

Connecting with the Media

Gary Peterson, Editor Home & Away Magazine

There is no magic bullet in media relations. No one tactic works for everyone, nor does it work the same way every time. Oftentimes, budgets – or lack thereof – affect what an organization, attraction or operation can or cannot do when it comes to courting media attention. Still, there are basic tips that work well as a guide toward successful promotion. Here are the six steps I consider essential:

Brainstorm with everyone on your staff about makes your organization, attraction or operation unique or attractive.

Is it a new operation? Is there a historical element? Is there an event? Is there something architecturally significant? Whatever it is that sets your message apart is what you should use as a hook to catch attention.

Identify a media outlet that best matches your desired message.

Rather than use a shotgun approach, spend time locating newspapers, magazines, websites, radio stations and so on that are more likely to find your message appealing. For example, a casual Web search I did turned up Sunset Magazine, which often features stories about farm vacations. Other examples: If your organization, attraction or operation has an unusual barn, then an architectural publication is a likely target; if you feature some of the best food around, then promoting recipes in local and regional papers during the holidays might be the way to go. Realize, too, that the same attraction can be repurposed for different outlets. A recent example from my experience is Glorieta Pass, a remote Civil War battlefield in New Mexico. My magazine's Web site featured a story about the site as general travel story. A short time later I read about the same site in a military history magazine. Your message, with a tweak or two, can be used over and over.

Analyze the process and content of the publication you target.

During my career, the most common surprise people have expressed when they've pitched stories is my magazine's long lead time – meaning how far in advance we plan our stories. We already are planning 2012, so it's important to have that information when deciding how to promote your message. Also noteworthy is the fact that we, and outlets like us, are far more flexible when it comes to our websites. In addition to lead time, check out the design of the publication. Look for departments where smaller tidbits of information are shared. These can be a gold mine for an unique organization, attraction or operation. It's not a feature story, but many times it's the best place to land in a general interest publication.

Collect editorial calendars.

When you've selected your media outlets – especially magazines – ask for an calendar that identifies the stories the publication is planning to run in the coming year. You may discover the publication is running a story about farm vacations or some other topic that comes very close to your message. It could a perfect opportunity to piggyback on an already planned feature.

Build personal relationships with editors.

Much like the typical sales process, developing a relationship with an editor can lead to easier promotion of your message. Cold calling is one way to approach editors. If you reach them, you have the chance to tell them about your organization, attraction or operation. Offer to set them up with interviews, photography or a visit. Sometimes e-mailing works as well. I don't always answer my phone,

but I will read e-mails that have relevance to what my magazine publishes. Many times We have discovered a Travel Treasure, which is a popular department in the magazine that highlights four or five unique attractions from across the country, from an e-mail. In fact, the one I'm writing right now came from an e-mail. Personal visits can work, too, but it's likely to be cost-prohibitive to plan a series of personal visits across the state or region.

One way to endear yourself to an editor is to be a willing fact-checker. If for some reason you are called upon by someone from a media outlet to review information, do so gladly. One, because you're getting free publicity. Two, that editor will remember your willingness. I have staff members who keep in contact with people they met through fact-checking, and who have generated story ideas based on those relationships.

Develop collateral material.

The easier you can make it for a media outlet to publish a story about your organization, attraction or operation, the deeper you can set the hook. One way is to create a photo library with candid shots, scenics, locations, etc. This gives a publication the ability to design a story with little effort. Be sure to shoot digital photography at your camera's highest setting – it takes more memory, but it creates images at a large enough resolution to be used in publications. Another way is to create a website. It gives media outlets (and visitors) a quick way to gather information about what you offer, where you are, when is the best time to go and so on. If you build a website, be committed to keeping it updated. An outdated site is worse than no site because it make you look unorganized. Finally, put together a media kit, which is a piece a media outlet can use as reference. Typically, media kits contain factsheets about the item it promotes, as well as photo CDs, and press releases announcing new or exciting developments.

Each of these can represent a serious financial investment, so be sure about what you want to accomplish. Doing any one of these just to do it probably won't get you what you hoped it would. In fact, they are the flash to the substance of the earlier tips.