

Media Relations – The Basics

Interviews: Remember that an interview is not a conversation. Excessive (or worse, compulsive) talking and overly detailed responses to questions can torpedo an otherwise promising interview. You want to sound conversational and, to some extent, spontaneous in the interview, but you also want to get your point across in a clear and “quotable” way. As you speak, try to picture your words as they might appear in print or on the air. Dress professionally in appropriate business attire – nothing loud or distracting, with minimal, subtle “ornamentation.”

An interview can be an excellent opportunity to get your story, your “message,” information about your grocery store or organization, out to a general (or specialized) reading, listening, and/or viewing audience (publics). If you have been approached about an interview, reporters will generally give you some idea of the kinds of questions they may ask, but always be prepared for other, related possible questions. If you have approached the news organization – or an individual reporter – about writing a story on a particular subject, you have to first interest the news organization in your story. Presumably, you have already done your research before you “pitch” the story, but other issues may arise in the course of initial contacts that require further research. Thorough research is the foundation of a good interview.

In any case, be prepared, well-prepared (and, yes, it is possible to be “over-prepared,” losing your key points in the deluge of well-intentioned but largely extraneous minutia). Be specific, and focused. Always have some “talking points” in mind, preferably in writing (for your use, not the reporter’s, although you should have any written documents that might be helpful to the reporter available for the interview). Individuals in specialized fields who have regular dealings with reporters often become “media resources” to whom reporters will turn for comment whenever that issue comes up in the media. Whether you are “pitching” a possible story or commenting on breaking news (or future news), you need to be available by phone (and in person), and return phone calls from reporters promptly.

News Releases and News Advisories: *News Releases* are used to announce real news, a solid feature, market or service, personnel or financial information about your organization. Use sparingly... And, if help is needed to draft such documents, than consult or hire someone, preferably with Public Relations and/or Journalistic experience, who knows how to write a release or advisory in “news” style. However, all of these writing documents can be learned and mastered through time and practice.

Reporters and editors receive hundreds of releases every day, by email, fax, regular mail, from the Internet and by delivery, and only the most newsworthy will be read. Most will be discarded if your release is not clearly and concisely written.

Use short sentences and paragraphs, paying particular attention to the first paragraph (the “lead” or “lede” in journalistic vernacular). The lead/lede should be succinct and include key information – the “who, what, when, where, why and how” of traditional news reporting. It should be limited to one or at most two sentences. They should be written in the style of news stories, using the news writing style of the Associated Press Stylebook, which is now available as an iPhone application.

News Releases should almost always include a substantive quote (from the grocery store owner, CEO, or other key, knowledgeable individual in the organization), preferably by the third paragraph of the release. The release should include a concise headline written in the news style as well as a release date and contact person and phone number. A website/Facebook/Twitter address should be included in the letterhead, and the name and address of the store location. Email addresses and phone numbers of contact persons are helpful as well. Avoid clutter and excess verbiage in your logo (as in your release), and limit the size of the logo to allow more space for the actual release. One-page releases are preferable, unless there is truly significant and/or complex information to provide.

Be sure your contact person is available at the phone number listed on the release, and as long as necessary to meet reporters’ deadlines. The earlier you release important information on the day of the release, the better – know and respect reporters’ deadlines.

News Releases must be written to stand alone, with all pertinent information included, but may also be included as part of media kits, fact sheets, Q&As (FAQs), and other information that may be helpful in writing a story.

News Advisories differ from releases in that key leaders of the organization generally utilize them for brief announcements to notify the media of upcoming events, an incident or to attach to statements of policy. They may or may not include quotes. They should be written in the same news style and format, utilizing the standards of AP Stylebook, as News Releases.

Examples of News Releases and News Advisories can be found on the websites of businesses, government and other organizations.

Facts and Q&As (FAQs): Fact Sheets and Q&As (often known as FAQs or Frequently Asked Questions) can take many different forms – from simple one-page documents to elaborate multi-page creations with charts and other graphic-design elements. They are often used in combination with News Releases and other informational material, in media kits. But they should also be written to stand alone as clear, concise descriptions of a particular topic – or general overview of an organization, event or other newsworthy subject.

While primarily designed for our purposes here as a media resources, Fact Sheets and related documents can be used for many purposes not specifically related to media coverage, and are regularly posted on websites.

There is considerable overlap in the various forms of Fact Sheets and Q&As. Media Kits often include elements of the same information in different form (a Fact Sheet may be used as the basis for a Q&A, and vice-versa). Q&As are also a way of posing questions – both positive and negative to an organization – and providing answers that you research and write.

While the information may not always be utilized exactly as you wrote it, your viewpoints is more likely to be included in a news story if the material is written in a clear and factual way and is based on thorough research. If there are issues involved in a particular subject that may reflect negatively on the organization, it is better that you raise – and answer – those questions, rather than waiting to be “blind-sided” with negative questions and publicity.

Crisis Communication/Escalation Management: Entire semesters are focused on so-called “Crisis Communication/Escalation Management” training, but basically it involves responding to breaking news “events,” which can negatively affect your grocery store or organization. How you handle the crisis and or incident – and how well-prepared you are with a general “crisis/escalation” plan – can affect the reputation and future success (or lack thereof) of your organization. Planning is essential. And, professional assistance may be warranted. Note that even professional public relations firms call out to specialists for assistance during major crisis (like a primary care physician seeks the help of a specialist to diagnose difficult medical conditions).

Rehearse possible “crisis/escalation” situations, prepare responses and practice the delivery. If a crisis occurs, respond immediately, utilizing some of the “tools of the trade” noted in this document. Do not try to avoid the inevitable and hope it will “go away.” It won’t! Failure to respond promptly in a crisis often becomes the story, and the story (or stories) is sensationalized and expanded, causing continuing, long-term damage well after the crisis has passed.

Op-Ed Articles: Writing and placing so-called “Op-Eds” (which means, literally, “opposite the editorial page” in major newspapers – usually the inside back page of the “Metro” or similarly titled second section of the paper), is one of the most important – and challenging – tasks in Public Relations. Op-Eds are increasingly limited by space, and you should check the requirements of the newspaper (or other publication) in which you want to place an Op-Ed. That information is usually available on the websites of major newspapers. Longer opinion and analytical articles can appear in the opinion sections of major newspapers on Sundays (i.e. The LA Times Sunday Opinion section, the Sacramento Bee Forum section...).

Many Op-Eds written by major public figures (like the ones we will see in the coming months of the election cycle), are placed by contacting the Op-Ed editor to see if he or she would be interested in running an opinion piece on a particular topic. If the editor approached first about an Op-Ed is not interested, “shopping around” for other editors at other papers is not uncommon. Although it is also common to send Op-Eds (and Feature articles) to a wider media list, with a cover letter (be careful about offering an important Op-Ed to the editor of more than one major paper at a time). Unless, articles are reprinted from other news services (such as a New York Times Op-Ed appearing in a major California paper), the major California papers are extremely competitive and editors want to know that the article is being offered exclusively to that paper.

Your choice of publication for an Op-Ed is often driven by the subject matter. Although many topics are of wide interest, a topic of major interest in one part of the state may not be of such interest elsewhere. Don’t forget the smaller papers. Weeklies and small dailies will often run well-written and researched Op-Ed (and Feature) articles. Specialized publications such as those with grocery, financial, legal, medical, political or other specialized readership are often interested in running articles on topics of interest to their readers. As such, you can use social media to self-publish, which will benefit your organization and its key audience (publics).

Examples of Op-Eds and Feature Articles can be found on websites of newspapers. Visit these sites to research the interest areas, style and word length requirements of the public you are “pitching.”

Remember to “write-right!”

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