

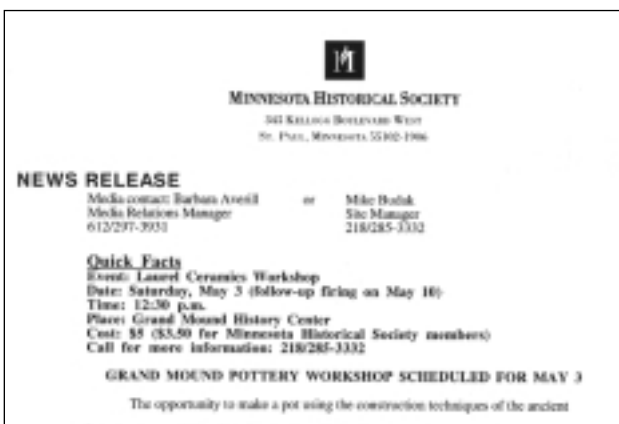


# Media Relations for Small Non-profit Organizations by Barbara Averill

## Some Things to Consider

One of the primary ways a non-profit organization tells its story to its key audiences is through the press. You may not have a major television station in your area, but chances are you have a local newspaper, a local radio station, and perhaps a local-access cable television station. Before long, you also will be using the Internet, whether you post your news on someone else's World Wide Web

*This is the top, or "Quick Facts" section, of the first page of a typical MHS two-page press release. It is sent to names on the list that have been selected as outlets most likely to inform their readers of such an event.*



Minnesota Historical Society

site or develop your own.

Media relations is only one part of a public relations plan, but it can be your most valuable and efficient tool. Once you know how to get your message not only accepted, but valued, as important news by your local media, you've made a big step toward the success of your program.

Publicity is not only low cost but has high return. Placing a news story about your event or your organization gives your message credibility and recognition, whether broadcast or printed.

Good editors and news directors, however, appreciate timely, well-written and well-organized news releases and will use them appropriately. They also like story tips that they can follow up on their own time. But don't ask for blatant advertising to be treated as news. News professionals are very adept at recognizing real news and culling out thinly disguised ads. They know their audiences, and they know their continuation as a business depends upon advertising sales.

## Four Basic Guidelines

- The first skill to develop is to recognize the difference between news and advertising. Do that by reading, listening and watching the local media to see how they treat news so that you can conform to their choices and styles. News is something unusual or important and/or affects a large number of people in a significant way. It must be timely. For example: Don't announce your relocation after you are settled in. Feature stories also should be timely. If you keep on top of what's in the news you might be able to tie today's headlines to something in your collections. If your part of the state is bracing for a flood, what do you have in your collections that tell the stories of past floods? When the Legislature wrangles with school funding issues, can you find the records of a country school that operated on a small salary for a teacher, some slates and a pile of firewood? When June dairy days roll around, can you write a short piece on your collection of cream separators, or cowbells? Or offer to let the local paper photograph these pieces of history?
- Second, learn to write good news releases. Put the news in the first paragraph; don't hide it under a paragraph about your organization (that goes last). Be brief, be clear, and be accurate. Neatness counts. Proofread three times, not just for typographical errors, but for content. Make sure your release has the "who, what, when, where, why and how" within the text. Every name must be spelled correctly. Using a quote from a credible source is great, but make sure it is lively. Double space your copy. Indicate the end with a "-30-" mark or the symbols ###. If your release goes over one page in length use "more" at the bottom to indicate to typesetters that they should look for the rest of the release. But don't write more than two pages. Newspaper space is valuable. Broadcasters will cut your news release to fit a very small time frame. You might want to write shorter releases for local radio stations. If they take Public Service Announcements, or PSAs, the rule of thumb



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is that a minute is filled with 150 words maximum, and no PSA should be more than a minute.

Be sure to put the name of the person editors can call for more information at the top.

- Third, learn media deadlines so your releases reach the right place at the right time. No one appreciates working at the last minute, and sometimes there just isn't room for late news.
- Fourth, get to know your local press so that when you have a good story idea, they will listen and follow through.

### *Organizing Your Media Relations Work*

If media relations sounds like a big job, it is. But it can be organized into a job that can be handled by a volunteer. The key is timely information flow within the organization. Your publicity chairperson must have information early so he or she isn't rushed into providing the press with a hastily written release or one that is nearly too late to print.

Part of the planning for any event, new acquisition or any major project should include a plan for publicity. Designate someone to provide accurate information to the publicity chairperson by a specific deadline—at least one month prior to when you plan

to hold your event or make an announcement. This information could be on a form designed to capture the essential “who, what, when, where, why and how” information from the project manager. It should also have a phone number that will be published in the release as a number the public can call for more information. Information about outside funding sources and sponsors also is appropriate.

Although your local editor might rewrite your release, if the information is printed, your release has done its job. Organizations that receive public funding have a duty to let the public know what they are doing and how to access their programs. That makes media relations one of the most important roles of your organization. Take the time to do it right and it will return good will, attendance at events, recognition for your organization and a chance to promote the appreciation of history through the media.

*Before becoming Media Relations Manager for the Minnesota Historical Society in 1993, Barbara Averill worked in public relations at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. Before that, she was a newspaper reporter for 18 years.*

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### **PUBLIC RELATIONS: Definitions of Some Basic Terms**

There have been numerous definitions of public relations, but my favorite comes from Frank Wylie, a former president of the Public Relations Society of America. “Senior-level public relations people are likely to spend 10 percent of their time with techniques, 40 percent with administration, and 50 percent with analysis and judgment. At entry level it's 50 percent techniques, 5 percent judgment and 45 percent running like hell.”

Most small organizations do not have senior-level public relations professionals working on their team, so that leaves the job to someone with many other duties, such as a museum manager, or to a volunteer, who might be anywhere on the scale from entry-level to pro.

**PR** is both an art and a science—essentially it means being aware of your audiences (your “publics”) and planning policies and actions that serve the interest of both the organization and the public.

**Advertising** is space purchased or time purchased to deliver a message prepared by the purchaser.

**Publicity** is information supplied to a news medium without cost. The decision to use it and its final form are controlled by the medium.

**Media relations** involves understanding the needs of the media you wish to deal with and meeting those needs. It includes meeting deadlines, making your news releases newsworthy and easy to use, and maintaining good relationships with reporters, editors and news directors.