Contact the news director of a radio or television station for feature or news segments. The producer of an interview program should be called to schedule a guest on the show.

It is helpful to develop and keep readily available a “Media Contact Guide”. This should include the names, addresses, phone numbers and deadlines of the media in your community. Use the yellow pages of your telephone directory to find the names of publications and situations. Call them directly to request the names of specific contact persons.

Guidelines for Telephone Radio Interviews

Ask the reporter immediately if your responses will be taped during the interview and used for a later broadcast. If so, you should be allowed time to prepare answers. Most reporters will tell you the topic of discussion and give you time to gather any information that you might need. Take as little time as possible to obtain your information and call the reporter back at the specified time. If you know someone with more expertise on the topic, refer the reporter to that person.

Do not respond to a radio telephone inquiry without logically thinking out an answer. Immediately putting yourself on the defensive or angrily replying to a question is the wrong way to approach the media and the public. Remember, your primary tool in a radio interview is your voice. You must speak sincerely, clearly and with conviction. Taking time to formulate a logical response to a question is vital to communicating your message to the public.

How to Handle Media Interviews

There will be many opportunities for you or spokespersons for your organization to be interviewed by reporters or television “talk show” hosts. It is essential that the individuals involved in press interviews be highly conversant with the subject matter and have a good understanding of how to handle media interviews. The following is a checklist to use when meeting the press.

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| Attire | Clothes should be well-cut and on the conservative side. Bright colors and bold patterns should be avoided because they detract from the speaker. |
| Position | Sit still in a natural and relaxed manner and keep hand movements to a minimum. Use gestures to emphasize key points. Talk to the interviewer, not the camera. |
| Visual Aids | Double check with the interviewer or producer about using any visual aids. Arrange your display material for easy access while you talk. If your hands will show, be sure your manicure and cuffs look good. |
| Voice | Speak at a normal voice, pitch and volume, but with modulation, not in a monotone. Try not to use “uh”, “well”, “you know” or any other habitual phrase or word. Do not drop your voice at the end of a sentence. The interviewer and public need to hear everything you say. |

Miscellaneous Media Tips

- < When you have sent a news release or granted an interview, be available to answer additional inquiries. You may want to offer the reporter your home telephone number for convenience.
- < Be aware that unless you and the reporter agree in advance that your remarks are “off the record”, anything you say may appear in print or on the air.
- < Most reporters and newspapers will not allow you to review a story before publication. If the news story is complicated, you can offer to check the facts before the article is printed. News reporters will accept an offer to verify facts, but they are less likely to welcome efforts to change the story.

- < Never give out information if you are not sure it is accurate. Make every effort to promptly obtain the information a reporter requests.
- < Thank the reporter for using the story or the interviewer for having you on the program. Even though reporting the news is the individual's job, everyone likes to hear a word of praise or appreciation.

Reference

1. "Public Relations Handbook", Journal of the American Medical Records Association, 52 (August 1981): 101-109.