

Marketing 101

Working with the Media

Why is important to communicate effectively with the media?

In order to be effective in carrying out NRCS's mission, a productive nation in harmony with a quality environment, we need the informed support of people in our communities. What better way to reach people in your community than through your local media.

To keep the public informed of NRCS and your local district's plans, work, and accomplishments, you need to be able to communicate information to newspapers, radio stations and sometimes even television stations serving your community. Remember, you are a conservation expert, and you have important conservation information and messages to share with people in your community.

Do's of working with the media

- Visit/call to introduce yourself to your local reporter. Provide your contact information. This works best if you're pitching a story. Leave them with a news release or background information on a story idea. Discuss deadlines, policies, circulation, broadcast range, copy format and photo format, etc.
- Work hard to develop a good working relationship with reporters. You are a conservation expert. You want local reporters to call you when they have a question in your field. You can be an ongoing resource for reporters.
- Return reporters' telephone calls promptly. Even if you don't know the answer, call back to say you'll find out.
- When leaving a phone message, give your name, field office, and a phone number where they can reach you.
- When they answer the phone, ask if they have time to talk. If they are working on a deadline, and your story can wait, let it. Have them call you back. Be sure to leave your phone number.
- Every reporter is unique. Find out how he or she prefers to receive articles/story ideas— phone, FAX, or email. Find out when their deadlines are and when they prefer to receive calls. Get to know the kinds of stories in which they will be interested.
- Credibility is key. Always tell the truth and always do what you say you'll do.
- Plan ahead and always give advance notice of events.

Don'ts of working with the media

- Don't contact the media one week before an event.
- Don't criticize a reporter for not writing your story or for not doing it to your satisfaction. If you think there's a pattern of no coverage or poor coverage developing, meet with the editor. Ask how you can improve your procedures to make their job easier.
- Don't play favorites. Give all reporters equal access to the same information.
- Don't lie or make up answers. If a reporter asks a question that you can't answer, tell them that you don't know the answer but will get back to them. Make sure you get back to them soon.

What is news?

News is anything NEW, including:

- NEW information about an event, ideas, programs. *For example, EQIP has changed, and here's how.*
- NEW interest. The story must affect the reader somehow, make a difference to them. *The 2002 Farm Bill created a new program, the Conservation Securities Program, to assist landowners install conservation practices on private lands.*
- NEW impact. The story must be presented in a way that grabs readers' attention. *\$8 million is now available to help Iowa landowners restore wetlands in 33 counties located in north central Iowa.*

News Values. What makes a good story?

Before you call the media, you should think about the newsworthiness of your story. Here's some questions to consider.

- **Timeliness.** Is it really new or current? *If there was a continuous CRP signup July 1-30, you don't want to send the story or make the media contact on August*
- **Proximity.** If a storm caused thousands of dollars of damage in LeMars and you live in Sioux Center, you probably don't pitch the story in Sioux Center, unless you can make a tie to it. *For instance, we had a similar storm in Sioux Center last year, but there wasn't as much damage, due, in part to the conservation practices that worked...*
- **Importance.** Tell them how it affects your community, Who's involved and who will be impacted. *A watershed planning meeting is open to everyone who lives in the Raccoon River Watershed, because we all have a stake in having clean water to drink.*
- **Progress.** What's going on with the project, what's changed? Results of projects. *Since the Iowa River Corridor Project began in 1996, we have restored wetlands on 500 of acres.*
- **Unusualness.** The odd event, situation, or idea that is interesting because it is different. What's special? *The Louisa County Soil and Water Conservation District hosted a 2 day conservation camp for kids and teachers interested in caring for our soil and water.*
- **Prominence.** If a well known person, such as a legislator or agency head comes to a conservation tour in your county, that's news. The draw may be the individual, but you still get to tell your story. *Natural Resources Conservation Service Chief Bruce Knight was the keynote speaker at a wetlands tour hosted by the Greene County Soil and Water Conservation District May 18.*
- **Human interest.** People often can relate to stories about others' struggles and successes. *As a landowner, if I read about how the Jackson family down the road is implementing conservation practices on their farm, and receiving financial as well and environmental benefits, maybe I'll be more likely to give it a try myself. After all, the Jacksons are a lot like my family.*

How to get media coverage

Once you've decided, yes this project is news worthy--and people in our community should/would enjoy hearing about it-- how do you get media coverage?

- Contact the reporter. Some reporters want to write the stories themselves. Give them story ideas. Other reporters want you to write the story. (How to write an effective news release is covered in another section.)
- Pitch the story's news values. Your story idea doesn't have to cover all seven areas. Remember, these areas are just a guide to use when determining if your idea/story is newsworthy.

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- Provide background information that summarizes your key points or a news release (how to write a news release is covered in another section).

If you choose to create a background information sheet, put the most important facts first. Include your name and phone number, and the phone numbers of others involved in the project/program. This is especially important if the information is complicated. Having written information will help the reporter, who is often writing against the clock, to be more accurate.

- Provide photos/photo ideas.
- Provide photos if you have them. Suggest shots their photographer or TV camera person could take.

Elements of a good news story

The best press releases have these things in common, they:

- are one page long
- are typed and double spaced
- cover one subject
- include the spokesperson's name and telephone number
- are interesting. To make your news release interesting. Ask yourself "Why should the newspaper print it? Why would anyone want to read it or hear it on the radio?"

Writing a news release

Focus on the one thing you want people to remember after reading/hearing your press release. Start your press release by stating that one memorable item.

Complete instructions and tips for success can be found in another section entitled *How to write an effective news release*.

Basics of media interviews

Media interviews are an excellent way to get your message across. Look at them as a good opportunity.

- Be prepared. Know your subject and the one thing you want people to remember. When you really care about the subject and know it well, you will feel most comfortable. Remember, you are a conservation expert, and speaking on behalf of NRCS and the conservation cause.
- Remember to be yourself--that's when you're at your best. Everyone is capable of speaking clearly and distinctly, using eye contact, and holding an audience.
- Do your homework and go for it.

Preparing for an interview

- Know the publications and reporters. Get familiar with articles of the reporter to whom you'll be speaking. Check out the magazine or newspaper--read some articles.
- Be prepared with key messages/talking points. Prepare two or three key points about your project. These sound bites are the facts that you want the reporter to remember even if they use nothing else from the interview. Include these messages in your responses in clean, short phrases, and repeat them frequently.
- Do your homework. Review NRCS materials, on the subject you'll be discussing, as well as other broad topics, which may come up.

During the interview

- Stick to the story. Get to the point right away, then fill in the details. Use your key messages as foundation for answering questions.
- Remember the 5 Ws, who, what, when, where, why and sometimes how.
- Stay positive. Smile.
- Remember the C's. Your delivery should be clear, complete, colorful
courteous, cautious, concise
credible, confident, consistent.
- Use plain language. No acronyms.
- Remember you are an NRCS employee. Whatever you say will be interpreted as representing NRCS. Don't discuss your own opinions with an interviewer. Only give your professional opinion.
- Make your point. If it appears the reporter isn't going to ask you a question that you really want a chance to answer (a point that you want to make)— answer the posed question briefly. Then transition to make your point. Be clear and concise.