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## Guidelines for Effective Media Relations

The HHC conducts daily media searches for news stories related to hunting and the activities of hunting organizations in their local communities. All of the daily newspapers in Washington State are researched every day. On average, for the period December 2000 through May 2002, there were 3.7 hunting-related news stories per month with more than 70% of these stories published by just two newspapers. About half of the published news stories in Washington State over this 18 month period dealt with negative images related to hunters and hunting (poachers arrested, fined or sent to jail, hunting-related firearms accidents, etc.) and these stories were the type receiving the widest media distribution.

Interviews conducted by the HHC with newspaper reporters who are hunters resulted in three important observations. Those attacking the heritage and culture of hunting are highly successful at gaining what amounts to free advertising and they do so through aggressive media relations. The hunting community is considerably less effective in creating positive public relations images regards hunters and the heritage and culture of hunting. And, as a consequence, the image of hunting is generally viewed less favorably by the public-at-large compared to 10 or 20 years ago.

These guidelines for effective media relations have been developed with the assistance of two news reporters who are hunters who agree with the concept that the hunting community in Washington State needs to do a better job of "telling its side of the story."

### The Basic's

How do you create media exposure about your organization, its activities or its accomplishments if your group is a small, local organization (or a statewide group for that matter) with no money to commission a professional media release or campaign? The first, and perhaps most important, step is to have a committee or individual specifically responsible for getting out the word. Then ...

#### **Make Believe You're A Journalist**

Put yourself in a reporter's shoes. Try to imagine what kinds of stories would interest a reporter and how you can make a reporter's job easier by dropping a good story right in his/her lap. Ask yourself what sets your event or organization apart from the competition (defined as everyone else looking for media exposure from the local church to political candidates, from neighborhood associations to a youth group car wash and all points in between)?

Work to establish personal relationships with local news reporters – get to know them and give them the opportunity to get to know you. Be credible. Don't flood them with something every week or every month. You have to work at being considered a reliable news source. What to write about? Have you recently launched a new wildlife conservation effort? Donated money to a wildlife project? Elected new officers? Had an award banquet? Conducted a survey whose results you are willing to share? All of these sorts of events and similar things are newsworthy.

***Inland Northwest Wildlife Council – Northwest Chapter SCI - Washington State Bowhunters  
Inland Empire SCI - Citizens for Washington Wildlife - Central Washington SCI – Puget Sound SCI  
Washingtonians for Wildlife Conservation – Washington State Archery Association***

### **Oh, The Humanity!**

Did your organization – or an individual member -- have to overcome some great challenge or difficulty to arrive at where you are now? Or maybe one of your members had a special, urgent need that was filled by your organization? Has your group done something special for children, disabled hunters or wildlife resources?

**Bottom line** - human interest sells. For example, big lottery jackpots would never make the news if they blatantly promoted the lottery itself. But notice how the media flacks writing the releases always focus on some aspect of the winner's life... an ailing grandmother in need of expensive treatments, a house that recently burned down and now can be rebuilt, etc. In other words, the human angle that newspapers, radio and TV just gobble up!

### **The Inverted Pyramid**

Write an enticing subject line, headline and first paragraph. Get to the point quickly. Believe it or not, most news writers and editors only take five seconds to decide if they'll act on your announcement or not.

News reporters themselves have been trained to write using the "inverted pyramid", putting the most important information -- who, what, where, when, why and how -- at the top. And that's what they expect to see in your media release.

Unfortunately, most releases wind up in the garbage/delete folder because they start weak, take too long to get to the point, or are full of hype and puffery.

### **Just The Facts, Ma'am**

Keep the self-promotion to a minimum but do include all your contact information -- e-mail and snail mail, URL, phone and fax numbers -- plus a brief explanation of what your organization does. Emphasis on brief! In fact, keep the entire release to under a page if possible. The exception to the rule is complex subjects, like for example an economic forecast, aimed at a niche market not a general audience.

### **One Photo = A Thousand Words**

If a photo is available and helps tell your story, by all means include it. This could make your release jump out and demand attention from a busy editor who sees nothing but black and white type all day.

### **Milk The Local Angle**

Always try to send your release to a specific person working on a specific beat at each media outlet, at least locally. This will require some research but will ensure that a warm body actually gets your announcement. And keep in mind, the media love a "local boy/girl makes good" story so target your hometown newspapers, magazines and TV/radio stations and work that angle!

### **Get A Second Opinion**

If you're having a hard time finding any angle at all, ask a friend or a associate to lend a fresh perspective. You may be too close to your own activities to see the forest for the preprocessed paper products. An objective bystander's insights might surprise and inspire you!

## **Get Out The Dictionary**

Finally, proofread your finished product meticulously for errors. Then get your friend to do so as well. Two heads are better than one. Ten proofreads are better than two.

In short, give the media something they can sink their teeth into. Dig hard, think laterally, navel gaze until you find the one thing about your company that the public (and therefore the media) would be interested in.

Remember, by handing reporters a ready-made story on a silver platter, you're sewing the seeds of positive benefit about the positive side of hunting!

## **How To Write A News Release**

A news release is known in the news business as a "handout." News people are used to rewriting handouts. They don't get angry if the news release is not a perfect composition, but they do get upset if the facts are not all there. Small papers have few reporters and like to use news releases without re-writing them. Most people can write well enough for small papers. So be humble. Put in all the facts. Write simple sentences.

### **The First Paragraph**

The first paragraph is a summary of what the release is about. In the trade it is called the "lead." These important three lines (never more than four!) determine whether your release sinks or swims.

**Example:** The Coronado International Historical Pageant, depicting the Hispanic and Indian culture of the Southwest, will be presented free to the public from 10:30 a.m. to 5:15 p.m., on Sunday (April 20) at the Coronado National Memorial in Arizona.

This is a fairly routine lead. But notice it answers all the important questions: What? Why? Who? When? Where? It also illustrates another basic rule on the sequence of listing time and place which is called "little time, big time, place."

Little time: 10:30 a.m. to 5:15 p.m.

Big time: Sunday (April 20)

Place: Coronado National Memorial in Arizona

**Example:** Alcatraz Island, which has been closed for repairs for two weeks, will be re-opened by the National Park Service for the public on Sunday (April 20), said unit manager Colleen Collins. Reservations at \$4.50 each are being accepted for the ferryboat service that begins at 9 a.m. every day, Collins added.

The release had two points to make: Alcatraz Island is re-opening AND reservations can now be made. Too much for one sentence. Put them into two sentences. News releases have short paragraphs just like newspapers.

### **After The Lead Paragraph**

Write the rest of your news release in logical order. Simple sentences. Short paragraphs. Use this checklist. Did you answer all these questions (if appropriate)?

Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

They are known to the old-timers in the business as "The Five W's and How."

## A Few Tips On Style

Newspaper style dictates certain things in writing. Most of these rules make sense. One rule is: Use the full proper name of a person, or of anything, only once to avoid clutter in the story.

Write, for example: The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, then a short form such as "the area" or "SMMNRA."

Another example: "David J. Prospero," then "Prospero." There is a rule about numbers, too, that you should follow. Spell out the numbers one through nine except for dates, time, ages or money. For all other numbers use Arabic numerals: 10, 11, 12, etc.

Never write, "11 a.m. in the morning." Write "11 o'clock in the morning" or "11 a.m." Don't be redundant!

Again, the principles:

"George Berkley said the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area would open at nine o'clock in the morning." "However, Berkley later conceded the SMMNRA would not be open until 10 a.m."

Wire services do not use courtesy titles with full names. Dr. is used for initial and subsequent references to physicians, but rarely for others with advanced degrees. Otherwise, for second or further references to the same person use the last name only, without Mr., but with Mrs. or Miss, as appropriate. Ms. is used if that is the known preference of the subject.

Exception: Even newspapers that never use courtesy titles in news stories usually include them in obituary reports, as a sign of respect (but a report of a fatality is NOT an obituary).

Formal titles are capitalized if they precede a name (Superintendent Ralph Schmidt); lower case if they follow (Ralph Schmidt, superintendent). Titles are lower case when not used with the person's name: "The superintendent of Great Buffalo National Park resigned Wednesday," said William Bigwig, director of the National Park Service.

A Note for the Office Secretary: News releases are intended to serve the news media. For that reason, they should conform to wire service (Associated Press or United Press International) rules of style. Correspondence manuals and style guides for research organizations or book publishers should not be used for news releases.

## Editors Advisory's

### The Gatekeeper

Every news organization has a central receiver, a person who screens the flow of incoming releases, calls and visits, determines which have news potential, and directs how the news organization will respond.

There are assignment editors, city editors, feature editors, news editors, and more. Radio and television often use the word "director" instead of "editor." Whatever the title, this is the gatekeeper. Learn who it is and cultivate that person. (No, we don't mean \$50 lunches.) Make an appointment to meet him or her professionally. Then, introduce yourself, state your business, and go. Respect busy professionals.

After you've made the initial contact, reach these people with simple messages on news release paper. Email versions also must be simple. Graphics and attachments that may cause newsroom delays or disruptions will win no friends. These messages, too, have a variety of names: Editors Advisory, Assignment Memo, Media Advisory, News Memo. This is what gets a reporter to your event.

### **Content**

When you want the news media to cover your special event, send them an "editors advisory." If you have an advance news release (and you should) attach a copy to the advisory.

The advisory is particularly valuable in soliciting television coverage. Include a brief description of what will happen and don't forget the visual aspects -- what there will be to photograph.

If you want advance publicity you will, of course, also send them the news release in a separate envelope. That's because news media filing systems are usually pretty primitive; your editors advisory and release probably will be put in the "future" file.

The editor usually will not make a copy for someone to do a story which would get you advance publicity. If you need advance publicity, send a second release to give you a shot at that, too.

### **Format For an Editors Advisory**

Duncan Morrow (333) 333-3333

Editors Advisory

Event: Secretary of the Interior Opens Coronado International Historical Pageant -- a colorful, costumed fiesta of music, song, dance and drama

Time: 11 a.m., Sunday, April 20. (Festival from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.)

Place: Coronado National Memorial, Hereford, Ariz.

Who: Secretary of the Interior Arnold Andrews and National Park Service Director Francis Drake

Editors advisories can also be useful at the end of a news release. These are called "trailers." They should be separated from the main text of the release and clearly labeled.

Trailer advisories are used to offer supplementary material, related to the release subject. For example, photographs, copies of reports, and review copies of new publications can be offered to the media through such advisories. They must always include clear instructions on how the recipient can obtain the offered items.

## **Distributing News Releases**

The first rule of trash-can avoidance is don't send trash. That is why it is worth taking the time to do a good job.

The second rule is don't bury the recipients in a paper blizzard. Use releases only when you have something worth taking an editor's time. There is no quota to be met. An editor who receives too many releases with too little news value soon learns to ignore everything that comes from the same source.

News organizations are trying to interest an audience. If your release will help them do that, they will use it. If it won't, trash it yourself.

**Honor the role -- include a title in every address.**

In general, use the following titles to address your releases, unless you know a particular organization uses a different title that would serve better:

Daily newspapers: City Editor  
Weekly newspaper: Editor  
Shoppers: Editor  
Magazines: Editor  
Radio Stations: News Department  
Television Stations: News Director

Almost every state has a few newspapers that are circulated over much of the state and that have small bureaus outside of their base city. If such a bureau is near you, put it on the mailing list. Address the releases to "Bureau Chief" (even if it is a one-person bureau).

Don't try to save postage by putting more than one release in the same envelope either. Since different stories are likely to be assigned to different reporters, this may cause one release to be ignored. If you use email, the same principle applies: send separate releases separately.

**Timing**

Consider to whom you are sending it. Most feature departments (such as travel sections) and magazines have deadlines long before things appear in print. They need to get releases in advance. Weekly papers need releases just before -- not just after -- their weekly deadlines. The daily media usually have reduced staffs on weekends and are better equipped to act on a release received on a weekday. Time your mailings accordingly.