

PE Tip Sheet No. 3 was the first in a four-part series called "A Media Relations Primer." That Tip Sheet presented ideas on how to develop a media relations program and how to build a working relationship with your media contacts. It also discussed the human factor in the media relations equation. This second Tip Sheet in the series focuses on the basic tools you will need to put in your media relations tool kit.

PE TIP SHEET NO. 4:

A MEDIA RELATIONS PRIMER (PART 2 OF 4)

BY

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Will Rogers said, "All I know is just what I read in the papers, and that's an alibi for my ignorance." He also said, "I read about eight newspapers in a day. When I'm in a town with only one newspaper, I read it eight times." So don't fool yourselves. For the most part, your public believes what it hears and reads and they hear it or read it over and over and over again in today's information flooded (pun intended) world. Therefore, we need to help the media get it right. Consider these actual headlines.

"Sewage Sludge May Be a Health Hazard"

"Toilet to Tap Worries Salk Researcher"

"The Murky Truth About Reclaimed Water"

Now, an effective media relations program cannot guarantee that your efforts will prevent negative press, but wouldn't you rather see headlines like these actual ones?

"Sludge Solution"

"Reused Water for Irrigation Is Better for the Environment"

"The Benefits of Using Reclaimed Water"

OK then. Now, hoping that we are on the same page, figuratively and literally, let's focus on the basic tools we can use as part of our media relations program. These tools should help your journalistic partners get it right and could even help them spin the item positively.

BASIC TOOLS IN MEDIA RELATIONS

Staff limitations may prevent some organizations from assigning even one person to handle media relations full time. This limitation should not prevent your organization from being accessible to the media. Organizations can use several methods--with little impact on either resources or staff time--to assist the news media in covering your matters.

Basic tools for your tool kit include:

- ◆ Calendar of events;
- ◆ Meeting agendas;
- ◆ Fact sheets and backgrounders;
- ◆ Official statements concerning a public matter;
- ◆ News releases (see Tip Sheet No. 1);
- ◆ News conferences, briefings and interviews (see Tip Sheet No. 2).

Calendar of Events

Most media practitioners will tell you that a calendar of events is the most basic piece of information they need. A calendar is useful because it alerts editors and journalists to the times, places and dates of public hearings, board and commission meetings, planned events and other activities your constituents may be interested in.

Although calendars are less informative than news releases or public service announcements on individual events, they do have several advantages. They can be assembled quickly and easily and they provide a lot of information. Also, the media can be directed to the appropriate point of contact for each event in case they need further information.

Calendar editors should also receive announcements about events. Such information should not necessitate a treasure hunt for the four Ws (who-what-when-where) and one H (how). A short paragraph or two, with a telephone number for additional information, is adequate.

To provide a sense of identity, your institution can develop a standard heading for preprinted calendar of events stationery, probably a variation on your organization's letterhead. The calendar of events stationery should provide space for the date of writing; at least one, but preferably two contacts, with telephone numbers; and your organization's address. By using standardized calendar of events stationery, your media contacts will become familiar with your notices and hopefully be on the lookout for them.

Meeting Agendas

A carefully planned and organized agenda is key to a successful meeting. A good agenda briefly outlines what you intend to discuss and in what order. A reasonable time frame, which allows sufficient time for discussion of all the agenda items, should be allotted.

Generally, when developing an agenda, be sure to follow the format used by your organization. You may want to include your organization's logo on the agenda along with the address where the meeting will be held. Or you could develop standard meeting agenda stationery as with the calendar of events.

Address the following elements as appropriate.

- ◆ Give the date, time and place of the meeting
- ◆ List invited participants
- ◆ Provide a place on the agenda for welcoming guests

- ◆ Determine if there is any “old business” or updates that should be included
- ◆ Include time for staff and or other reports
- ◆ Determine what “new business” should come before the group
- ◆ Include a period of time for general questions

It is usually necessary to establish a deadline for the submission of agenda items to allow enough time to develop the agenda and post it. Follow your organization’s rules regarding the time period required for posting of agendas and public meeting notices, allowing at least a week before the meeting.

The media appreciates receiving agendas several days in advance of each meeting. Editors and journalists review agendas to decide whether they should cover a meeting. Often the agendas alert them to issues and quasi-judicial actions that could merit future coverage thereby giving “legs” to an issue and future opportunities to report on the story.

Background Material

Regardless of size, nearly all organizations must often convince editors and journalists to cover softer issues, to do stories on routine programs and services, or to be interested in the non-controversial items. Fact sheets and backgrounders can be used to persuade them to cover your soft news. Remember to satisfactorily answer the all-important question, “Who cares?” before asking for soft news coverage.

Fact Sheets

Fact sheets can be used to summarize important information by giving the four W’s and one H in a simple format. A relative of the fact sheet is the question-and-answer (Q&A) format, in which key questions are anticipated and succinct answers provided much like Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on today’s internet web sites. That information can be supplemented by other background information such as biographical data, brief histories, examples, and case histories.

Backgrounders

We seem to live in a world of instant gratification and the media thrives in this environment. So, as the pop tune goes, “Let’s give them something to talk about.”

Here is what should go in a backgrounder.

- ◆ Title/headline
- ◆ Your organization's name, address and web site
- ◆ Table of contents
- ◆ Key contacts - names, titles, phones (including cell numbers) and e-mail addresses
- ◆ One sentence description of your organization
- ◆ One paragraph summary that sets your organization in a larger context
- ◆ The facts, issues and perspectives a journalist would find helpful in preparing his or her story

Keep any opinions you express brief and label them as such. The backgrounder is meant to be a brief but substantive "report" offering information, insights and often some simple statistics about a piece of the subject being researched by the journalist.

Sending out background material on agenda items or events several days before meetings is helpful to journalists who cover your organization. This service gives journalists time to review materials in advance so that they can follow discussions of the issues more easily and gather supporting information they need for their stories, which are often written to meet tight deadlines. Generally it is to your advantage to provide as much information as possible to journalists. The direct result is that your stakeholders will receive more accurate and substantive news accounts.

Fact sheets, Q&A sheets and background information, along with a press release, can be packaged in a media kit. Some organizations have preprinted media kit folders that can be used for many occasions. Others simply buy blank folders from stationery suppliers and then put a label on the outside when appropriate. Media kit folders are especially useful when several sheets of information are to be given to each representative of the news media. They are also useful in packaging information to be retained by journalists and editors for background.

Official Statements

To add depth to their stories, the media need access to your governing officials and to top-level staff from whom they can obtain more information and statements. Journalists also need direct quotations from key officials--a feature that adds the human factor into the equation as discussed in Tip Sheet No. 3.

Elected or appointed officials and staff should make every effort to speak to journalists when they call or else to return their telephone calls promptly. Failure to return calls promptly is the most frequent complaint among journalists. Could these officials be the same ones who continually complain that the media never tells their side of the story?

When you are talking about soft news, you can prepare for when journalists call by developing or locating anecdotes, analogies, quotes, and metaphors that illustrate and enliven the points you want to make. People love stories. Think up a slogan or easily remembered catch phrase that plants an idea in the minds of audience members or readers. You can't tell too many stories or give too many examples. I like to break the ice by telling about driving in the car with my wife and pointing out every water and wastewater plant that we pass. She will tell you that I'm the only person she knows that thinks the moon rising over a clarifier is romantic!

It's good to show genuine emotion, but don't allow the emotion to take over. Laugh, show surprise, disappointment, even indignation, if doing so helps you accomplish your goals or shows a positive facet of your character. Just don't let an emotion cause a flood of words that will detract from your message or image.

Lastly, never lie! Never speak "off the record." Never say "no comment." This is worth repeating. I said, "Never lie! Never speak "off the record." Never say "no comment."

Next month's Tip Sheet No. 5 will present Part 3 of "A Media Relations Primer", which will detail interview techniques.