
Media Relations for Animal Shelters

by Merritt Clifton

Here are some tips for dealing successfully with the media:

1 Don't wait for the media to come to you. If you do, they usually won't come until someone has complained about a problem, which puts you on the defensive.

2 Get to know your local media. Find out who edits each of the newspapers and broadcast news programs in your area. Find out who covers the "Lifestyles," "Children," city, crime, and wildlife beats, as well as who writes the "pets" column, if the paper has one. Make sure all of these people get letters of introduction, welcoming them and explaining what your shelter does, followed by copies of all your newsletters and announcements.

Be aware that journalists usually have short tenures. Four to five years with a publication is often the maximum. Read the papers! Every time someone new appears on a beat that might overlap humane work, send a letter (or at least an e-mail) of introduction, which should always include an invitation to come by for a visit, any time.

Contact media with relevant background information anytime a topic comes up that involves animals. Don't assume they're automatically going to think of you as a resource when, for instance, they're dealing with a child abuse case or a civic budget crisis, even though you may have reams of information they need.



3 Always have a media kit ready to mail, fax, or deliver in person to anyone who needs it. Have the same information posted on your website. Include, in this order:

- Contact information (and don't forget to offer a number for 24-hour-a-day crisis response).
- Vital statistics on your shelter, together with the national norms in important areas, such as dogs vs. cats, adoptions vs. euthanasias, and budget relative to population served.
- Succinct explanations of variances from the norms (e.g., "We have a high euthanasia rate because we are in an animal control shelter in a rabies area where there is no effective low-cost neutering program.").
- Succinct statements of realistic short-term and long-term objectives ("We seek to lower our euthanasia rate by doing thus-and-such.").
- Succinct statements of short-term and long-term needs in order to achieve stated objectives (in terms of both income and/or legislation).
- Summary of your most recent financial statement, including salaries of best-paid staffers. Allegations of high euthanasia rates and self-aggrandizement are the two most frequent complaints from groups and individuals that engage in shelter bashing. If you put the essential information right out in front of the media, they won't be inclined to listen to people who claim you're hiding it for a nefarious reason.

If you don't have a website, fax machine and e-mail account, get them. All of these things will pay for themselves in improved media relations alone within just a couple of months.

4 Hold at least one media event per month. This can be a special announcement, an announcement of a major bust, an initiation of a campaign, a fundraising event, a response to a public issue, or a seasonal activity. Whatever it is, it's a reason to bring the media into your office or shelter, introduce yourself and your organization, and get some positive publicity.

- Avoid scheduling media events in conflict with elections and other big newsmakers. You'll get the maximum return for your effort on the slowest news days.

- Make press conferences brief, prompt, and to the point. Always have adoptable animals present for photo opportunities.

- Share the spotlight. Invite representatives of your local veterinary associations, animal rights groups, breed fanciers' associations, et al., to join you at media events involving their interests, and to say a few words. Always point out that, "While we aren't necessarily always in agreement with our friends at such-and-such group, we are working together on this aspect of this issue, and we would like to welcome their perspective." This way, you avoid getting a reputation as a mere "media freak," you build goodwill with the interest groups that could otherwise become problematic to you, and you establish coalitions that can help all of you get more things done.

5 Send a fresh packet of about five photos of adoptable animals to your local newspapers every week. Include one-sentence descriptions of the animals in each photo. If the papers need a filler (and a cute animal shot to balance ghastly headlines is always welcome), your photos will be handy, and every photo that runs is an adoption virtu-

ally assured. And, don't underestimate the cumulative effect of the photos in education media about pet overpopulation.

6 In all communications with the media, remember that reporters always want to know Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How, in that order. Don't try to give the background before covering the essentials (but if there is important background, always say "There is further background to this situation, which is important to your understanding, and I'll get to it in a minute.")

7 Respond immediately to media inquiries. Media people live on deadline. If they can't get your side of the story right away, they may opt to do without it.

If you really can't respond right away, have someone else on your staff call and try to answer the necessary factual questions as best he or she can, with the promise that you'll call within a specified amount of time and with further clarification. (Do not, however, put someone else in the position of having to address policy matters or give opinions that will be construed as those of your organization.)

8 Acknowledge problems. Most people, including reporters, have sympathy for those who face up to difficulties and try to work through them. Those who practice denial, on the other hand, are generally suspected of deliberate wrongdoing.

9 Acknowledge discomfort. If you are uncomfortable talking to a reporter, say so. Reporters understand stress because journalism is among the most high-stress occupations. It is okay to be rattled when everything is going to hell in a handbasket. Explain that you're a lot better trained to handle animals than human crises, and that you are trying to do your best despite your feelings of awkwardness. Most reporters will respond positively.

Hard questioning does not mean the reporter is hostile to your position. Rather, it means the reporter is doing his/her job.

10 Never lie to a reporter. You will always get caught, and you'll lose more credibility in five minutes than you've built up in five years when it happens.

- You'll come out looking better with the simple admission, "I goofed," than with a string of circumlocutions, excuses, and evasions. The next question in such a situation is always, "Why?" Then you can give your explanations, and then the reporter will be listening, whereas previous to your admission of a goof, the question is not why it happened but rather what happened.
- Don't ask to speak off the record with a reporter who doesn't know you. This may be construed as an attempted evasion of responsibility for what you're saying.
- If you must speak off the record, give the reporter a means of verifying whatever you're explaining. Otherwise, you come across as attempting to influence a story with unverifiable hearsay, eroding your credibility as a source.
- Remember that reporters have to protect sources, too. Your need to protect a source in a sensitive situation will usually be understood.

11 Don't hold grudges against the media. Never ascribe to malice what can be ascribed to stupidity, and never ascribe to stupidity what can be ascribed to ignorance or miscommunication. If you think a reporter blew a big story involving you, invite the reporter to visit for some intensive backgrounding. The humane beat is a low priority with most papers, so you'll often be dealing with rookie reporters who just don't have enough background either in what you do or in reporting to make seasoned judgments about a lot of the information they

receive. Most reporters will appreciate a friendly response to an apparently unfriendly story. Very few really have an axe to grind.

- Never telephone a reporter with a complaint. Write it down. When journalists err, it is usually because of the pressure to become an instant expert on something complex in just a few hours before deadline. Telephone calls in response to yesterday's story interrupt gathering information on today's story, and are rarely appreciated. (And, bearing in mind deadline pressure, don't assume that the reporter who screams an obscenity in response to your hostile call really means it. Try a more friendly approach after a cooling-off period.)
- Write letters to the editor in response to anything that you feel deserves response, whether or not it involves your shelter directly. Keep your letters brief and factual.
- Never threaten to sue a journalist if you are not really willing and able to follow through. And even then, don't do it. Most publishers will fire a journalist rather than defend against a lawsuit, even if the journalist is absolutely in the right, because journalists are more cheaply hired (and fired) than lawyers. Thus, when you threaten to sue, you're directly threatening the journalist's livelihood. The journalistic grapevine is swift and influential. If you go after one journalist's job, every other journalist in your community is going to know about it almost instantly. Unless you have one hell of a good case against someone who is known to colleagues as a sleazeoid, you will never again be trusted no matter how long you live and no matter what you do to cultivate good media relations.
- Don't blame one reporter for something another one wrote or broadcast, even if it was for the same newspaper or TV station. Once again, journalist tenures are short. Chances are, the reporter you are talking to today doesn't have a clue what appeared in print last month or last year – and it may be that no one else there does either.

- Don't blame a reporter for quoting you accurately when you say something idiotic. People often don't say clearly what they mean to say, or think they said. In a situation where you come across as an idiot, explain that your explanation of thus-and-such may have been garbled at one end or the other, and go on to clarify the matter, without accusing anyone of bias or underhandedness. Remember, the reporter probably never had a clue what you meant to say, and therefore took whatever you did say at face value, not realizing that something wasn't clear or complete.

- There are bad reporters. There are three categories of bad reporters: "squirrels," young and inexperienced, who spend all their time chasing after nuts; airheads, usually TV or "Lifestyle" reporters, who want no more than a superficial take on any given topic; and would-be muckrakes who never let the facts get in the way of a good story, having decided in advance what the story is. If you feel a bad reporter has victimized you, and attempts to straighten the situation out with the reporter have only verified your suspicion, contact a good reporter, who will usually be sympathetic, and try and try again. Bear in mind, though, that many reporters are bad reporters before they become good reporters. It takes experience to cut through all the mendacity and fluff a reporter runs into, and to build the background necessary to understanding any and all stories. You're usually better off helping a reporter rather than writing him or her off because of one bad encounter.

12 **Always say thanks for good publicity, and neutral publicity, and especially for fair coverage of difficult situations.** Damned near nobody ever says thanks for a story. Even fewer subjects of stories ever say thanks for stories that balance the negative with the positive. If you can do that, you can bet your gracious response will be remembered for years to come.

13 **If a reporter wants to corroborate your information, or needs background on a humane issue that you don't have handy, have him or her call ANIMAL PEOPLE.** We're journalists too. Almost every day we help reporters with mass media make heads or tails of humane issues by providing context. Because we can talk reporter-to-reporter, and because copies of ANIMAL PEOPLE already go to every major newspaper and TV station in the U.S. and Canada, we have credibility on many issues that advocacy groups might not have. Where misunderstanding may become a problem, we might be able to help you out of a jam. Keep our numbers handy.

Follow the Monkeys!

The following was originally posted to the Society of Environmental Journalists' discussion group and is now used to precipitate discussion in "The Press and the Public" classes at several university journalism schools.

On January 8, 1998, Earle Holland posted:

"Some years ago, we co-hosted a journalism workshop on campus during which there was a hypothetical scenario presented involving the pollution in a river upstream of a major imaginary city. With the exception of two science writers in the room, the overwhelming majority of the 30+ reporters spent their time for questions looking under rocks for villains and scurrilous politicians. Only the science reporters were asking about the facts of the pollution situation."

And here is why that is:

- We are great apes, and great apes will always watch a fight more readily than study a problem. Of the other great apes, orangutans are most likely to study a problem; chimps, one of our two closest relatives, are more likely to study ways and means of winning a fight. Bonobos, our other closest relatives, will study a problem only if they don't have the opportunity to either have sex or watch someone having sex. In other words, conflict and sex are what our readers/viewers most want, and what interests most reporters the most, too.
- Most reporters break in covering politics or sports, that is, win/lose situations.
- If we do succeed in getting a story about complex issues on page one or the top of the TV news, the

editor or anchor person will demand (sometimes on camera, live), "Who's to blame?" Someone has to be blamed. That's rule #1 of great ape behavior in a crisis. If no one can be blamed, you get social disorder, because if leaders can't blame someone, they get deposed.

In short, to find the truth, follow the monkeys!

[Yes, of course, I know great apes are not monkeys – but you'll find this same social interaction in them, too. It appears to have evolved somewhere between bats and lemurs, about 70–80 million years ago when it was still possible to blame everything really bad on T-rex, i.e., a higher power and irresistible force.]

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