

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

USDA Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

Social
Sciences
Team

Creating Effective Relationships with the Media

With advancements in traditional mediums, news can now reach a larger audience quicker and more effectively than ever before. In addition, Email and the Internet are gaining in popularity as effective communication mediums. Any organization can use these mediums to promote its ideas, products, or people if they have an understanding of the media. A lack of understanding, however, could eventually take up your time without yielding positive results.

Why should you use this information?

If you work with the media it is important to understand how they work. Creating effective relationships with the media can assist in building partnerships and implementing watershed initiatives.

Who should use this information?

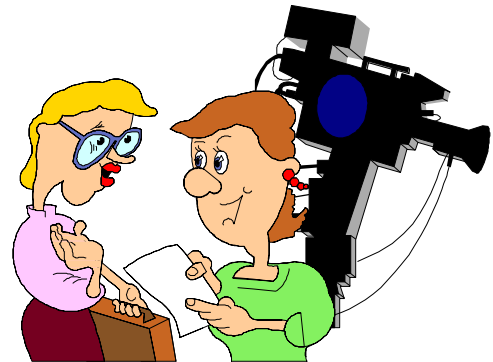
Anyone who wants their organization, its products, or its people to receive some recognition or publicity in their community should use this information. One of the best ways to do this is through effective media relations.

When should you use this information?

When you need to provide new information or progress reports to your customers and /or the "general" public or various publics.

How do you build relationships with the media?

Talk to journalists. Find out their guidelines and deadlines. This will allow you to prepare your story to fit their needs. Also, let the media know about your organization and your role in it. This will help develop a mutual understanding. Media often need to have experts they can contact to help translate information they receive. In addition, contact your NRCS state public affairs specialist for information and assistance.



How do you develop a positive relationship with the media?

- h Tell the truth. The media may eventually uncover the truth.
- h Respond to all press inquiries quickly. Do not keep the media waiting. They have deadlines and you may miss your chance.
- h Avoid the response "no comment." Let them know you will get back to them with the answer.

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- h Be accurate. Do not oversell a story. Do not tell a reporter anything “off the record” unless you are comfortable seeing it on the front page of the paper.
- h Establish relations with reporters who cover your area so when you try to pitch a story about your organization you will not be a stranger.
- h Keep informed about your organization, natural resources issues, and the media so you can be as effective as possible.
- h Own up to negative news. Don’t try to hide it. It will find a way out. It will be better if it comes from you rather than another source.
- h Be persistent in trying to get coverage, but don’t be a nuisance. Use diplomacy and tact.
- h If a reporter asks to interview you or someone in your organization, do not ask the reporter what questions he/she will be asking. Reporters might take offense. Rather, simply ask what the interview will cover so you are better prepared to meet their needs.
- h Do not follow your press releases with inquiries about whether or not they plan to run the story.
- h Avoid bureaucratic language, technical terms, and government acronyms. Speak simply and plainly.
- h Offer to provide background material. Fact sheets and back-ground information are appropriate.
- h Try to meet the needs of the media. Provide a service to them by serving as a local conservation expert, for example. Develop working relationships through hard work.

How do you know if your story is newsworthy?

Your story should contain some of the following elements of newsworthiness (Bivins, 1996).

- w *Consequence* — Does your story offer something of value or importance to the audience of the medium? For example, does the story have visual interests for television viewers? Will the readers of a publication be interested in the topic?
- w *Interest* — Does your story contain some kind of human-interest aspect?
- w *Timeliness* — Does your story offer something new to the audience?
- w *Proximity* — Is there a local angle to your story?
- w *Prominence* — Does your story include prominent people or events?

You should also never try to sell a story if the story does not contain news. However, if you are looking for some attention there are ways to create news. For example,

- w Relate your organization’s activities with the news of the day.
- w Work on a project with a newspaper or another type of medium such as cable television, radio and television.
- w Encourage a poll or survey that would produce interesting and relevant results for both your organization and the public.
- w Have an anniversary celebration of your organization.
- w Conduct a contest or create an award.
- w Plan a tour or field day.
- w Issue a report or adopt an NRCS report/ release for local use.
- w Arrange to do a presentation for a local organization.
- w Tie in with special days like Earth Day and National Volunteer Week.

What do you do if you have a newsworthy story?

If you have a newsworthy story, issue a press release to the different media you wish to reach. When selecting a medium, be sure you are familiar with it. This means: Do you know if it reaches your audience? Is the size of the audience appropriate? What type of style does it use? What are its deadlines? Once you have answered these questions, you should write the press release.



How do you write a news release?

A press release should be written with the most important information listed first and answering the who, what, when, where, and why.

A news release is typically produced on plain white paper with about one-inch margins on all sides. Use paper with your letterhead on it. Your address, along with a day and night phone number, should be placed in the upper left-hand corner. The date you wish to have the story released goes on the right margin, slightly below your address. If you wish to have it released immediately, simply type “For Immediate Release.” If not, state the date and time. Next you should start the body of your story. You should include a “catchy headline” above it in all caps or bold. The body (along with

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the headline) should appear about a third of the way down the page to leave room for editor's remarks. Double space the body and if it continues to another page simply type "more" at the end of the page(s) and indicate the page number at the top of the following page(s). At the end of your news release you can type "end," "30," or "####." Any of these will indicate the end of a news release.

When sending out press releases, some editors do not like to receive them via fax. It is important to find out this information ahead of time. Also, if you are sending out a release containing local news, stamp or write "local news" on the envelope. Some editors say this will prevent your release from being easily overlooked.

How do you deal with trade publications and non-traditional publications?

Trade publications and non-traditional publications such as newsletters are a valuable resource that is often overlooked. These publications are already targeted at a specific industry or organization. If your news concerns their industry or organization, it is more likely to be picked up by a trade magazine than it would by a local paper. Trade publications and newsletters have fewer issues published than daily or weekly newspapers, so it is important to know their deadlines. If you know their deadlines, you actually have more time to prepare a release than you would if you were sending it to a traditional publication.

Trade publications are designed to reach people in a specific industry. If you have news concerning a new service or product being offered in your field, your news will likely receive top priority from a trade publication. Trade publications also ask for graphic materials more often. A photo of a new product or service would put you at an advantage in getting your release published.

Like any other publication, trade publications should be studied to see if they meet your needs. Often you can acquire a copy of a sample issue and/or a media kit from trade publications by contacting their advertising or communications department. Or, contact a member of the organization. A local realtor, for example, might give you a copy of the newsletter that serves their local organization and/or a copy of their state-wide trade publication.

Newsletters offer a couple of aspects not as available in other publications. Along with publishing information from news releases, some newsletters will publish interviews with leaders in the field and carry written articles/editorials. Chambers of Commerce, environmental groups, and many community service organizations have newsletters. Many newsletters now reach a larger audience, as they are being placed on-line.

How do you develop a media list?

Any organization planning to use the media should develop a media list. A media list should include the different publications or broadcasting stations where news releases will usually be sent. The list should include: names of editors, reporters, news directors or other contacts; addresses; telephone and fax numbers; and information such as deadlines and times of editions or broadcasts. To find this information there are several directories available. You can usually find these directories in your local library. It is important to use a current directory as editors, reporters, or news directors often change positions. Here are just a few of the available directories:

Bacon's Newspaper Directory

Bacon's Information Inc.
332 S. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60604

Burrelle's Media Directory

Burrelle's Information Services
75 East Northfield Road
Livingston, NJ 07039

Editor & Publisher Year Book

Editor & Publisher
11 West 19th Street
New York, NY 10011

If you are trying to identify newsletters in agriculture and natural resources, look at the organizations you work with in your community. You may be surprised how many organizations you work with publish their own newsletter.

When deciding where to place your story, it is important to understand the audience of the medium you select. For example, radio is the primary source of information for all farmers. Agricultural publications are the primary source of information for women in agriculture.

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Where can you find more information?

- v NRCS State Public Affairs Specialists
- v Bivins, Thomas. Handbook for Public Relations Writing. Chicago: NTC Publishing Group, 1996.
- v Dilenschneider, Robert L. ed. Dartnell's Public Relations Handbook. Chicago: Dartnell, 1996.
- v National Association of Conservation Districts in cooperation with National Association of State Conservation Agencies and the USDA Soil Conservation Service. Guidebook: Media Relations. 1994. Available from: National Association of Conservation Districts, PO Box 855, League City, TX, 77574.

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