

2

Getting Your Chapter's Message Out to the Public

Communication is defined as a giving or exchanging of information or a message. A simple definition for a very complicated topic. Communicating is something we all take for granted, something we really do all the time—we visit with clients, share information with associates, ask for favors to complete a project. We know what message we want to transmit, but how do we know it's received? How do we change the message to fit the audience? What medium works best for our message—personal contact, news releases, radio, television, fax, direct mail or computer bulletin boards?

There are no pat answers to any of these questions, but there are guidelines to follow to build successful communication pathways to your membership and to the general public. This guide is designed to help you do a better job of communicating your conservation messages to your members, to potential members, to agency officials, policymakers, stakeholders and the news media.

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Public relations is everything that your Chapter does to present an acceptable image to the public. Chapter members should be aware of the effects of public relations and the images they project. It can be as simple as your Chapter's letterhead, the way you treat speakers or guests at meetings, or how your Chapter handles controversy. While all members of the Chapter should practice good public relations, your officers should be aware of and promote deliberate activities to enhance the image of the Chapter and SWCS.

Public Relations

Publicity is a vital function of public relations and involves feature stories, news releases or other announcements for newspapers, magazines, radio, television, or even electronic bulletin boards. Publicity efforts should be coordinated by one person or a special committee. This may or may not be the same person who handles the newsletter or other internal communications, depending on the workload. For special events such as the Chapter's annual meeting, you may wish to establish an adhoc publicity committee.

It's best to develop a public relations plan and schedule as part of your Chapter annual program plan, so you, as a Chapter leader, and the publicity committee can keep the lines of communication open. A plan should include publication deadlines and dates for the newsletter, who is responsible for the newsletter and any columns, person responsible for initial contacts with the media (including telephone numbers and e-mails for media contacts), who handles publicity for the Chapter's annual meeting and other important events, and a strategy to handle adverse or controversial publicity.

Developing Media Contacts

Basic to any publicity program is getting to know the key people and media who determine what is news and what is not. This doesn't imply that you have coffee with them every day. What it does involve is putting together a list of media outlets—daily and weekly newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television stations, organizations' newsletters and electronic outlets in the geographic area covered by your Chapter.

Ask your membership if they know any potential contacts in the media. Get a contact person in each outlet, introduce yourself in person, ask them what kind of information they may use, how they want the material sent and what are their deadlines. Remember the old adage, "It isn't what you know, it's who you know."

Your media list also should include local, state or province and federal resource agencies, university extension and public information offices, other conservation groups in your area, private consulting firms, SWCS contacts such as adjacent Chapters, your regional member of the Board of Directors, international headquarters, Congressional officers and other individuals and groups you want to keep informed of Chapter programs and activities.

It's important that someone meet personally with contacts in the media. At your first meeting you should accomplish:

- That the editor, program manager or reporter knows who you are and what SWCS is.
- That you know what kind of material they are likely to publish or broadcast.
- That you know the deadlines for different kinds of stories - hard news, features, photos, calendar listings.
That you know if they prefer news releases, notices, newsletters, story ideas, or just a phone call so they can cover the event themselves.
- That you know how long and in what form news releases should be and whether they accept photos and videos.

Stay in touch during regular intervals through e-mails or phone calls, especially before major events or to ward off potentially negative publicity (more on that later). Help the media by identifying Chapter members, landowners, local and state/province officials, and others who may be good sources for stories or who can serve as knowledgeable, articulate "talent" on radio or television. Be sure you read the newspapers and magazines and start a clipping file of your news releases that have been used and/or stories of interest to the Chapter. You may wish to share this with your newsletter editor.

Finally, encourage your membership to read, watch and listen to the various media outlets and drop a note of thanks or a letter to the editor if a topic is particularly well covered.

Preparing News Releases

A news release is used for communicating with the mass media and the general public to announce an upcoming event, to summarize an event that has just happened, to provide background information on a past, present or future natural resource issue (either local, regional or national), or comment or state a position on a news development or issue, or to communicate your Chapter's stand concerning negative publicity or on a controversial topic. Also consider a Letter to the Editor or Op-Ed piece.

Just as you want to present a good visual image when you meet someone, you'll want to look good when you send out news releases. Some general rules to apply include the following:

- Type the release on 8 1/2x11 paper, double spaced.
- Leave a one-inch margin on each side of the paper.
- In the top right hand corner of the first page type your name, the name of your Chapter, address and telephone number of a contact person.
- In the top left hand corner of the first page, type the date and time when the information can be released or "For Immediate Release".

- Start the text about one-fourth of the way down the page with a very short headline that tells what the release is about.
- Type "more" at the bottom of each page, except the last, where you type -30- or ##### to signify the end of the release. At the upper left of each additional page, type the headline followed by the page number.
- Try to keep your releases down to one or two pages.
- Always send neat, clean originals or photocopies, never carbon copies or poor quality photocopies.
- Write on one side of the paper only.
- In the text, put the most important information first. The first paragraph should convince people to read the rest. If it doesn't, they won't.
- Include a link to a web site (s) with more information or supporting material in the press release if appropriate.
- Write clearly, as if you were telling a story or talking to someone.
- Include a standard closing paragraph about your Chapter and the SWCS.
- Be sure the releases are distributed in a timely manner.
- Use e-mail and fax when possible. If using email, include the press release in the text of the email message and as an attachment.

What's Newsworthy?

Information is considered newsworthy if it has something of interest to the general public — regular meetings are not newsworthy, but an annual meeting with a good slate of speakers or special interest workshop could be. Make sure you have substantial material. Don't send out a news release every time your Chapter does something.

Other things to remember when dealing with the media are to make sure your releases have all the information the reader needs, don't play favorites with the media unless an exclusive will benefit your Chapter in some way, don't expect editors to run stories as a favor, and be sure there are no errors in your news release. Double check all quotations.

When Contacting the Media

Be sure to include the following information in your news releases - sites, dates, themes, names of speakers, program outline, SWCS information and other pertinent details. For further information, add phone numbers and e-mails so the public the media know how to reach your meeting and publicity chairs.

Remember, no matter how interesting your program or your speakers, there may be other more important news that could take away your expected media coverage. Be ready to offer written information to the media and be flexible enough to help them get interviews later.

Public Service Announcements

Another way to get your message across to the public is through public service announcements. These are usually pre-recorded messages to be used on radio and television. Visit with your contacts at the stations for their preferences. Be sure to include cable TV stations in your outreach efforts.

Handling Controversy

Most of us would rather avoid controversy, but there is no doubt that it does sell newspapers and attracts attention. If you have developed an honest working relationship with local media, you may be able to use controversy to your advantage, depending on your approach.

If you are approached by the media to make a statement concerning a controversial issue, here are a few tips to remember:

- Make yourself available to the media if they should ask, but don't volunteer information unless it is in the best interest of the Chapter. Within your Chapter, establish who should be the spokesperson before a controversy arises.
- Be honest and objective. State your case and answer questions.
- Prepare a statement. Call a media conference and read the statement. Be positive, and don't make negative comments about the opposition. Have copies of the statement to distribute. See

this as an opportunity to tell your story to the public.

- If your opponent has a valid criticism, agree with it. Then make a point to stress the corrections being made to change the situation for the better.
- There may be times when it's best to keep silent. Use "no comment" as a last resort.
- By developing an open relationship with the media, you'll be able to release unfavorable as well as favorable information and be treated fairly.
- Act, don't react to bad publicity.

Working with Policymakers

An important way for you to achieve your Chapter's conservation goals — and to receive the best possible support and public exposure toward those goals -- is to work closely with agency officials and legislators at all levels of government.

Include them on the lists of people who receive regular information about your Chapter activities. Follow up with personal invitations to the officials or staff aides to attend specific Chapter events. Let them know you would welcome their attendance and membership in SWCS.

In addition, when you network with policymakers as part of your regular Chapter communications efforts, you'll have gained an ally. By laying the groundwork for good relationships, your public relations program will pay off in dividends in the future.