

Media Relations and Writing a Press Release

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Developing media relations will allow any business or organization to obtain free coverage of events and activities. This is your chance to get your theme and message across to interested reporters and eventually the public. A good press release will answer all the questions a reporter would want to ask, and be interesting enough that they will want to do a story. However, most organizations often overlook or underutilize this very important media relations tool. Successful press releases get your organization's name and event in print. In this article, I will offer several tips on how your Pony Club can improve its media relations and press coverage.

Attracting media coverage has a lot to do with whether or not your event is newsworthy, but it is also about form and function of the press release. A well written press release is typed, easy to read, and provides the necessary information (who, what, where, when, why?). The aesthetics are as important as the story, but are often overlooked by an inexperienced person's effort at public relations.

You will never understand the importance of public relations and the media until you realize that conversations disappear as soon as the words are spoken. This brings us to the essence of publicity. Unless you are there to tell people, they will forget the message. Managing media coverage for your organization means everything you do, including what you say, how you say it. Even the way you present yourself should reflect your organization's goals. Effective use of media relations advances and assists in achieving your organizational goals and has the ability to educate and influence public opinion. Pony Clubs can use effective media relations to assist the organization in gaining community support, fundraising efforts, publicizing an event, recognizing individual or group achievement, such as placing at equestrian competitions. Successful media relations can even help you increase membership and interest in Pony Club.

A media relation's plan should have two goals. The first goal is to clearly manage the media coverage for your organization. This coverage can play an integral part of promoting Pony Club and providing recognition for equestrian sports. The second goal is to develop a solid media relations plan. This takes time to implement because it involves establishing relationships with real people. It is not as simple as writing the press release and faxing it to every newspaper or radio station in your area. Over time, if you are truly committed, you will build a strong relationship with people who are the decision-makers in your local, state or national media markets.

In order to be prepared, you should evaluate the media markets in your area or region and develop a database of newspapers, television and radio stations that provide services to the market area. Vital information for the database should include business name, address, contact person, telephone number, fax number, and e-mail address. Additional information should include deadlines for submission of articles. For example, a weekly newspaper may have a Tuesday deadline for their Thursday publishing date. An important part of being prepared is to keep your database updated. The media database I have developed is computerized. However, 3x5 note cards also work very well.

When you are writing a media release or developing a media plan, it is important to determine whom you want to reach; and what areas or regions you want to reach. For most organizations, media lists run along a local and regional path. Next, how does each media outlet conduct business? What are their deadlines to which you must adhere if you want your story to run the next day or the next week? I would like to suggest sending each media contact person a media kit that provides information about your group and organizational goals. The press kit could include a fact sheet about your organization, photographs with captions attached, a calendar of events, biographies of key individuals and brochures. This information can be kept on file and used by the reporter when necessary. Additionally, your group is more likely to receive media coverage if your contact person already has all of the vital information about your group. Always remember that your job in managing media coverage is to make the reporter's job as easy as possible.

Finding out the information reporters need and providing it to them in a well written, standard format is critical to successful media coverage. Finally, what about after the story appears in the newspaper? I would like to suggest saving newspaper articles, and keeping a written log of radio and television coverage.

When you are writing a press release, think about the following question; what would you want a newspaper reader to pick up in the paper in the morning? An example of this concept is found in the film industry. Take a look at any one-page advertisement for a new movie. An action packed movie might have the Siskel and Ebert “Two thumbs up!” or “A rip roaring roller coaster ride!” These quotes are examples of what public relations professionals in the film industry might use to promote a movie. I do not advocate using these types of quotes to promote your Pony Club or event. However, these quotes do give you an idea of how important it is to get the audience’s attention. Additionally, you should keep in mind your organizational goals and how your story fits in with those goals.

The press release should generally be no more than one 8-1/2 x 11-inch page and should be on organizational letterhead. The press release should include the following information:

The upper left corner should have your name and telephone number, while the upper right corner should have the words “For Immediate Release”: with the date set just below it. At the end of the text center the symbols ###. This is an age-old method used to tell reporters that the release is completed and there are no further pages to follow.

Media releases should be current, concise and complete. They should be printed double-spaced and include the name of a contact person in case the reporter needs additional information or wants to conduct a follow up. A headline should be set in bolder and larger type just above the body of the press release. Media releases should have the who, what, where, when and why close to the beginning and be kept to a single page whenever possible. Imagine that the reporter will read only the first three lines before deciding whether or not to trash it. What would you say and what is the most important information? Check and double-check all of your facts. There is

nothing worse than announcing a Saturday event when it is really on Friday. Always have someone else read your press release for grammatical errors and content before it is sent.

The most important thing to remember is to make your news newsworthy. If you are writing press releases for every little thing, they will be reviewed and placed in the circular file for awhile. Fax or mail press releases to the appropriate media outlet. Some stories are designed and only appropriate for print, while others may be appropriate for print, television and radio. For example, a press release on an upcoming event may only be printed in the calendar section of the newspaper or the radio, but would rarely be announced on the six o'clock news. As always, it depends on what the event is and who will be there.

While I have primarily focused on newspaper (print media) in this article, it is important to utilize other types of media coverage as well. Public Service Announcements (PSAs) are non-paid commercials on a non-profit organization's upcoming event or its on going services which many television and radio stations will run free of charge. Contact the station's Public Service director to find out the station requirements. Usually, a written script for a 10-, 15- or 30-second spot (typed, double-spaced in caps), or a pre-recorded spot which you must produce on your own. Some stations will record the spot for you in their studios and free of charge.

Finally, do not be discouraged if you get minimal or no interest in a particular story. It is extremely rare for 100% of the media you contact to be interested in a given story. Even if the reporter is interested, sometimes he or she just may not be available at the right time. Reporters do file releases for future use in "roundup" stories (those, which include the activities of a number of organizations). If you cannot sell a particular story or event to the media, you still have made a valuable media contact and have improved your chances for the next time. Always remember to say please and thank you when interacting with the media.