Think Like a Reporter

by David Essex

To get good press – or any press at all – you need to think like a reporter. That's my conclusion as a citizen planner who came to that calling from the other side of the reporter's notebook.

I've watched with frustration as boards have missed golden opportunities for favorable coverage, needlessly antagonized reporters, or forgotten to publicize public decisions. I've been misquoted, and once wrote a letter to the editor correcting an article that misled voters before a Town Meeting. I've also learned to admit, reluctantly, that a committee's interests don't always coincide with those of the press.

Having seen media-relations issues from both sides, I have some insight into why press coverage can go wrong. Most problems stem from a failure to understand what motivates reporters and how they do their jobs. The following advice can help you think like a reporter so you can tailor communications to appeal to your first audience: media reporters and the editors and producers they must satisfy before any story reaches your community.

Know What's News and What Isn't

More importantly, know what's *really big* news. The first instinct of many board members is to try harder to withhold information the bigger the news. You should suppress that urge and do the opposite. If you've just made significant news in your community – say, you've approved the Master Plan, or received an application for a major new development – shout it from the rooftops. Call local beat reporters within a day or two so they can get the story into an upcoming edition. Better yet, give advance warning if possible, explaining clearly why the story is newsworthy. Consider writing a press release for release on the hour of the event, and fax or e-mail it along with a heads-up call. *Writing An Effective Press Release, p. 20.*

To do this well, you must understand how reporters and editors define news. It's an event, situation, or decision that's new, different, and important, and likely to impact many people in your community. For land-use boards, press-release-worthy news is usually some major turning point: a long-awaited ruling, the culmination of an administrative process, or the introduction of a new initiative. It's the half-dozen things you do each year that generate a buzz in the coffee shops, grocery stores, and post offices in your community.

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Some boards lack such news sense, or try to promulgate "good" news after a spate of not-so-good publicity. The result can be bland press releases and useless tips that all but the most desperate, understaffed news organizations will throw in the trash. A change in the membership of your board is minor news that might merit a press release if you have the time. But a we're-still-alive release that drones on about ongoing work that isn't newsworthy anytime, or that breathlessly relates events that were news weeks ago, won't get published and will hurt your credibility as a news source.

Still, sometimes a constructive complaint is all that's needed to jump start news coverage. Journalists live in fear of missing important stories, so they're sensitive to accusations of inattentiveness. If you find local media seem to be ignoring your board, make a friendly call to say so diplomatically, or pull a reporter aside after a meeting. Explain why your board's activities are newsworthy and give examples. If possible, cite similar activities of other boards that were covered by the same media outlet or a competitor.

Use "Judo" to Turn Negative News to Advantage

Controversy is also news, and it's the primary source of public resentment of the media. Better to accept that the press loves controversy than to wish it weren't so. As a media consumer, you probably enjoy hearing about disputes, too – you just don't like being publicly embroiled in one.

The question, then, is not how to squelch controversial news, but how to manage it once it arises. You have no responsibility to volunteer information that's potentially damaging to your cause, unless it comes under standard disclosure or Right-to-Know requirements or is customarily included in the public record. But if you clam up or actively try to squash the news, you could find yourself on the losing end of a public-relations war, and you won't be at war with the media, you'll be fighting against your own positive public image. If you try too hard to control the nature and tenor of news reports, you'll only end up coming across to the press, and hence, the public, like a control freak who may have something to hide.

The best response is to make sure your side is included in the resulting press coverage. State your case matter-of-factly, sticking with facts and logic. Avoid tit-for-tat comebacks to rumors, innuendo, and personal attacks. Above all, frame your board's actions as motivated by the public good, and be sure to state why your position is the best one to further that greater end.

You may be able to turn a public-relations nightmare to your advantage the way a judo master uses an opponent's weight against him.

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Don't Antagonize or Annoy the Media

Inexperienced people often make two understandable but unforgivable mistakes: they needlessly antagonize reporters and editors or make such a nuisance of themselves that coverage, if any, is more likely to be negative.

If your mother or a former sales manager sagely told you that dogged determination is what closes the "sale," forget that advice. Local reporters do not take kindly to persistent unwanted communiques – and may not notice when a "real story" from that person or organization comes along. If you don't have a valid news tip or quotable quote, whatever it is you're selling won't sound better the tenth time around.

When you're *really* mad at reporters, you may be tempted to refuse to cooperate, cutting them off from communications or shutting them out of meetings. It's sometimes called blacklisting, and it's a very bad idea. When I was a reporter, a local defense-related manufacturer that was being courted by an overseas company tried this, instructing employees not to talk to me after I wrote articles examining the national-security implications. My response was to rely more on unnamed sources outside the company, one of whom had an axe to grind and reams of confidential documents. The next stories went to print without a single statement from company management.

Your attempts at blacklisting will probably bring a similar response from reporters, at least the competent ones. If they don't get part of their story from you, they'll get it from sources that don't know what they're talking about or have a different agenda from yours. Those aren't the people you want to see as the primary sources for a story.

Remember that behind every jilted reporter are several stressed out, perturbed editors who can't do their jobs because of you. Almost all the journalists I've known are decent, hardworking people who strive to be fair. But they're also human, and their objectivity can be sorely tested by petty actions that they view as threats to their livelihood. When you make things personal, you run the risk the media will, too. Only, they have the last word.

Head Off Errors, Misquotes, and Distortions

An old saw says the three most important things in journalism are accuracy, accuracy, and accuracy. But chances are you know first-hand how frequently the press gets things wrong. Journalists believe errors are inexcusable, but they also know too well how they happen. News is history written on the fly, and most reporters don't have the time to verify every fact. Worse, in many ways, is their frequent inability to understand the policy or science that underlies a story, or to see the real up-shot of events. Distortions creep in when biased but press-savvy sources get their spins reported as unchallenged truth in coverage slanted their way by reporters who were never told there is another side to the story.

You can avoid such errors by taking time to explain technical concepts and complicated programs or policies. Write press releases, highlight sheets, and backgrounders (question-and-answer is especially effective) and make sure they're accurate. Include relevant graphics or photos. Put the most important information up front, and always include a contact name and phone number. Explain why the news is important. Try to make materials available several days before deadline, and distribute them simultaneously to media outlets with similar deadlines to avoid slighting anyone.

Media confusion often begins with a confusing message. Stick to a simple message, and only use terms and phrases that relate to it. Don't be sarcastic, ironic, secretive, subtle, coy, vague, funny, cute, or overly familiar.

Answer the question and stick to the facts, just like a reporter. ◆

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Basic Tips for Good Press

– Inform the media of important news in a timely fashion.
– Learn to write press releases (or find someone who can), but don't waste them on non-news.
– Keep all meetings open to the press and public with rare exceptions.
– Give board members and other principals a heads-up before releasing a story.
– Don't try to put the genie of negative news back in the bottle. Instead, make sure your viewpoint is included.
– Take time to help reporters get their facts straight – and to understand the larger story.
– Don't try to punish reporters or play favorites in response to negative coverage. It can lead to worse publicity or none at all.

Writing an Effective Press Release

1. Craft an attention-grabbing opening paragraph that reads like the lead of a newspaper story, summarizing the most important information and why it matters to the community.
2. Next, directly quote one or two organization leaders who reinforce or explain the main points. Include exact titles.
3. Add one to three paragraphs that elaborate on the lead with more details, background on preceding events, and information on what comes next (this can help the reporter plan a follow-up story).
4. Include a paragraph or two explaining the history, public policy, or science behind the news.
5. Close with a boilerplate paragraph summarizing your organization's purpose, membership, relationships, and accomplishments.
6. Go back and add a newspaper-style headline in boldface or all caps, and an optional blurb or "deck" underneath.
7. Try to stay within two, double-spaced letter-size pages.

Must-haves include:

- Contact name and phone number.
- The organization's formal name, address, fax/phone numbers, e-mail address, and Web URL.
- Dateline (city, state, month, day, year) at beginning of lead.
- Date and time the information can be released (if different from dateline).
- "End" or "–30–" (newspaper lingo for end) at bottom.