



Talking to the Media ~ Helpful Hints

Part of the NEANS fall 2002 meeting featured a panel discussion called “Meet the Media.” Panelists included Peter Lord, *The Providence Journal* and The Metcalf Institute, Bob Paquette, WFCR public radio; and Diana Weaver, US Fish & Wildlife Service public affairs. For the benefit of all NEANS Panel members, the key points made during this discussion are outlined below.

- Build and maintain relationships with local media. Know something about them—different newspapers have different attitudes, talents, and interests. Who would do best job?
- Remember that the press is “not with us.” They just want good stories and to cover the news.
- If a story is not picked up, ask yourself: Was it presented well? What else happened that day?
- When the spotlight falls on you, make the best of it, because when *you* want the spotlight, it’s harder to get. Seize opportunities—timing. If something is in the news, that’s the time to call.
- Reporters are always in a hurry. There’s never enough time to do all the stories that should be done—news is relative and depends on what else is going on. Few reporters are experts on anything. Tomorrow is always another story.
- Return phone calls from reporters promptly—tomorrow is probably too late.
- Provide key information in writing: names, titles, phone numbers, sum up important points.
- Figure out *what* you want to tell people and *who* you want to tell. Consider the audience.
- Be absolutely accurate.
- Practice simplifying your message. Don’t use jargon.
- Tell a story (beginning, middle, and end), conflict, timelines, who-what-where-when-why.
- Pictures sell. Graphics are needed/useful—especially for TV. Radio loves good audio.
- If you don’t say it, they can’t print it (covers both good and bad stuff). If you don’t share info, the media doesn’t have it and can’t report it. There is no such thing as “off the record” when you are speaking with a reporter. Stick to your subject and don’t say too much.
- The press wants to talk to experts directly, not public relations.
- Be patient and polite.
- “No comment” can create a negative reaction to a story, which can hurt. Remember agencies and organizations can (almost) always say something. Consider the needs and responsibilities of the agency or group for which you work. Determine in advance who talks and what they say.
- Don’t ask to read a story before it goes to press. It won’t happen and the media thinks less of you.
- Plan ahead. Faxed press releases are ignored more than phone calls. Invest time & use the phone.
- Press releases should:
 - Indicate either “Embargoed” (with a date) or “For Immediate Release.” If the latter, send and then call to discuss it.
 - Always have the first paragraph sum up issue.
 - Use quotes to editorialize.
 - Always be clear and concise. Help reporter determine what is of greatest importance to the greatest number of listeners or readers. There is limited space or minutes to devote.
- If the press makes a mistake, call the next day. Corrections will be printed. Don’t overreact—the reporter wasn’t trying to get the quote wrong.
- Be a resource for the media. Use handouts and bulletins that are concise, with good information and phone numbers are helpful.
- Save news conferences for very big things.