

Kids and Dogs: Gaining Media Attention



No matter how big your organization is, you need a plan to get your story out.

By Erika Oliver

In Michigan, the funding for 4-H was in jeopardy. Legislators needed to cut the budget, and it made sense that an agriculture program was no longer needed when money could go to support the real problems of urban youth. How important was it in today's society to learn how to raise a cow?

4-H program managers and supporters learned a hard lesson. Non-profit organizations must continually gain and retain community support for their programs. What the state and elected officials didn't know was that 4-H had greatly changed their programming to address modern needs. True, farm animals were still involved, but leadership skills were the primary goal, not animal husbandry. In the final hour, 4-H scrambled to secure funding by sharing their mission, programming, and success stories. Funding was retained.

They were lucky that this worked. Usually, it's too little, too late. You must relay the need for your programming to your community on an ongoing basis. Tips to help you gain media attention:

Be certain the information you share is newsworthy. What's newsworthy? Look at what's currently in the news, and follow the trends, making sure your content is important to the reading, listening, or viewing audience.

Tell the truth. Reporters appreciate accurate information because they can't be everywhere and they can't know everything. It only takes one piece of wrong information to earn the media's distrust.

Include some kids and dogs if you can. They're great for visual media, such as television or photos in the newspaper. People are drawn to these sentimental images, and

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media representatives are people too.

Be the expert. Contact the media with expert resources so that you become their pipeline for important information. The 4-H could become “the” media source for youth leadership principles because they stay connected with national, state, and regional sources on youth leadership.

Have a PR plan to connect with the media on a regular basis. Sporadic contact doesn't build a relationship. Depending on the size and activity level of your organization, you should connect with the media weekly, biweekly, or—at the very least—monthly. A public relations plan can help you determine all the avenues and angles you have right now within your organization.

An organization that helps people with disabilities discovered that, although they had been in existence for 25 years, the general population didn't know who they were or how they supported the community. Through a feasibility study conducted in preparation for a capital campaign, it became clear that they had been negligent in connecting with their stakeholders. Their first step was to determine what newsworthy and expert information they could provide to the media. They hired a PR consultant who wrote a media release and made contact with local TV, radio, and print media. In line with the kids and dogs theory, the consul-

tant helped the organization create an event, as part of their programming, which would attract the media. The event included newsworthy information straight from people with disabilities, pleasing surroundings for filming and taking pictures, and a couple of kids. Media attention was gained in all venues.

The organization has been successful in increasing awareness of its work in the community and is now well-positioned to embark on an ambitious capital campaign. They've also created a PR plan that fits into the staff's current work.

The support of the community, from the government to the people down the street, is essential. If you believe in your organization's mission and know that your programs are solving a critical social problem, it's your duty to inform the public and include a few kids and dogs. ■

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Resources

Goldberg, Richard, “Getting Your Message on Television News,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 2, No. 3.

Lauer, Larry, “When Reality Becomes Image: Dealing with the Media,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 5.

Martens, Tom, “Are Nonprofits Newsworthy?” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 3.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.