



Media Relations

Strong media relations will ensure that you get the news out about Extension.

The term *media relations* refers to the relationship that a company develops with journalists. Good media relations help companies get the news out about their business accurately and quickly. It also plays a marketing role. When your company's name is mentioned frequently and favorably by the press, it increases name recognition and positive regard for the organization.

Keeping reporters happy is important, but the end result is the message that's conveyed to the public. Here are a few tips to help you get more media attention for your news and events.

WHERE TO START?

Press releases are usually the first thought that comes to mind when folks think about media relations. Writing a good release is essential, and Extension already has some great training in place on how to write an effective news release. However, sending a release is only a small part of media relations. The bulk of the work takes place before a release is written. This work can make the difference between having your release land in the trash or in the "to be covered" pile.

Know your media environment

Your area likely has local newspapers, local TV news affiliates and several radio stations. It is also home to a host of smaller publications geared to certain interests (fishing gardening, eldercare) or certain groups (newcomers, grain growers, and youth). Every single one is a potential mouthpiece for your news and events.

Your first job is to list the topics you work on and create a list of all the area publications that cover news about this subject. Second, you need to learn which reporters cover that topic in your area. It's a good idea to refresh your list

regularly. Reporters tend to move around a lot, and the names may have changed. Releases sent to people that no longer work at a media outlet probably won't get covered. Sending such items may also make you look out of touch. Keep your list fresh, and present the best image possible.

Knowing a bit about how news reporters work can help.

- Beat reporters specialize in news about a certain topic, such as crime, schools, environment and politics.
- General assignment reporters may cover a car wreck, a planning meeting, a local celebrity's birthday and the grand opening of a new store—all in one day!
- Trade and specialty publications use either or both types of reporters.

The distinction is important

Crime reporters don't cover the environment, and specialty publications don't cover general news. Send a few releases to the wrong place, and they'll remember...to hit the delete button.

By now you have a list of publications and the names of reporters who cover topics you work with. Your next job is to begin networking with the reporters. Having a personal relationship with people who receive a daily barrage of news releases is the best way to make sure yours get noticed and covered. But don't start dialing yet! Get familiar with the reporter's work. A keyword search on the outlet's Web site is often useful, but Google's news search engine is also a good tool. This sounds tedious, but reporters are just like anyone else. People like people who notice and appreciate their work.

Build a relationship with the media

The art of selling a story to a news source is called a "pitch." The word comes from the old days when enterprising authors and promoters would literally "pitch" their

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copy through transoms over the door to the newsroom. The doors were often shut because too many folks tried to send them items they could not use!

Today, a pitch can take many different forms, but all of them benefit from a personal relationship. Depending on the reporter (and be sure to ask when you meet) a pitch could be made over the phone, via e-mail, a fax or even dropping off a DVD. We all have communication preferences, and media choice is only part of it. Some reporters prefer lots of detail, whereas others respond better to a simple who, what, where, when format. Some reporters like pictures (be sure to ask about format and resolution), while others prefer to take their own pictures. Discover what your reporter likes and add the data to your file. Include deadline data as well. The best story in the world will never get covered if it comes in after deadline.

Know your journalists' audiences

Journalists only publish items their audience will find interesting. And their audiences vary for a number of reasons. Good reporters usually know quite a bit about what their audience likes, but media researchers have discovered some broad audience attributes that may help you match audience likes to your news items.

- Newspaper readers are usually older and more affluent than the general population.
- TV news captures a broad cross-section, but you must have visuals to succeed.
- This varies depending on format. News and talk stations attract older and wealthier audiences; you'll find more youth at rock stations.
- Online. Many people now get their news online. Most are younger and have higher incomes than the average population.

Knowledge and interest about your topic varies per audience, too. General news is written at the 8th grade level or lower to ensure that all readers can understand the story. Jargon is a no-no with this audience. Reporters don't publish things their audience don't understand, so save complex topics for journals or specialty publications. For example, when beef prices rise, you have a general interest story. But if you discover a great alternate feed crop, save the news for a cattle publication.

WHAT TO SEND

Simply put, not everything you do makes a great story. Sure, it is interesting to *you*, but will it interest the reporter and his or her audience? Here are a few tips to see if your item passes the "so-what?" test.

- Make it timely. Most news media work on a short

schedule. If your event is 90 days off, by all means get it in the calendar. But save your release for a week or so out, unless it is a truly major event.

- Make it relevant. It's wonderful that you received grant money to do research, but this is news the accountant can use. Save the release for your findings. But steer them to the right place. Learning fruit flies are more susceptible to alcohol is an important research finding, but it hardly affects the general public.
- Make it useful. Journalists and their audiences want news they can use. Will reading your news make children safer or businesses more profitable? If you can't find a "use" for your news, reconsider sharing it.
- Make it short. If you got the reporter to read past the headline, you have two to three sentences to set the hook. Long introductions kill the momentum. The goal of a release, like a resume, is to provide enough information to spur further interest. Don't try to write the entire article! Include contact data so reporters can follow-up.
- Call it a *news release*, not a press release. A news release applies to all media, but press releases refer primarily to print media. Some reporters that don't work at newspapers resent the term. Be smart, and make them happy.
- Consider a media advisory instead of, or in addition to, a release. Media advisories are usually shorter than releases. They may be used to follow-up after a media release has been sent. For example, you may send the release one week prior, and then, on the day of the event, send out a media advisory to remind reporters that your event is *that very day*. Media advisories often include directions, although releases rarely do.

Sometimes less is more!

Depending on your topic, reporter and news cycle, you may opt to send more or less information, use a release and advisory, or only a release. Consider that a reporter who receives everything they need from a media release may not feel the need to go to the event or interview someone for more detail. On the other hand, too little information may not pique the reporter's interest and could discourage them from covering your news. Finding the balance between too little and too much information is something best done by speaking with your reporters to determine their needs.

Sometimes more is called "value added!" Visit a TV station, radio station or newspaper Web site, and you'll see lots more than the newscast or the print edition. They now include extra photos, audio interviews and links to sites with more details. When you can supply this content, you gain greater presence on the Web site.

Before you start loading down your release with attachments, ask reporters if they want additional content and what type. Without getting into too much detail, higher resolution photos work best in print and lower resolution works better on Web sites. Obtain permission from anyone in your photos to use their image. Sending Web links can build site traffic, but long URLs are rarely printed because they look bad on a page and are rarely used. Embed the URL into a word on an electronic file (a “hot” link) for a more attractive presentation.

WHERE TO SEND IT

By now you have taken your local reporters out for a coffee, a field trip or dropped by their office. You know what they cover, how they want to be contacted and learned a bit about their audience.

Because one of the areas you work in is holding an event or has news that passes the “so what” test, you are finally ready to write that release! Knowing where to send it is easy. Just check your media file to find publications that cover that topic, the names of the reporter(s) to contact and how they prefer to hear from you.

Before you write, consider that you may have more than one story. In 2007, a North Carolinian grew the Christmas tree chosen for the White House. That’s a great story all by itself, right? But wait! The front page can take that angle, but the business reporter may be interested to learn that Christmas tree sales equal X many millions of dollars a year to the state and Y dollars for a given area. Environmental reporters may be interested to report that a new weed suppression technique reduces erosion and pesticide runoff. The tree grower was a 4-Her, so a reporter covering youth may find that angle news worthy. While you’re at it, don’t forget the trade publications that can cover the topic in more technical detail.

Not every story has as many angles as this one, but most have more angles than one. View your topic from many viewpoints, and different angles will emerge. Instead of writing a new release for each angle, change the headline and a paragraph or two. Crafting a few different versions will become easier with time.

WHEN TO SEND IT

Knowing what life is like on the reporter’s side can help you succeed. Daily TV news shows and morning newspapers usually have a budget meeting around 10 a.m. This is the time when they “budget” which stories will be covered that day. Get your release in the day before or before 9 a.m. Weekly publications may wrap up a day or even three days before publication. These deadlines should be in your media file. Afternoon newspapers often wrap up between 7 a.m. and 11 a.m.

Also consider when NOT to call. Most print reporters often race the clock between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. with afternoon editions at full hum between 7 a.m. and 11 a.m. The hour before a TV newscast or the half-hour before a radio broadcast is reserved for polishing and fact-checking stories already covered. Calls at these times are often ignored or greeted with a snarl. Pick your times carefully!

At budget meetings, editors and reporters decide what news will be covered that day in much the same fashion you pitched the reporter. It is important to know that after you “sell” the reporter, the reporter must then convince the editor that your topic is worth time and energy. Reporters usually get about 15 seconds to describe what the story is and why it should be covered. You should be able to do the same. Make it easy for the reporter. Write releases with good headlines and a tight first paragraph.

Be aware that “news happens” and a three-alarm fire, Amber alert or even some good political scandal might bump your story. As tempting as it may be, don’t blame the reporter. Their whole day got turned upside down, too.

Make yourself available

Every release should state what organization sent it, when it was sent and who to contact for more information. If you are the contact, be available. To a reporter, there’s nothing more frustrating than trying to contact a source on deadline and failing. When reporters need a quote or additional information about your topic by deadline, you can provide it, they can call your competitor to provide it, or they can kill the story. Which would you prefer? If you can’t be available, designate a contact who will be.

Contacts should check voicemail and e-mail frequently. If you are slow to respond, you just became a hassle to work with. Reporters don’t like hassles any more than you do.

You may get asked a question that you can’t answer. That is fine! Don’t speculate and by all means, don’t say “no comment!” A simple, “I do not know, but I’ll find out and get back to you” is perfectly acceptable and comes across much better.

Make yourself a star

Let clients, potential clients, partners and other contacts (everyone you know!) know that you will be featured or interviewed by X station or Y newspaper and when to watch for the coverage. Then, encourage your contacts to provide feedback to the radio, TV or newspaper outlet that provided coverage. Most media outlets have Web sites that offer ways to provide feedback on stories via e-mail. Newspapers often print letters to the editor. Stations and newspapers appreciate hearing what viewers think of their coverage and how a story they did has helped someone or

made some sort of positive impact in the community. If YOUR work generates positive feedback, you're likely to be asked to appear again. So help make that happen!

A WORD ABOUT NETWORKS

Media usually comes in two flavors—single outlets and networks. A family-owned newspaper publishes their news to their subscribers, and that is it. Networks serve many audiences in different markets.

Local news outlets only cover a specific area, and the good ones offer wonderful in-depth coverage. A network's many audiences make for wider coverage, which is a good thing! However, networks tend to cover more stories in less depth than their local counterparts. Both types of media have advantages.

Know your outlet's coverage area

To find out which areas fall into a network's area, check their Web site or contact the sales staff.

If your news is only relevant to residents of a certain county and the daily newspaper goes out to 20, the paper will cover something useful to the entire audience before it covers what's only useful to a segment.

Radio and TV tend to cover larger areas anyway, so their networks are larger still. If your topic is of interest to the entire state, try to get network coverage. N.C. News Network is a radio network with more than 70 affiliates across the state. TV 14 is a cable network created by Time Warner with outlets in major metro areas like Charlotte, the Triad, Triangle and the Sandhills area. Each news desk covers its region, but TV 14 outlets share news. You may pitch a story in the Triad and get coverage in all markets. Southern Farm Network broadcasts agricultural news to counties east of I-95. They cover news from the entire state, but focus more on this area.

MULTIPLE MEDIA COVERAGE

When more than one type of media (e.g., print, TV, radio) cover the same story, it not only helps you reach a larger audience, it helps you reach a *broader* audience. Like you, most folks favor TV or radio or newspaper. Remember those different media releases you wrote? Some pitched certain story angles, while some catered to different media needs.

If you sold area TV stations on your great visuals, successfully pitched the local radio reporter on your great audio and convinced the newspaper to cover your event, you just scored three different types of media audiences. If the newspaper posts the story online, add a fourth media to your tally. Why should you care? Research shows that when people hear the same news from different outlets, they tend to remember it better.

Let competition be your friend

The days when a town had two papers are pretty much gone. However, most towns are served by a number of TV and radio stations. They all compete to get news first (a scoop). But when you invite all three at once, don't play favorites—even when they beg. Exclusives work better in politics than in public service. Be a friend to all in your media coverage and reap the benefits long term.

SOME DAYS YOU EAT AND THE BEAR, AND SOME DAYS....

Media relations is like sales, some days are better than others. You may send the best release to the right place at the right time and still get nothing. Don't get discouraged. News cycles come and they go. The story no one cared about may become hot in future months or it may never become hot. Find another story and keep moving on.

You may also find the reporter relationships you build bear unexpected fruit. Slow news days happen, and they often leave reporters grasping for something, anything to cover. If you have a good relationship with a reporter, they may actually call *you* looking for news. Be a resource whenever this happens. Congratulations! Your earlier efforts made you a "trusted source," and you'll get more media coverage as a result.