

To quote Shakespeare, "To be or not to be" involved with the news media is not a choice that is available to local environmental officials. The role the media play in shaping public opinion necessitates a relationship between media and environmental representatives. The quality of the relationship is often determined by the level of environmental officials' respect for the role of the media and their willingness to be active partners in the relationship. Tip Sheet Nos. 1 and 2 hopefully wet your whistle on two effective media communications techniques. This Media Relations Program Primer will be presented in PE Tip Sheet Nos. 3-6. Tip Sheet No. 3 focuses on developing a media relations program and building a working relationship with media contacts.

PE TIP SHEET NO. 3: A MEDIA RELATIONS PRIMER (PART 1 OF 4)

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Every public information strategy must include a media relations component. The most important goal of a media relations program is to develop a two-way relationship between your organization and the media instead of simply responding to inquiries or crises. Taking an active stance is important if your organization is to function effectively in encouraging communication and the sharing of information on issues that are important to you and your public. An active stance is even more crucial to your organization's efforts to disseminate factual, objective information about the services you provide, special events, public hearings, and the many other matters of which your organization would like the public you serve to be informed of.

The purpose of this Primer is to help you in your efforts to develop and maintain an effective media relations program. The Primer contained in Tip Sheet Nos. 3-6 will cover the following subjects:

- ◆ Developing a media relations program;
- ◆ Building a working relationship with media contacts;
- ◆ Basic tools in media relations;
- ◆ Effective news releases;
- ◆ News conferences and briefings;
- ◆ The interview, and
- ◆ Dealing with "problem" journalists.

Tip Sheet Nos. 1 and 2 discussed in detail preparing effective news releases and conducting news conferences and briefings so this Primer will only recap these topics. This Tip Sheet reviews how to develop a media relations program and build a working relationship with media contacts.

DEVELOPING A MEDIA RELATIONS PROGRAM

It has been said that good media relationships can be best achieved by the practice of a few basic principles: (1) shoot squarely, (2) give service, (3) don't beg or carp, (4) don't ask for the media to kill an story when you expect negative press, (5) don't flood the media, and (6) keep updated lists. The successful practice of media relations by your organization is founded on several basic principles:

- ◆ Knowing the news media in general and the characteristics and needs of the local media in particular;
- ◆ Being willing and able to understand the journalist's viewpoint;
- ◆ Building credibility through honesty, consistency, and availability;
- ◆ Respecting the agenda of the media, even though it may be inconsistent with that of your organization, and
- ◆ Dedicating sufficient staff time to plan and implement campaigns, develop and distribute information, and make media contacts.

The planning and organization of a media relations program should follow essentially the same process used in developing other organization programs. The first task is to set realistic goals and objectives, considering the particular needs of your organization and the community you serve as a whole, and establishing priorities within the constraints of staff time and funds.

An important initial consideration, particularly for smaller organizations, is deciding who will be responsible for developing and implementing the media relations program. It is important to assign someone primary responsibility for media relations. Doing so will give reporters, editors, and news directors a source to call on when they want authoritative information from your organization. It will also give your organization a measure of control over its image in the community.

The long-term goals of your public information strategy, which includes media relations, should include the following:

- ◆ Developing and maintaining an informed citizenry that supports your environmental policies and goals;
- ◆ Ensuring that your organization meets the information needs of your public;
- ◆ Ensuring that your constituents are aware of the depth and breadth of services your organization provides and the qualifications and dedication of the people providing those services, and
- ◆ Fostering a sense of pride among the public about their environmental facilities and the job you do to protect public health and the environment.

An effective relationship with the news media can contribute to the fulfillment of the above long-term goals. In the short term, you need to develop media plans that deal with specific issues or promote individuals, services, or facilities.

BUILDING A WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH MEDIA CONTACTS

To function effectively in the dual roles of being (1) a news source and (2) an aggressive promoter of your organization's services and activities, staff members who work with the media must develop and maintain credibility. The basis of credibility is honesty. Reporters and editors value consistency and reliability above all other qualities. They respect the news source who admits it when he or she doesn't have the answer to a question and then comes back as soon as possible with the requested information, or puts the reporter in contact with someone who can help. Reporters become wary of future contact when a source "wings it" or, even worse, intentionally misleads them.

Professionalism is also important in developing credibility. Reporters expect their sources to be familiar with format requirements, deadlines, and the organization of various media, and to share the information with others in your organization that work with the media.

Besides understanding the general requirements of the various news media, importantly you must also become familiar with the local media. What are the deadlines for newspapers, radio and television broadcasts and regional magazines? What are the requirements of different radio and television stations for public service announcements? What is the best time to call a television news assignment editor to ask for some discussion of a local issue or to talk about an event?

To be successful in media relations, staff members should make a habit of reading local daily and weekly newspapers, noting bylines and issues currently being covered; watching the news and become familiar with interview, talk, and public affairs programs on local TV; and keeping up to date on the format, public service policies as well as interview and talk programming of local radio stations. This kind of close observation of the local media will yield several types of useful information:

- ◆ Reporter's current beat assignments;
- ◆ Issues and trends already being covered;
- ◆ The ages and interests of the audiences of certain media outlets;
- ◆ The frequency with which specific radio stations use public service announcements, the time of day they are aired, and their typical format and wording, and
- ◆ The existence of local interview, talk, and public affairs programs on radio and television that offer opportunities for coverage.

The Human Factor in the Equation

Your organization needs to get to know key people in the print, electronic and broadcast media including reporters, managing editors, editorial writers, news managers, wire-service staff, and even camera crews. Keeping information on contacts current is a time-consuming and continuous process

because of the news media's tendency to make frequent changes in format and personnel. However, it brings rewards. By cultivating relationships with journalists, you are likelier to be rewarded with fair, substantive coverage of matters important to your organization.

Members of your staff who work with the news media should also be sensitive to the constant space-constraint problem facing newspaper editors and the time limits of the broadcast media. Failure to use a news release or to cover an event should not be regarded as a personal put-down. Sharing information about media constraints with other organizations like yours, such as a local television station having only one crew on weekends and is thus limited in the number of events that it can cover, can prevent misunderstandings and enhance cooperation.

Here are several other helpful suggestions that elaborate on these basic principles:

Always be honest. Buddha said, "Three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon and the truth." However, this doesn't mean that you have to tell media representatives everything you know--only that everything you tell them should be true. Deliberate attempts to mislead the news media will almost always backfire.

Don't play favorites. It is always tempting to give preferential treatment to one reporter or editor over another, especially if that person seems more sympathetic. Over time, this approach generates resentment among others in the media.

Be consistent, no matter when the news is good or bad. It's a bad idea to court the media when times are good and then hide when things go wrong. Remember your public role. You are representing your organization and not yourself. Don't use media relations as a means of self-promotion.

Be available. The media contact for your organization should be available around the clock. The media should know who this person is and have phone numbers for his office, home, cell phone and beeper. The contact should take all calls from the media or return calls as soon as possible. In cases of emergency, the contact, or someone else temporarily designated as the media contact, should be available at the scene of the emergency or in an easily accessible location.

Develop two-way relationships. Getting to know the people in the media during times when there are no deadlines or crises builds rapport. Go to lunch with an editor, or set aside some time to talk with reporters in a relaxed setting to explain a complicated issue that soon will be in the news. Get to know them and their interests, and let them get to know you.

Be sincere in your approach. Make sure the relationships are genuine. As with anything in life, trying to develop phony friendships is just a way of trying to manipulate a situation, and it will sooner or later backfire. It's a good idea to give media representatives candid feedback about their news and feature reports, being as specific as possible about the good points and the weak points of their reports.

Be positive in your attitude. Don't complain about every story in the newspaper and on television. Tell the media representatives when they do things right as well as when they do things wrong. If facts are reported incorrectly, ask that they be corrected.

Stay tuned. Tip Sheet No. 4 will explain the basic tools used in media relations.