

Telling Your Story Through Effective Media Relations

by Scott Summerfield and Sheri Benninghoven

PICTURE THIS: Your city has just won a prestigious award for its water conservation efforts, and the city council wants the entire community to hear about this success. The Public Works Department sends a press release to all the local daily and weekly newspapers, along with the regional radio and television stations, and hopes that the story will be covered. It does, but as a miniscule item buried in the middle of one of the weeklies. The council isn't thrilled with the coverage, you've missed a great opportunity to laud your staff, and your residents won't learn much about the city's innovations or how they can help conserve water.

Does this scenario sound familiar? There's a more effective way to interest the media in your city's story, and you can start improving your media coverage immediately — even though you may not have public information professionals on your staff. Progressive public agencies are taking cues from the corporate world and developing strategic media relations programs that result in better coverage and deeper understanding of city issues and services.

“Pitching” is the process of actively contacting the media and getting them interested in your story, rather than passively notifying them through traditional press releases. While press releases still have a rightful place in your city's communications toolbox (such as those announcing recreation programs, traffic detours and police/fire incidents), programs that are important to the city should be strategically pitched to the media so that your residents, business operators and visitors can learn as much as possible. Not only will these audiences be

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Quick Tips for Better Media Coverage

Don't rely on press releases. Call the reporter directly and follow up.

Think about the “people” aspect of your story. What does it mean to your residents and local businesses?

Consider unique angles for different media. Television needs visuals while newspapers need more details; magazines need both. Radio needs audio opportunities: sounds that bring the story to life. For example, if it's a story about parks, the sound of children playing on a jungle gym is a good way to “show” the story.

Make it easy to cover your story. Offer historical photos, timelines, video clips and other helpful materials.

Let the world know. Send copies of your story to agency stakeholders.

Advantages of Targeting Your Small City's Local Media

Media outlets in smaller markets generally have fewer resources to devote to news gathering. As a result, they are often hungrier for material than media outlets in larger communities. In addition, they are more focused on your local area so your item may have more value to them than it would to a larger outlet. Keep this in mind when you're crafting a pitch.

better informed, but they'll also receive the news from a credible third-party source (the media) rather than just from the city itself.

Smart Media Relations

The ubiquitous press release has been the mainstay of government public information for decades. But a typical media newsroom receives hundreds, if not thousands, of press releases daily. It's clear that a different approach is necessary to grab a reporter's or editor's interest. Local government agencies typically write one news release for any given issue or event and then send the release to every outlet or reporter on its media list. This process has a number of drawbacks:

- The story isn't tailored to a specific medium, such as print or broadcast;
- More than one reporter at an outlet may follow up, creating confusion over who “owns” the story; and
- The release is buried among the numerous others received that day.

Establishing an ongoing relationship with the media that cover your city is a much more effective way to tell your organization's stories. By minimizing press releases and focusing instead on learning who covers specific aspects of your city, getting to know those reporters and editors and then pitching them with appealing stories, you'll begin to see a dramatic increase in the quality and quantity of your media coverage.

Your city council establishes its priorities each year, and your media relations program should support the council's direction. If senior citizens or small businesses are a focus of the year's efforts, you should consider pitching stories aimed at those audiences because the resulting media coverage will reflect what's important to the council. Also, this selective pitching strategy will minimize the number of contacts your city makes with the media, sending the signal that when you do contact them, you have an interesting story to tell.

What's Your Story?

While we think that just about everything we do as a city official is noteworthy, not every issue, project or award is interesting to the media.

While media pitching may seem daunting at first, the payoff is enormous.

For example, your Police Officer of the Year award is certainly important to your organization but is likely to be seen by the press as a “filler” item rather than a feature story. That's often because the press release announcing the award includes very little enticing information, such as examples of residents the officer has helped, off-duty projects that are making a difference in the community and testimonials from the public. Stories like these usually have a unique or unusual twist that is best conveyed by a targeted contact to specific outlets. Instead of appearing as a small brief, the story may be a photo-laden feature that explores how the officer is truly making a difference and how specific residents are better off due to the officer's (and the Police Department's) actions.

Cities often send out press releases announcing innovative new programs, such as those that make it easier for small businesses to get started. These announcements suffer the same fate as the Officer of the Year award because there's no effort to appeal to a news outlet's primary audience. For example, Spanish-language media outlets often run stories focused on how new immigrants can better prosper in the United States. Consider the appeal of a strategic pitch to a Spanish-language television station that includes suggestions for interviews with Hispanic small business operators who have benefited from the program. This targeted approach will likely result in a television story that reaches hundreds of thousands of viewers.

Examine each of your city's priorities with an eye toward what will make them stand out for the media. For example:

- What's the “people” angle? Who does the issue affect?



A well-targeted pitch to the media can draw a news team to your site or event, resulting in a television story that reaches thousands of viewers.

- Is there an “Aha!” factor? What makes it unique, unusual or different?
- Has an employee gone “above and beyond”? Is he or she improving public service?
- How will the public benefit? Can you connect a proposed development with the local services it will help to fund?
- Is there controversy? How can you use community discussion to better explain the issue?
- Is there a natural news hook for your item? Think about your story in the context of what’s happening in the larger community and what’s capturing the public’s attention right now. Then look for a natural link or connection with that event or trend and your city’s story, and tie them together for the reporter.

Pitch Your Story

Think beyond your local outlets. Even though we often live or die by the coverage in our local daily newspaper, many

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other media can tell our story if we strategically pitch ideas.

Although some cities prefer to inform all media equally, an occasional exclusive to certain outlets can create interest; offering future exclusives to other media helps avoid accusations that the city is favoring one particular outlet.

Other media to include in your pitching strategy are:

- Broadcast outlets;
- Trade publications;
- Regional and national daily newspapers;
- Lifestyle magazines;
- Online news sources;

- Locally focused, often free, weekly or monthly publications; and
- Business publications.

Each requires its own angle to your story, but a well-crafted pitch will get your issue in front of an audience that can potentially influence your community’s success.

Support Your Pitch

Etiquette and preparation are critical to success. Make sure you’ve contacted the right reporter and have talking points in hand. Once you’ve made initial contact via the telephone, you can ask about the reporter’s preferred contact method (phone, e-mail or other). You need to be able to summarize your story in one or

two sentences. As you make your pitch, highlight the story's unique aspects, point out the interest for the reporter's viewers, readers or listeners, suggest third-party interview prospects who can lend credibility, and then offer follow-up supporting materials such as graphics, video footage, fact sheets and photos.

The reporter will quickly realize that you understand the outlet's needs, can deliver helpful items to clarify or illustrate the story and have considered members of the public who can speak about the issue. These thoughtful elements all combine to help raise your story's visibility and appeal above all the others coming into the newsroom that day.

Don't be disappointed if your story doesn't appear right away. The reporter may be busy with other assignments, there may be a high level of other news or the story may require research time.

Be patient and follow up later to remind the reporter of your earlier discussion and offer additional help with covering the story. And be aware of strategic opportunities to follow up, such as reminding a reporter about an emergency preparedness pitch when there are major earthquakes, floods or fires in the news.

Market Your Story

When you see your story in print or on the air, you can extend its impact by distributing it to those who may not have seen the original version. You can send reprints of a newspaper story or DVD copies of a broadcast story to key community and business leaders, board members of local organizations, development partners, convention planners and others.

By marketing your pitching success, you'll take the city's story even farther and leverage the media's coverage to support the council's priorities. And don't forget to post the story on your city's website.

While media pitching may seem daunting at first, the payoff is enormous. Assigning each appropriate staff member one or two pitches per quarter won't drastically impact their workload but will allow your city to communicate more actively. And



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Don't Overlook Public Radio Opportunities

Local public radio stations are always interested in stories with a local angle. And if you have a local college radio station, they may be interested in things that are happening at the city level that may affect the institution or its students.

once the stories appear in print or on the air, the sense of satisfaction in the organization can be dramatic. With a well-planned shift in your communications

efforts, you'll be much better positioned to help the public understand the issues most important to your community. ■

The Value of Proactive Media Work

There are numerous benefits to working proactively with your local media:

- You have an opportunity to present good news — information with a positive focus.
- Developing relationships with local journalists helps you to understand who covers different types of stories and builds your credibility and their trust.
- It enables you to establish yourself as a source for other related stories.
- When a problem or emergency occurs, you already know the appropriate person to contact, and so does the journalist.

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