

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Why work with the media?

- The news media can be a good way to reach external actors; in some cases they may even *be* important external actors. As a basic public relations strategy, the news media can often be the cheapest, most effective way for you to reach a large, broad audience of people with information about what you are doing. The media also have a documented effect on the public policy agenda at the federal, state, and local levels.
- But you need think strategically about dealing with the media. You should never seek out attention for its own sake.

Where do most people get their news?

- Not surprisingly, the Internet has exploded as a news source in recent years. According to the Pew Center for People and the Press one third of Americans now get their news online at least once a week. The growth of online news sources has drawn people away from newspapers and the traditional nightly news broadcasts.¹
- At the same time, about 63 percent of Americans still report that they read a newspaper daily. This actually represents a slight increase over newspaper use in the 1980s and 1990s.¹
- People vary in the attention they pay to the news and their patterns of news consumption based on age, education, and a range of socioeconomic factors.
- Across the board, however, general interest in the news may have increased since September 11. According to the Pew Center for People and the Press, only about 23 percent of the public paid “very close” attention to typical news stories throughout most of the 1990s. After September 11, this increased to 48 percent.²

Understanding how the media work³

- Research has shown demonstrated some clear patterns in *what* the media cover and *how* they cover it, based on their perspective and organizational routines.
- The news tends to have an *episodic* focus, with public affairs reported in terms of individual event rather than ongoing, systemic issues. With environmental issues, this means that more attention is paid to *incidents* (timber sales, toxic spills, or a hole in the ozone layer) rather than *systemic* problems (forest health, nonpoint source pollution, global warming).

- Reporters sometimes practice “*pack journalism*,” in which they follow the lead of other, higher profile news outlets. This means that multiple news outlets will cover the same issues *and* that they will miss the same issues.
- Audience considerations – the need to make stories interesting and compelling to readers and viewers – lead many reporters to seek out stories with *personal* relevance and compelling *individual stories*. Reporters are also drawn to seek out *drama* and *conflict* (sometimes to the point of finding it where it may not exist).

“There is no doubt that the news business is getting more and more competitive. Everything has to be sensational and it has to have conflict.” (Matt Mathes, USFS Region 5 Public Affairs Officer).

- Professional norms and legal requirements for *objectivity* generally lead reporters to seek to present issues in a fair, balanced way. In practice, this means that most stories are structured as “*point – counterpoint*” presentations in which issues are described through alternating references to opposing sides. In practice, this means that views that are on the fringe or in the minority can sometimes receive a disproportionately large amount of coverage.
- Collaborative projects consequently face some unique challenges in dealing with the media. What you are doing is complex and ongoing; there are not always clear “sides”; and much of your energy is devoted to minimizing the conflict that journalists crave. You need to think carefully about how you present what you are doing so that you can fit the needs of reporters.

“The media likes conflict because it is good guy-bad guy and it is about a fight. Collaborative stuff doesn’t fit the mold, so you really have to sell it.” (Brian Kahn, public radio host, former head of TNC-Montana)

How do you work with the media?

- The first step in working with the media is to pay attention to what they are already saying. An effective media strategy needs to begin with a dedicated effort to follow coverage of conservation issues in the local, regional, and national press outlets that are relevant to your field or project. Get in the habit of reading the papers, listening to the news, and watching for stories.
- Following the news on a regular basis will give you a sense of the beats that individual reporters cover, what outlets and individuals might be receptive to stories about your project, and what publications and individuals you will want to treat with caution.
- Your interaction with the media should be guided by a strategic plan. This does not necessarily have to be a sophisticated, lengthy document, just something to keep your

activities consistent and your objectives clear. There are four steps that you will want to take in building and implementing an effective media strategy:

1. define your *objectives*
2. identify your *audience*
3. develop a *clear message* and find a *the right forum*
4. *evaluate*

Define your objectives

- Start with your project or agency's mission statement. Any interactions you have with the media should be guided by the goals and values that you define in your mission statement. You should not engage in media outreach for its own sake.

"You need to ask 'what is our goal and is it furthered by media exposure?' Then ask which media, how, and so on. Have a strategic plan so you know when the media fits in to your agenda. What media coverage, if any furthers the mission? Why do you want coverage? What does it accomplish? Is the project ready for news coverage?"
(Brian Kahn, NPR radio host, former head of Montana TNC)

Define clear messages

- Successful media interaction is the result of having a few clear messages and sticking to them. You lose control of the discussion and get pushed into defensive positions when you stray off-message. Staying focused will give you a tremendous amount of power over what finally ends up in the news.

"Know your message before you start," advises David Wear, the chief US Forest Service scientist behind the multi-agency Southern Forest Resources Assessment. "Have a clear idea of what you want to say and exercise message discipline." In their dealings with the media, the officials involved in the two-year, 13 state study stuck to a few clear points:

- *Urbanization and development are the most serious short term threat to forests*
- *Expanded timber production won't reduce forest inventories but the structure and distribution of forests will change*
- *We have the potential to sustain forest values, but it will depend on how well we manage our forests in the years to come*

Getting your message out: cultivating media relationships

- Make yourself a personal resource for reporters who cover resource management issues. Good reporters are always looking for good sources of information. You should aim to someone they can turn to when they need good, accurate information or quick answers to last minute questions.

- You need to approach reporters and editors with the goal of developing and maintaining an ongoing relationship. They should *not* just hear from you when there is a crisis or incident. Developing a sustained relationship means that they will call *you* when something happens.

“One Forest Service public affairs officer in California is very good. He gets in touch with you, he calls you up like he’s a human being. He’s not afraid of you. He knows you will bite him sometimes but he knows that the best way to keep from being bitten too often is to be out there and he is as helpful as can be.” (Ed Marston, former Editor, High Country News)

- Do not overlook the editorial side of each news operation. Most editorial boards are interested in meeting with someone who is doing something important in the community. Set up a meeting with them to discuss what you are doing and give them an opportunity, outside of the pressure of day-to-day news coverage, to listen, learn, and ask questions. Positive relationships with editorial boards can smooth the way for good editorial coverage and potentially influence broader audiences than regular news coverage.

Six months before the conclusion of the Southern Regional Forest Assessment, the scientists involved in the project met with editorial boards across the South to discuss the study and lay the foundation for its release. “We met with them when there wasn’t anything happening,” reports David Wear, the chief US Forest Service scientist in the project. “When we released it, we had relationships with these people” that led to generally positive editorial coverage across the region.

Key techniques for working with the media

- *Press releases* are one to two page announcement of “hard news” - an action, decision, report, or other major newsworthy. Press releases should always have a good headline and contain the five Ws: Who, What, Where, When, and Why. A good release will catch the reader’s attention and should tempt them to write a story (even though it will always take more than release). Write the release as though you were actually writing the news story - small news outlets will sometimes reprint your release in its entirety. Always include a few good quotes.
- *Media advisories* are short (one page) announcements that indicate the time, place, and other important details of an upcoming event or meeting. Always include complete contact information and a “use through” or “good until” date so reporters know when to pitch it. You should follow up an advisory with personal contact.
- *Op-eds* are short guest opinion pieces that newspapers or magazines will run on their editorial page (*opposite* the *editorial*). Editors are often looking for good, interesting, and timely opinion pieces. News outlets vary in their procedures and format for approving and publishing op-eds: many require exclusivity, meaning they will not

consider op-eds that have been sent to multiple other outlets; most news operations will have their own time frame for approving and printing op eds.

- *Letters to the editor* can be an effective way to correct misinformation or piggyback on coverage of another subject. Most newspapers will print letters that are thoughtful and timely. Monitor the news for stories, editorials, or other features that are relevant to your activity and then follow up with a short (250 - 300 word) letter. Make sure that your letter is positive and moderate in tone.
- *Avoid using jargon.* Most journalists do not have a background in natural resource management and their audience may know even less. Give some thought to how you can explain what you are doing in plain English. Be especially careful about using jargon that can sound like a euphemism (like using the work “treatment” to describe cutting down trees).

“We had a district ranger say on TV that ‘we built 40 chains of firebreak today’ and most of the audience was left scratching their heads about whether that was a good thing or not. Instead you should tell them ‘we built a half mile of firebreak under hot smoky conditions.’” (Matt Mathes, USFS Region 5 Public Affairs Officer)

- Get reporters and editors out on the ground as much as possible. Reporters love getting outside and actually seeing what is taking place on the ground. Taking them out to visit project sites and see your activities also gives you the opportunity to place issues in context.

“We had a project involving Aspen harvest in Southwest Colorado. These trees were beginning to reach maturity and it was biologically necessary for us to clear them out. But it was becoming politically controversial, so we took reporters out to actually look at the site and explain to them the reason for the project. That’s one of the best things you can do. Put a reporter in a truck with a ranger for the day and take them out in the forest.” (Matt Mathes, USFS Region 5 Public Affairs Officer)

- Don’t overlook *unconventional targets* and tactics like outdoors writers and regular columnists.
- Although there are some rough guidelines and standard procedures you can follow in dealing with the press, nothing is set in stone. *When in doubt, ask.* Find out what reporters need and what they want you to do in order to help them do their job. Ask them if they would prefer to receive information in a certain format or on a certain schedule and then do whatever you can to accommodate that.

Resources:

Jacobsen, S.K. "Using Mass Media" in *Communication Skills for Conservation Professionals*. Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999.

Graber, D.A. "News Making and News-Reporting Routines" Chapter Four in *Mass Media and American Politics*. Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1997.

Graber, D.A. "Media Impact on Attitudes and Behavior" Chapter 7 in *Mass Media and American Politics*. Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1997.

Bonk, K., Griggs, H., Tynes, E. "Designing a Communications Plan." Chapter 4 in *The Jossey Bass Guide to Strategic Communications for Nonprofits*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

¹ Pew Research Center for People and the Press, "Internet Sapping Broadcast News Audience" June 11, 2000, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=203> [accessed 3/8/02]

² Pew Research Center for People and the Press "Terrorism Transforms News Interest" December 18, 2001, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=146> [accessed 3/8/02]

³ See Graber, D.A. *Mass Media and American Politics*. Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1997 (excerpts follow this section)