

Telling Scouting's Positive Story

By Bill Sloan

Photograph by John R. Fulton Jr.

Winning favorable media attention for your troop or pack may not be as difficult as you think.

Designing a Winning Pitch

Is It News?

No news is good news, they say. But BSA volunteers trying to obtain news coverage for their Scouts' achievements and good works can find this old adage holds equally true in reverse. To those who decide the content of today's media, good news often means no news.

Newspaper front pages and TV newscasts increasingly seem centered on negative reports and "bad news" in general. For a Scoutmaster hoping to drum up "good press" for a Scouting for Food campaign, or a public relations chairman trying to get the names of new Eagle Scouts printed in the local paper, this situation can be the most discouraging news of all.

In this atmosphere, obtaining newspaper space or electronic airtime for the positive things done by local Scouts and Scout units may seem harder than ever—even impossible.



Good photos greatly enhance a story's chances of being published. Try to limit subjects to three or fewer in a picture and always include their full names.

A FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

Yet, according to a consensus of media publicity experts, winning favorable media attention for your troop or pack may not be as difficult as you think. In fact, the formula for success, the experts say, is relatively simple: (a) recognize what reporters and editors want, then (b) learn when and how to present it to them.

"Common sense tells you that a troop cleaning up a park can't compete for space with a multiple-fatality school shooting," says Keith Stephens, a specialist with Burson-Marsteller, the world's largest public relations agency. "But if you plan ahead, time your approach properly, and build solid contacts in the local media, you can still get your story told. Actually, many editors are looking for positive stories to help balance the negative ones."

However, Scout leaders who hope to reach the public with positive messages about their programs must realize that society has drastically changed over the past 25 years, says Stephens, who serves as a public relations consultant to the BSA national organization.

"In addition to a mindset in the media that may seem negative, we also face a much different audience nowadays," he notes. "One of our challenges is unclogging the communications channel between the BSA and the many 30-something parents of today who aren't familiar with us. Meeting this challenge means speaking these parents' language. That's a major key to getting effective unit-level publicity."

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

One of the worst things to do, the experts agree, is bombard editors, reporters, and other media professionals with weak, untimely, or poorly thought-out story ideas. Other bad strategies include waiting until the last minute to let them know about an event or phoning them at rushed or inopportune times.

"Too often, we tend not to realize the newsworthiness of an event until after the fact," says Joe Mueller, director of public relations for the [Greater St. Louis Area Council](#). "By the time we think, 'Wouldn't it be nice to have something about this in the paper?' it's too late."

Organized efforts at the council, district, and unit levels are the best ways to avoid such last-minute pitfalls, says Phil Bevins, national director of the External Communications Division for the BSA. At the council level, this means having an active, alert marketing committee which, if possible, includes some public relations professionals. It also means offering guidance at the district and unit levels.

A PERSONAL APPROACH

But for maximum results, districts and individual units also need their own designated volunteers to take responsibility for generating local publicity.



Rely on planning, not luck, to capture newsworthy publicity images to send to local media. Photos should be at least 5 by 7 inches, with subjects doing something—not just staring at the camera.

"I've been very fortunate in getting articles published in local community newspapers," says Ann Gastler, public relations chairman for the Boone Trails District of the [Greater St. Louis Area Council](#). "I send out two or three media releases per month, and I try to make sure the subjects are newsworthy. Sometimes, the releases are published pretty much as submitted, but other times, I'll get a call from a reporter who wants to go into more depth."

Getting to know members of the local media is a crucial first step in winning their attention, Gastler emphasizes. "It's important to establish relationships with the editor, so you can become familiar with the paper's printing deadlines and 'lead times,' then plan your releases accordingly," she says. "There's a lot of turnover among reporters on smaller papers, but I also try to form relationships with them.

Whenever I see a bylined article on our Scouts, I always call or write to thank the reporter who wrote it."

A VALUABLE RESOURCE

Such small touches can reap major dividends, says Bevins, whose office has created an informative new Scouting CD-ROM titled "The Merits of Marketing." Available to units through their local council service center, the CD-ROM offers a host of tips and a step-by-step plan for gaining positive publicity.

"The best news is always local news," Bevins says, "and one of the best ways to get your share of it is to cultivate a solid relationship with the media in your community."

This means, among other things:

- identifying and getting to know local media contacts;
- providing these contacts with timely, pertinent information about Scouting;
- being sure members of the media know how to reach you, day or night;
- responding to media requests promptly, accurately, and with attention to deadlines;
- letting reporters and other contacts know you appreciate their support;
- respecting your contacts' wishes about how news releases should be delivered. (If a newspaper's fax machine is always busy, for instance, an editor may prefer e-mail or regular mail.)

"The biggest complaint journalists have with publicists is that they aren't familiar with the people and media outlets they're pitching," Bevins emphasizes. "Knowing the reporters and editors you're dealing with, as well as their areas of news coverage, their deadlines, and the methods of contact they prefer, will go a long way toward making your pitches successful."

To familiarize herself with the local media, Ann Gastler created a list of all the community papers in her district, with notations about how each one prefers to receive news releases. "Only one paper is set up for electronic communication, so most of my releases are sent by fax," she says. "If there's an accompanying photo, I use regular mail."

THE IMPORTANCE OF TIMING

Timing is of paramount importance. The experts suggest placing phone calls to media contacts about 10 a.m., when most reporters are planning their day, and early in the week, when weekly papers and news bureaus are filling out their story "budgets" for the week. Never call a morning newspaper after about 4 p.m.; that's when reporters and editors are busiest.

Generally speaking, the smaller the community, the better chance local Scouts have of getting their stories published.

"While the big metropolitan papers never have enough space to cover all the news that should be covered, the opposite is true of many smaller papers," says Keith Stephens. "The fact is, many smaller papers need your news more than ever, and they're usually very happy to get it."

In this same vein, don't overlook today's many specialized media. They may not have massive circulations, but many are well read by their particular audiences. Renee Fairrer, associate director of the External Communications Division in the BSA national office, explains:

"Newspapers and news broadcasts are only two of many avenues for communicating your message. Other available media include public service announcements (PSAs) on radio, religious and corporate publications, newsletters published by chartered organizations, fliers, advertisements, and your own council newsletter and Website."

SUCCESSFUL PICTURES, PRESS RELEASES

You don't have to be an accomplished writer to prepare an effective news release. In fact, trying to use flowery or overly dramatic language in your release can be counterproductive. Presenting the facts in a way that is simple, straightforward, and brief is usually more effective.

News releases should never run more than two double-spaced typewritten pages. (The "Merits of Marketing" CD-ROM includes easy-to-follow formats for writing news releases and shorter, more urgent "media alerts.")

Think pictures! the experts stress. News is becoming increasingly visual, and good photos will greatly enhance your story's chances of being published.

"If you take your own pictures, be sure they're clear and sharp, and preferably at least 5 by 7 inches in size," advises Fairrer. "From a newspaper's point of view, the fewer people in a picture, the better, so try to limit the number of subjects to three or fewer. You should also try to have them doing something and not just staring at the camera."

And always, she urges, make sure to include a caption with each photo, in which all subjects are identified by full name from left to right.

"The local community papers don't generally have a photographer available for Scouting events, so I make sure I have my camera with me at all times," says Ann Gastler. "That way, I don't miss any photo opportunities that may come along."

Larger papers, on the other hand, may prefer to send their own photographers to certain events. If so, it's best to let them know about a photo possibility at least a week in advance.

"An interesting photograph requires either planning or luck," says Bevins. "You can't count on luck, so you have to plan."

And that tip is also good, all-around advice for every aspect involved in getting the good news about Scouting into local media.

Contributing editor Bill Sloan lives in Dallas.

DESIGNING A WINNING PITCH

This brief checklist can help you keep your publicity "pitches" to the media solidly within the strike zone:

- Make each release clear, concise, and complete. Don't waste words.
- Be sure you fully understand and can explain your own story.
- Know the needs of the media you're targeting.
- Act professional, even if you're an amateur.
- Show respect and courtesy for your media contacts.
- Do all you can to build ongoing rapport with reporters and editors.
- Accept the fact that "no" means "no." Don't be a pest.

—B.S.

IS IT NEWS?

Just what is news and how do you recognize it? Simply speaking, news is virtually anything that affects and/or interests those who read, watch or listen to the media. To help ensure that your news releases meet these criteria, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it new and different? (Example—A new co-ed Venturing program is being introduced to the community.)
- Is it novel or unusual? (Example—An NBA basketball star is making a special appearance at a Scouting event.)
- Does it represent a milestone? (Example—A local troop observes its 50th anniversary.)
- Is a significant honor involved? (Example—A local Eagle Scout wins a national conservation award.)
- Does it have an impact on area residents? (Example—The local Scouting for Food drive helps people in need.)
- Is it dramatic? (Example—A local Scout saves a child's life, using skills learned in Scouting.)
- Does it have "human interest"? (Example—An 80-year-old volunteer makes his first trip to Philmont Scout Ranch.)
- Is there a tie-in to a holiday or special occasion? (Example: A Cub Scout color guard is the youngest unit in a Memorial Day parade.)
- If your answer to one or more of these questions is a firm "yes," your story is almost certainly newsworthy.

—B.S.