

4-H Volunteer Leaders' Series

Media Relations

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You have a great 4-H program and you want people to know about it. You decide the best way to get the word out is to run a story in the newspaper. You write a press release and mail it to the newspaper or you call the editor and ask that the paper send a reporter.

Then you wait for the reporter to show up. If she doesn't, what do you do? If she does, will your story appear in the next edition? If so, will everyone read about you? If they do, will they get the message you meant to send?

To get news out, plan ahead. In all likelihood, a weekly or daily newspaper circulates in your community or county. If you are fortunate enough to have locally owned and operated radio and television stations or cable outlets, your options for seeking news coverage increase. Another emerging tool for communicating to niche audiences is the Internet. Use it to plan promotional efforts.

Newspapers

Weeklies and dailies approach news differently, and you need to understand that difference. You also need to know who reads the paper – their age, education level, gender and where they live. Knowing who reads the paper is every bit as important as knowing how to place a story in the newspaper.

If you want junior high students to know about 4-H, chances are you won't reach them through the newspaper. Instead, you might reach them through their school paper or through their favorite radio station, if it's produced locally. According to studies, young people do not read the paper or watch the evening news. On the other hand, if you want their parents or community leaders to know about 4-H, the local newspaper might be one way to go.

Since daily newspapers are put together from scratch each day, they prefer hard, timely news. They face tight, daily deadlines. Soft stories planned weeks in advance will be bumped quickly if a major hard news story breaks.

At one time, the daily newspaper's greatest competitor was another daily newspaper, but with the recent trend of newspaper mergers, competitors have become other media. Television, radio, cable, satellite and the Internet bring news that is instant and generated from distant locations with content typically focused on regional, national or international news at the expense of local news.

If your goal is to place stories in your local newspaper, there are several steps and options that you have; but no matter what approach or approaches you take, you should be an avid reader of your local newspaper.



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To help you develop a plan, you should pay attention to the news and to the bylines of reporters whose stories appear in the paper. You want to find the reporter who writes stories similar to the sort of stories you want to place in the paper. You will waste your time if you send or call in a news story to the police beat reporter if you are pitching a story about your 4-H club painting an elderly couple's home.

If your newspaper has an education or family section, you might have more luck contacting a reporter or editor for that section. If your newspaper has a local section, make sure you take advantage of that section as well.

In public relations, several successful people swear that the best way to gain news coverage is through a well-written news release with a catchy lead or beginning. Others say the only way to place a story is to "pitch" it directly to the editor or reporter. The benefit of a pitched story is the reporter can claim it entirely as his or her story and get the byline. The benefit of the press release is the reporter or editor has the basic information and selected quotes. Some of the work is done for the reporter, especially if she received the release as an e-mail attachment that can be altered. A well-written release includes names, addresses, telephone numbers and e-mail addresses reporters can use to follow up with their own questions.

Whether you prefer a press release or pitching a story, you need to become acquainted with the reporter and editor that you have identified through reading the paper. Reporters typically appreciate being contacted with good story ideas rather than getting an assignment from the editor, because they are usually required to develop their own story ideas.

A good way to become acquainted with a reporter is to call. Introduce yourself and explain that you are a 4-H'er or a 4-H volunteer and your group is quite active in town. Let the reporter know that your group has stories that might interest the reporter, but don't be pushy. Be diplomatic.

Find out what the reporter's deadlines are. Ask if the reporter prefers a press release or a call. Find out how far in advance the reporter needs information to help you promote a future event or meeting. Find out who should receive your announcements. Many newspapers assign one individual to compile the community calendar.

Keep in mind that seeking publicity for a meeting is different than seeking a story about a project or program that is successful. The purpose of publicity is

to notify the public so they will attend. The reason for promoting your program is to gain public support and recognition.

Give the reporter your name, telephone number and e-mail address where you can be reached 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Let her know that you are available at any time. Ask for an appointment to meet the reporter.

Once you have met the reporter, nurture the relationship and always return phone calls. Do not overdo it, but if you read a story that was especially well written, send the reporter an e-mail or call and let her know you thought it was a good story even if it's not your story. Reporters are people. They like being recognized for a job well done.

If you send the reporter a press release, you may want to wait a few days and then call to make sure the release arrived and that it was clear and lacked holes. Even experienced public relations people occasionally leave holes in their releases. If you choose to make a call, be prepared to give the reporter the same basic information that you would have in a release: who, what, where, when, how and why. Also, be prepared to provide the reporter with others who might be quoted, such as 4-H youth involved in a project or program.

Before you give names and numbers where sources can be reached, make sure those individuals know you are giving their name and number to the reporter.

Once you learn of a deadline, stick to it and take care to avoid placing the reporter in a situation that will cause her to have to rush to meet the deadline. After your story runs, call the reporter and thank her. Also, let her know she did a good job. Reporters respond to goodwill gestures just as you would do.

As you work with a reporter, you will begin to build a good name for yourself and the reporter will begin to think of you as a ready source of good story ideas. She will also think of you as the person who can find and make available quality news sources.

If your community has a weekly newspaper, keep in mind that weekly papers are more interested in names, names and more names. Editors of weekly papers will say that plenty of local names in the news maintains a healthy readership.

Weekly Newspapers

Local, weekly papers typically have few staff members. The editor might be the reporter as well, or the staff may include one or two reporters at most.

Weekly newspapers are usually receptive to well-written press releases. By writing quality releases that require little to no editing, you increase the probability of getting good coverage.

Just as you should pay attention to the daily paper's deadlines, respect the weekly's deadline, too. Chances are the weekly deadline for copy is Wednesday afternoon if the paper is printed and distributed on Friday. If you miss that deadline, you will see your story slide to the next week's edition or forgotten all together.

When working with a reporter for a weekly newspaper, be sure to use the same common sense approach that you would with the reporter of a larger paper.

If you notify a reporter of an upcoming event and the reporter fails to show, avoid a common pitfall. Don't complain and don't bad mouth the reporter. Chances are the reporter ran into a scheduling conflict. Instead of complaining, write a press release about the meeting or event. Be sure to include all pertinent information. You might take pictures and submit them with cutlines that identify, from left to right, anyone who appears in the pictures. Deliver photos to the newspaper. A weekly newspaper is more likely to use your story and picture.

Many readers will stop and read a cutline or caption rather than the entire story. As a result, pictures that tell a story get noticed more than a full story.

Television or Cable

Few communities have a local television station, and most cable systems do not have a reporter, but if the cable system offers a community service channel, chances are you can get your meeting or event announced.

Call the individual responsible for posting community announcements and ask what format works best, what length works best, what audiences watch community announcements and how far in advance the cable system needs your release or announcement. Chances are, you will need to provide a short press release that tells who, what, where, when, how and why.

Keep in mind that television stations need short, concise copy. As a result, most community calendars roll a series of very short messages and nothing more.

If your local cable provides a community service program, find out how you become a regular guest on the program. Keep in mind that the individual responsible for a community events program may be as hungry for material as you are in need of getting out information.

Once you build a relationship with your local cable system, you might investigate the possibility of producing your own weekly or monthly 30-minute show. If that is possible, the cable system might provide the studio, cameras and staff to help pull the program together.

Tip: If you have access to a television news department, remember to provide visually strong stories. Newspapers are better at in-depth reporting.

Radio

One of the strengths that radio offers is a loyal audience. However, radio stations, like television stations, are merging with larger networks and are becoming more dependent upon nationally or regionally developed programs. This trend reduces your opportunity for placing local news for local listeners, but it doesn't necessarily negate it.

Just as you need to build a relationship with your local newspaper and television station or cable system, you need to build a relationship with your local radio station owner, manager or talent. If your local station has no news department, which is highly likely, find out if you can place public service announcements (PSAs) on the radio station. A PSA is typically 20 or 30 seconds at the most. Your writing must be very tight and no longer than a brief paragraph.

The Federal Communications Commission once required, as part of the Fairness Doctrine, that radio and television stations provide a formula-driven number of public service announcements. During the 1970s the formulas were tossed out and radio and television stations were no longer required to provide free air-time. Instead, they simply had to show an effort at providing public service.

This change reduced radio and television stations' commitment to public service announcements. Nevertheless, if you work with your local radio station, you might be able to air public service announcements. Messages written for radio or television must be succinct and to the point, and must contain who, what, where, when, how and why.

If the radio station is locally owned and operated, and if program decisions are made locally, you might

succeed in hosting your own weekly or monthly radio show. Keep in mind that radio is a medium that is heard, so you cannot have empty air space. If you record a regular radio show, you must fill every minute with audio. Otherwise, you will lose your listening audience. Stories should be entertaining, informative and relevant. Practice speaking clearly before going on the air.

Internet

Recent surveys suggest that the adolescent audience is turning to the Internet or web more than radio, television or newspaper for news and information. Users like the Internet because they determine when and where they will acquire the information they want and need at the time they want and need it.

If you hope to attract young men and women to the 4-H program, you might consider developing a county web site to attract and hold visitors. Once you provide a web site, you must update it frequently or risk losing your audience. If you require visitors to log on, you may chase some off, but you can capture and retain visitors' e-mail addresses. This enables you to

broadcast messages about 4-H to young people who have visited your site.

Target your message to the specific audience you want to reach. As technology evolves and becomes accessible, learn how to design, write text, use images, and video and audio streams to deliver your message.

And unlike newspapers, television or radio, on the Internet you control your content.

Message

No matter which media you use, your message must be consistent. You should also know who your audience is and use that to determine your use of each media. As you talk or write about your 4-H program, add credibility by mentioning in every press release or interview that the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service offers and supports the 4-H program.

Good luck in working with the news media. If you plan it right, 4-H can benefit from better, broader and more sophisticated news coverage.