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Media Strategies for Community Practitioners

A supplement to *Communities and Forests*, the newsletter of the

Communities Committee of the 7th American Forest Congress

The media exert enormous influence on the public's perception of issues and events. The news is instrumental in focusing public attention, and media exposure is a great way to raise public awareness. Further, there is a connection between media coverage and policymaking action. A good example is the growing need to invest in the restoration and maintenance of urban and rural ecosystems.

Across the country, communities, businesses, and individuals are working together to find new solutions to natural resource management issues. However, the understanding and acceptance of these innovative approaches rarely reach the mainstream media. Often the media do not find these collaborative efforts as attractive as conflict-based stories.

Effectively using the media takes effort, but doing so can help broaden understanding of community-based approaches and influence dialogue at the national policy level. There are always risks associated with 'going public,' so it's important to recognize potential pitfalls and weigh the benefits against the problems. This Quick Guide presents tools and approaches for working with the media and is designed to help individuals and groups reach a wider audience and influence policy.



Getting Started

Determine your message

- Describe the problem. (For instance, Congress is not adequately funding forest restoration projects.)
- Describe solutions you have developed or support.

Identify your "intended audience"

What type of people do you want to reach? Make a list of characteristics. Start with a simple brainstorming process:

- What types of people would identify with your issue? Why?
- What types of media would your audience be likely to use?
- What message do you want to convey?

What type of information do groups with similar issues give the public?

Which newspapers or magazines cover similar issues?

Identify the most effective media tools for your audience

Reach your audience by one or more methods: a letter to the editor, an opinion editorial, a purchased advertisement, a press conference, and more. (See later sections for details.)

Identify newsworthy events

The media look for certain types of information to determine whether something is "newsworthy."

- New information that affects the public interest (research reports, innovative on-the-ground projects).
- Local leaders' or government officials' involvement in project.
- Material that deals with a current event or issue, offers a distinct perspective, or features a unique solution.
- Events connected to a nationally recognized day or week such as Earth Day or Fire Prevention Week.
- Events with good photo opportunities. This is especially important in attracting television coverage (for example, projects that show children interacting with older community members).

NEWSWORTHY ACTIVITIES

- Announcement or launch of restoration projects in your community
- New technology or techniques
- Research results of studies you conducted in your community
- Unique agreements between unusual allies (public-private partnerships, conflicting interest groups, local and national interests)
- Situation that deals with conflict and methods of solution—journalists love stories with conflict and complexity so they can paint a vivid picture
- Human interest



TOOLS

Press Advisories and Releases

A press advisory or release is a short piece (1 to 2 pages) that informs the press of an important event or announcement. Both press advisories and releases should answer the questions who, what, where, when, and why. These tools attract free publicity and provide instant credibility when used in a story. An advisory should never give the full story because your goal is to get reporters to attend your event or to call you for more information. However, a release should provide enough information to write a story, even if the reporter cannot attend or interview you. Reporters commonly reproduce content from press releases in articles.

Press advisories

- Announce an upcoming activity your coalition is sponsoring.

Press releases

- State your position on a particular issue, framed in response to some news event (e.g. if you disagree with what a local leader said recently).
- Describe recognition you or your organization received for your efforts.
- Provide important supplemental information on a current issue.
- Announce the addition of people or organizations to your coalition.

Guidelines for writing a press advisory or press release

1. Include your name, organization, contact information, and release date at the top of the page.
2. Keep to one page, double spaced as a general rule.
3. Be concise, clear, and informative.
4. Use an attention-grabbing, powerful headline in bold print to draw in your audience.
5. In the first few sentences, outline your story and tell the reporters everything they need to know, without having to read the entire release. Try to begin with a catchy lead sentence.
6. Provide a brief explanation of the event and present a news angle.
7. Include a quote explaining the event's importance to your group followed by credentials demonstrating the person's expertise.
8. At the end, include a brief background of your organization and message.
9. End with the symbol ###.

To increase their chances of being read, press advisories and releases should be distributed by both mail and fax. Send them to a wide variety of media. If you have established relationships with certain reporters, send your release directly to them. You may want to follow up with press calls. For examples of press releases, visit AMERICAN FORESTS' web site at www.americanforests.org and look under News and Publications.

Press Events

Press can help broadcast important happenings within your organization (for example, the launch of a project or release of research findings). Steps to planning your press conference should include

GENERAL TIPS FOR CONTACTING THE PRESS

- Show appreciation for reporters' busy schedule by asking, "Is this a good time for you?" or, "Can we schedule a time to talk?"
- Always be honest. Covering up information will only hurt you later.
- Research before talking to reporters. This knowledge will help you sell your story by presenting a different angle or outlook from the norm.
- Be accurate. If you don't know the answer to a question, tell them you'll find out and call back later, or you'll find a source to answer the question.
- Keep your remarks to 30 to 60 seconds. Practice listing the most important facts about your story within this time frame. Make sure you can answer the question why is this worth looking at? with a quick, detailed pitch. The important facts are the who, what, when, where and (very short) why of your story. Ask the reporter if you can send a one-page fax of your press release with more detailed information.
- Follow up with reporters, but don't overdo your pitch by sending information every day. If they believe your story is newsworthy, they will get back to you.
- Provide adequate background information. Reporters' knowledge of local issues and their understanding of the context and conditions on the local level will vary, especially if the paper or station has frequent personnel turnover.



Sample Press Release

For Immediate Release: [Insert Date Here]

Contacts: [Your agency or organization's spokesperson & phone number]
Craig Noble, AMERICAN FORESTS - 202/955-4500 x234;
crnoble@amfor.org

AMERICAN FORESTS Brings ReLeaf to [Name of your project]

[City, State, (Date)] AMERICAN FORESTS, the nation's oldest nonprofit citizen conservation organization, will fund the planting of [number of trees] trees on [number of acres] acres of damaged forest land at [name and location of project]. The trees, which will be planted [month or season of planting], are an important part of AMERICAN FORESTS' Global ReLeaf 2000 campaign to plant 20 million trees for the new millennium.

[Quote from your agency or organization's spokesperson that tells why this project is important. For example, explain why the trees need to be planted and what benefits they will provide to the environment and surrounding communities.]

[Name of your project] is one of nearly 50 Global ReLeaf projects and 3 million trees to be announced so far by AMERICAN FORESTS for 2000. Additional projects are expected to be announced later. Through AMERICAN FORESTS' Global ReLeaf 2000 campaign, more than 10 million trees have been planted in more than 500 forest ecosystem restoration projects and urban and community forest projects. Global ReLeaf trees offer a multitude of environmental benefits, such as clean air and water, habitat for wildlife, recreational opportunities for people, and more livable communities.

"The outpouring of support from individuals and our business partners has been fantastic," said Deborah Gangloff, AMERICAN FORESTS' executive director. "As more people discover that they can participate in Global ReLeaf by planting trees online or calling our tree planting hotline, we are confident that we will be able to support many more projects like this."

AMERICAN FORESTS was founded in 1875 by citizens concerned about waste and abuse of the nation's forests. Global ReLeaf projects are made possible by individual and corporate donations. The public can participate by calling 1-800-545-TREE or visiting AMERICAN FORESTS' website at www.american-forests.org.

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1. Write a press advisory with bare bones information: who, what, when, where, why, who you are, and directions.
2. Call select media and determine the extent of interest in your press conference.
3. Write invitations to reporters, detailing the reasons for your press conference and why they should come.
4. Call reporters a couple of weeks before your event, and the day before, to determine whether they will cover your press conference.
5. Never hold press conferences on Monday.

Good rules to follow for media conferences:

- Hold your press conference in locations convenient for reporters.
- Hold press conferences at “slow” times of the year (4th of July, right before Christmas, end of August, Labor day weekend) to increase media attendance.
- Research other events that could cause news or time conflicts for reporters.
- Find a location that will provide good photo opportunities and draw attention to your message (for example, your local forest or government building).
- Choose a time of day that does not conflict with reporters’ deadlines (usually mornings).
- Create media kits with information about your issue and organization.
- Provide a contact person for follow-up inquiries.

When working with television sources, focus on the visual aspects of your event. For print media, look first for an interesting news angle.

Press Calls

Make press calls after sending out a press advisory or release to determine which reporters will cover the story or event and to field questions.

Letters to the Editor

The letter page of a newspaper is a forum for readers’ comments and thoughts. Brief, concise, and informative letters are more likely to be printed. Individuals or coalitions can submit letters to the editor that

- React to news articles or editorials.
- React to policy announcements or new legislation.
- Clarify specific points in an article.
- Correct misinformation.
- Present position statements.
- Inform readers about your efforts and urge them to get involved.

Remember that you want your message to reach the broadest audience possible. For this reason, you should submit the letter to all daily and weekly newspapers whose readers you are targeting.

However, try not to submit the same letter to more than one competing daily paper in the same circulation area. Submit an original, signed copy of your letter with all relevant contact information, including your address and telephone number. Many papers now allow submissions online as well.

Opinion Editorials (Op-eds)

Unlike editorials, which express the views and opinions of the editor, op-eds allow you to express your own views and opinions. Good op-eds usually provide the following information:

- A clear focus on a single issue.

Sample Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

Eric Lipton’s story provided an in-depth look at the the issue of storm water runoff caused by development.

I applaud the Fairfax County Park Authority and the Commonwealth of Virginia for planting trees to abate storm water runoff in the Difficult Run watershed. The ability of trees to reduce the damaging effects of storm water is well documented. As part of our Global ReLeaf 200 tree planting campaign, American Forests has funded the planting of trees in Difficult Ran and planted the millionth-and-one tree in the watershed’s Stream Valley Park in 1993. We now have planted more than 5 million trees worldwide. Our goal is 20 million trees for the new millennium.

I encourage municipal planners and developers to get in on the act. A recent study by American Forests documented the dollar value of trees in storm water management. We found that trees lost in the Atlanta metropolitan area between 1986 and 1993 did the equivalent of \$2 billion worth of storm water control work. By planting and car-

ing for trees, municipalities can reduce the need for costly alternatives.

Our research found similar results in other cities, such as Milwaukee. It make economic sense of communities to map, measure and analyze their urban ecosystems in order to maximize the benefits of trees in reducing storm water runoff, conserving energy and protecting air quality. This is especially important as urban areas continue to sprawl into natural landscapes.

The fact that Difficult Run is part of the larger Chesapeake Bay watershed suggests even more should be done. It is one of the many compromised streams and rivers that flow into the bay endanger this valuable natural resource. We have proposed an accelerated tree-planting campaign to bring ReLeaf to the entire region and make it a model for a healthy ecosystem.

Deborah Gangloff
Dunkirk, Md.

The writer is executive director of American Forests



- A clear premise presented in the first few sentences.
- A back up of your premise with specific examples, especially from within your community (e.g. premise: the EAPs are not adequately funded; examples: In FY2000 Congress allocated 11 million, including earmarks).
- A forecast of potential scenarios that expand upon your premise.
- A conclusion with proposed solutions and suggestions for readers who want to help.

Because writing op-eds can take a good deal of time and effort, find an editor interested in your idea before putting a lot of time into writing. Often the editor will advise you about procedures. Be sure to ask for a word limit. If you plan to use an image (map, photograph, graphic) to enhance your piece, let the editor know ahead of time.

Public Service Advertisements (PSAs)

When media publications and radio and television stations have empty space, often they choose advertisements from organizations to run for free. Since ads are very costly, PSAs are a great, inexpensive way for you to broadcast your message to a wide audience.

PSA Action Plan

1. Choose organizations from your press list and send your PSA to the advertising sales manager, who places advertisements.
2. Contact the publication or station to determine requirements for PSA submission.
3. Include a cover letter with the PSA. Use a visual, creative format for the PSA that clearly states your message and the benefits of becoming involved. Provide contact information.
4. Call the top five people on your press list under each category and tell them you are sending a PSA. Use this call to gauge interest for your advertisements, update contact information, build personal relationships with journalists, and answer preliminary questions.
5. Make follow-up calls to the top five publications from each category to make sure they received your ads and to find out if they will run them. During these calls emphasize why running the ad will benefit the publication. Ask yourself
 - Will your ad help the publication attract a wider readership? Why?
 - Is your cause something the publication has covered in the past?
 - Is the media currently discussing your issue? Is it in legislation?
6. Inform the contact person of any confirmed publications running your ad. This information provides credibility and shows support for your cause.
7. Above all, be confident, polite, and enthusiastic on the phone, and, no matter what the outcome, thank them for their consideration.

TARGETING YOUR AUDIENCE

Identifying the best media location for your story

Depending on your objectives, a good place to start is your local newspaper or national news organizations, as well as local television and radio stations.

Local Press

Local media represent the best starting point since they are most likely to be familiar with your forestry activities. Also, they are easily accessible to you and will be interested in a local news angle.

Other advantages of using local media include

- Broadcasting your information to nearby relevant areas.
- Publicizing your activities to your community.
- An automatic interest in any issues affecting the community or local legislation.

Use local press when your target audience is

- Local government
- Community organizations
- Local businesses
- Members of your community

Local press will be interested in stories that have a direct impact on your community or local government. Examples of potential stories include

- A local presentation you are giving about community forestry.
- A press conference about the consequences of legislation locally.
- A tree planting you are holding to promote reforestation efforts within your area.
- A community service event involving local people.
- Recognition you have received for your forestry efforts (awards, grants, funds).

Stress the relevance and impact your story will have on the local community. For example, you are holding an urban tree planting in your downtown area. Things to think about include

- Who the tree planting will aid and why (local businesses, schools).
- The need for urban trees and other projects and solutions you are developing.
- Other community members involved or supporting your event (local politicians, businesses, organizations).

National Press

National news organizations can broadcast your events to a broad, mainstream audience. When approaching national press, show how your story applies to more than local communities. Benefits of national media include:



- Exposure of your message to a wide audience.
- Enhanced credibility.
- Recognition of your cause as an important national issue.
- Having a small blurb in a large paper is often better than a full story in a small paper.

Use national press when your target audience is

- National government
- General public or mainstream groups
- National corporations
- National interest groups

Possible stories for national news sources include

- Significant findings with national implications (research results, field work).
- Large events you are hosting (conferences, workshops, speaker series).
- Significant accomplishments (government awards, large grants).
- Joint ventures/corporate sponsorship (linking with large organizations).
- Human interest stories (link to statistics or findings and give names of people willing to talk).

For example, if you are holding a national conference, you should highlight

- Resources from the conference area as examples or models.
- How and why you will attract a national audience.
- Why this information should be important to a national audience (your problem statement).
- New initiatives or research findings.
- Reports or projects with national implications.

Television

Television news coverage offers an opportunity to create a visual impression. TV stations can be contacted in the same manner as newspapers for press events, with a release and follow-up phone call.

- Choose action-oriented or visually engaging events.
- Point out effective speakers to television stations to help them find “sound bites” for news stories.

Local television stations also run features, usually human interest stories. If you have a feature idea, pitch the story to the station manager, either by letter or phone. For example, if your organization initiated a project that benefitted the community (increased job opportunities, significant environmental benefits), a good feature story could highlight these results and your organization.

Radio

Radio news can help you reach your local community, particularly to announce upcoming events. Pitch stories for radio news the same way as you would for newspapers. When contacting radio stations, offer engaging speakers as sources.

DEVELOPING A PRESS LIST

A press list is a compilation of all local and national media to whom you intend to send information. This list should include print and broadcast media (television and radio). You can learn about knowledgeable reporters supportive of your issues by compiling a packet of materials about your cause. Include stories and editorials that address issues important to your community and your projects. Arrange your press list into categories, based on the subject matter of each publication. The list should contain the name of media source or publication, the street address (as opposed to P.O. Box), phone and fax number, email address, website, and the appropriate contact person(s) and official title.

You may also purchase a media directory—either phone-book style or a more expensive CD-ROM.



STRATEGIES

Building relationships with editors and reporters

Editors serve three important purposes:

1. Scan stories
2. Give reporters assignments
3. Set the tone of and prepare editorials

For these reasons you should contact editors and develop a rapport with them. The more familiar editors become with your issues, activities, and goals, the more likely they will assign and publish stories about your activities.

Editorial Boards

An editorial board is a group of editors, publishers, editorial staff, and news editors responsible for discussing and planning the topics and themes the publication will explore. Meeting with an editorial board, or its individual members, is a good way to begin the communications process.

Contacting editorial boards

If you have an established contact at the newspaper (for example, a reporter), contact that person first and ask for help in arranging a meeting.

If you are starting from scratch, find the name and phone number for the editorial page editor. The editor may not be the right person



to contact but will direct you to the right source.

Meeting with an editorial board

1. Introduce yourself or your coalition as a resource. Present a list of forestry experts for use as possible sources.
2. Convey the importance of your message. Bring things that reflect you and your efforts (past projects, charts, maps, photographs depicting your work as a forest practitioner or in a community coalition).
3. Inform the newspaper of newsworthy activities and events you have planned. These include
 - Big events in the next few months.
 - Research and interesting findings.
 - Your forest restoration activities.
4. Explain the relevance of your issues to readers.
5. Ask for and answer questions.

Working with Reporters

Building relationships with reporters has a number of benefits:

- They will think of you first as a source of information about forestry issues.
- They will be more likely to write stories about your issues.
- They will refer you to other newspapers where your story would be a better fit.
- They may call you on a slow news day for a story.

Steps toward building relationships

1. Keep track of reporters who cover your issues and introduce yourself. Send a letter recognizing the coverage and requesting a meeting. A little flattery never hurts (I saw your story about community-based forestry and thought it was very fair and evenhanded). Be personal about your work and organization; be specific about your goals and the voice you bring.
2. Demonstrate your ability to provide valuable information:
 - Compile a contact list of experts (reporters will try almost any source once, and if useful they will use them over and over again).
 - Provide facts, figures, and findings. This will help reporters who want hard evidence to add credibility to stories.
3. Send general mailings twice a year to keep media informed of your activities:
 - Attach a handwritten note to your best contacts to show your personal gratitude. Include a response card for updated address or contact information so you can keep your information current. Also, provide a “no thank you” box so you don’t waste money sending mailings to uninterested reporters.
 - Create awards for reporters who contribute to your cause through research and news articles. These awards show appreciation for the reporter and build recognition for your issues.

4. See section on General Tips for Contacting the Press.

Handling inaccuracies

Occasionally, a reporter may write a story that you feel contains misinformation or misrepresents you or your organization. When dealing with these situations

1. Remember that reporters are only human and occasionally make mistakes. Most likely, the inaccuracy was unintentional.
2. Write a letter to the editor with your perspective on the issue and story in question.
3. Call the reporter directly, especially if you have an established personal relationship. To keep lines of communication open, use phrases such as, “I’m sure this wasn’t your intention, but I felt that your story...” or “I enjoyed many parts of your story, however...” Give them a heads-up if you plan to write a letter to the editor. Most reporters will appreciate your willingness to discuss stories.

BOOK AND WEB RESOURCES

BOOKS:

- Guidelines for Maximizing your Company’s Public Relations Campaign: How to Obtain Free Publicity from the Trade Press, by Bruce Weibusch
- The Jossey-Bass Guide to Strategic Communications for Nonprofits: A Step-by-Step Guide to Working with the Media to: Generate Publicity, Enhance Fun, by Kathy Bonk, et. al.
- Making the News: A Guide for Nonprofits and Activists, by Jason and Jack Salzman
- Getting the Word Out in the Fight to Save the Earth, by Richard Beamish
- Selling Goodness, by Michael Levine

(Source: amazon.com)

WEB:

- <http://marcommwise.com/>
- <http://www.gebbieinc.com/>
- <http://www.mediarelations.com/>
- <http://www.charityvillage.com/>
- <http://www.infocomgroup.com/>
- <http://www.usprnet.com/> <http://www.BrockU.CA/commstudies/courses/Peter/mediaseminar/>
- <http://olyopen.com/creativemedia/LO/>





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