

Working With the News Media¹

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This publication about working with the news media is the second of a four-part series on media relations. This series also covers media relations strategies, news releases and public service announcements, and media interview skills.

Introduction

The news media—radio and television stations, newspapers, and magazines—pass your information to specific audiences. The news director for a television station or the news editor for a newspaper decides what is important and what is actually reported. In essence, they operate as *gatekeepers*. A gatekeeper, in the news media, determines what you read, view, and hear about the world around you. Consider this illustration of how a gatekeeper operates: Someone operating the gate of a livestock pen uses the gate to keep certain cattle in the pen while also keeping other cattle out. Similarly, a news media gatekeeper opens the “news gate” to allow certain information to reach the general public; the gatekeeper also closes the “news gate” and does not report other aspects, based on a story’s content and newsworthiness.

Determining Newsworthiness

Following are some of the criteria many news directors and news editors use to determine newsworthiness:

- *Timeliness*: This refers to when your event happened or when it will happen. News reporters do not like old news.

- *Proximity or location*: The event should be in the immediate area so that a local newspaper or television station will want to cover the story.
- *Prominence*: High-profile people, issues, or concerns are more likely to get news media coverage. If your event has a professional athlete, a well-known government official, or an actor, it has a much better chance of being covered.
- *Importance or significance*: The greater the effect and the larger the number of people impacted by your news story, the more likely it is that your story is news.
- *Human interest*: An event that involves interesting people doing interesting or unusual things is likely newsworthy.
- *Innovative or unusual*: If the event features something different, unusual, or innovative, it is likely to be covered in a news story.
- *Conflict*: A story that shows struggles—a person versus the environment, a person versus another person, a person versus a governmental agency—is usually newsworthy.
- *Money*: News stories about financial issues are almost always newsworthy.

With these criteria in mind, you may wonder what story ideas you might have that would be of interest to a news outlet. If you want a reporter to cover a meeting, you first should ask yourself, “Why would a reporter cover this meeting?” If it is a regular meeting and nothing new or exciting is happening, the chance is slim that the reporter would be interested in covering the meeting. If, however, you have invited a special speaker or are doing something

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unusual, it is more likely a reporter would come. Note that in this case, the story would focus on the speaker or event during the meeting and not the meeting itself.

In addition to knowing the criteria used to judge the newsworthiness of possible news story topics, it is also important to understand how the news media cover stories.

Newspaper reporters want quotations, facts, and photo opportunities. Newspapers provide much more detail because people can reread printed stories. Newspaper reporters will spend considerable time talking with you. Radio reporters want short quotations—also called *sound bites* or *actualities*—of 10 to 20 seconds in length. For radio, you need to be able to describe the situation so it can be understood just by hearing the information. Television reporters also want sound bites (10 to 20 seconds), but they want stories that are visual. Television stories cannot be as detailed as newspaper stories; television stories are usually 90 seconds or less. TV reporters and their camera people split time between the interview and shooting video footage to illustrate the story.

Also keep in mind that most news media have an online component. Newspapers, television stations, and radio stations likely will provide a version of their stories on the web and can include text, photographs, and video clips, enabling people to read, listen to, or watch the story about your event online whenever and wherever they are.

Thinking Like Reporters

One way to establish successful media relations is to think like a news reporter. Following are some ideas to keep in mind when working with reporters:

- *Schedule events to maximize news coverage.* Other events are happening at the same time yours is, so make your event count. If you know when one of the most popular and longest-running events in your community is going to happen, do not schedule your activity at the same time as this surefire news event.
- *Know the reporter's deadlines.* Arrange your news events so they can be covered well in advance of a reporter's deadline. Schedule stories with newspaper reporters in the early afternoon because they must complete their stories by early evening for inclusion in the next morning's paper. Interviews with radio reporters can be scheduled at any time because radio news programs air many times during the day. Schedule television interviews for early to midmorning for the noon or early evening newscasts, or early afternoon for the evening newscasts.
- *Remember that reporters are generalists, not specialists.* Reporters know a little bit about a lot of things, but not a lot about any one particular thing. They may not know much about agriculture, your organization, or an event you are sponsoring. Therefore, presenting facts clearly and concisely will help them develop a story.
- *Understand that reporters are good observers.* Anything reporters see or hear is fair game for the story. Be sure that everything a reporter could see is presented in the most positive way. For example, if a reporter is working on a story about preparing for the county fair, make sure all of the livestock pens are presentable.
- *Recognize that reporters like to personalize a story.* Submit story ideas that emphasize people or that would interest people on a personal level.
- *Make sure the facts you provide the reporter are correct.* If you do not know if something is right or not, do not guess. Check it out before you give it to a reporter.
- *Follow trends.* Keep up with the events related to activities you do. Submit story ideas that are trendy or timely. For example, if during the holiday season, giving young farm animals (chicks, rabbits, goats) as presents is the new craze, you may want to submit a story idea to a reporter about what people should consider before giving an animal as a gift.

Lastly, below are a few suggestions on how you can help reporters do their jobs better. Remember, to develop good media relations, try to accommodate reporters as much as possible. Written materials, such as news releases and brochures, can help reporters tremendously.

- *Setting:* Provide tips on where interviews should be conducted. What visuals and audio would improve a television story? Most reporters appreciate any tips to enhance a story.
- *Directions/travel:* Provide detailed directions to an event, assistance with camera gear, and help to get reporters and videographers from place to place.
- *Several sources/resources:* Reporters like to have more than one person to interview. If you know someone who could add to a reporter's story, suggest the person's name.
- *Understandable terms:* Do not use unfamiliar words, acronyms, or *jargon* (technical language). Do not assume they understand "your language."

Additional Information

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