

Public relations pointers

Ross Daily, agriculture/business editor of CFPL-TV (London, Ontario), and host of This Business of Farming, presents some public relations tips that would be helpful to all WI branches.

1. Get the information to the media. Addresses are in the telephone books and libraries have reference sections which list media locations.
2. Send complete information. Always include the five Ws: WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE and WHY. If there is an admission charge, add HOW MUCH.
3. Send the information early. Most media people plan at least a week ahead. Special programs like talk shows and weekly television, radio or newspaper features plan two or three weeks ahead.
4. If you send information by telephone and the person you want to speak to isn't in, LEAVE A MESSAGE. In agriculture, events are often advertised in several places. The reporter may already know about yours.
5. Always include on your press releases the name and telephone number of an organizer of the event. If callback hours are limited, say so. If there's a work number, put it on as well as your home number.
6. If you are a resource person for the media, inform your family members of your activity, so they may be prepared to take a message from a reporter if he calls and you are not in. Simple facts like the five Ws are helpful, and reporters haven't the time to keep calling back. It's more likely that they'll just skip your event.
7. Write the most important points first on your press releases. That's usually WHO (major speaker), WHAT (International Plowing Match) or WHEN (National Agriculture Day). If the recipient of the press release likes the most important points, he'll read on to the details. If he's cluttered with details, he may not bother to search for the important points.
8. Don't be discouraged. You are competing with major events like visiting cabinet ministers and company presidents, national fundraising campaign kickoffs and city council meetings. As well, emergency events can result in a news crew being called back, even if it was on the way to see you. There will be other times when the media will be dying to cover something and your event will be the one, IF THEY KNOW ABOUT IT.
9. Consider trying for special coverage. The Middlesex County Federation of Agriculture approached the London television station and was able to land a monthly visit to the morning talk show. A different kind of agriculture is profiled each time. Newspaper columns in weekly publications are good possibilities. Again, don't be discouraged if your offer is declined.
10. Offer your organization's members as resource people. The media may need you at a time when you're not planning an event. Someone may want to do an interview on the challenges of planning and organizing events, or the problems of maintaining a branch, or a filler profile of some aspect of your branch. Send a list of your officers to the media each year. Chances are good that the list will be placed in a file and remembered when stories aren't showing up as quickly as usual.
11. Consider the location of your event. If you're hoping for large city coverage, decide whether or not it's worthwhile to stage the event close to that city. Story coverage is sometimes assigned on the amount of time necessary for travel: less time, more chance of coverage.
12. Consider calling people in the media for advice on an event. Is it the kind of thing reporters will cover? Will it help if your main speaker is scheduled at a certain time during the event? Many corporations are now scheduling their news conferences to suit the local media. Encourage the media person to be realistic and even critical of your plans.
13. If you have landed an interview, make sure the spokesman you send can do a good job. The damage done by a petrified president at the TV studio is difficult to erase. The good done by an animated and interesting club member is a bright reflection on your group, no matter what her position. Besides, you can always create a position for your spokesman. Newspaper reporters can edit out the "ums" and the silences, but radio and television reporters have a more difficult job. The interview is no place to pull rank just for the glory. Send the BEST REPRESENTATIVE.
14. Consider ways of making your event more newsworthy. For television, is there something to look at? Perhaps a dramatization, demonstration or display could be included. Conferences need strong topics, like alternate energy forms or farmland ownership, and they need strong speakers.
15. Follow up. If you get a reporter to your event, and he has to leave early or all of the information isn't there yet, promise to call him, and KEEP THE PROMISE. Attendance, ticket sales, amounts of funds raised are all numbers we might report, and we understand they're not always available immediately. Make sure we get them.
16. **NUTS AND BOLTS:** Reporters will appreciate some help when they arrive. Designate a club member to meet them with the answers to as many of the following questions as possible:
 - Does the speaker know he might be interviewed, or that his speech could be taped? Is it all right with him?
 - Does the speaker have a copy of his speech? Do you have one for us?
 - Is there a press table? Is it close enough to the speaker to run microphone cables and still control the tape recorder at the table?
 - Is there a microphone stand? Can we tape our mikes to it? Do you have a roll of masking tape, because we forgot ours?