

Working With the Media



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Reasons Your Press Release May Get Tossed

Greg Brooks worked at a newspaper and said he had a chance to read, ridicule, and throw away thousands of press releases. Here are a few of his thoughts on why press releases often get tossed, plus my suggestions for avoiding it.

- **Your release failed because I never saw it.** Do you have any idea the amount of mail I get every day? And how much of it is utterly irrelevant? I throw away fully half of my mail without opening it because the address isn't local, and at a small daily we're all about local.
 - **What to do?**—You should make it a practice to hand deliver all your press releases to the newspaper, making an appointment beforehand. This gives you an opportunity to sell your program/activity and answer questions about why it is worthy of space in their newspaper. You should also take the opportunity to highlight any new features if the program has been held before.
- **Your release failed because it made the newsroom laugh.** We laugh at lots of stuff: Poor use of AP style. Horrible writing. “Local angles” that are as thin and weak as spider silk. Hint: If we're laughing, it won't get used.
 - **What to do?**—Invest in an AP Style Book. Becoming familiar with its guidelines will make your releases easier for newspapers to use because there will be less rewriting. If you're using a release for an event like National Library Week or Library Card Sign-Up Month, make sure to localize it with quotes and program information. The paper won't be interested if there is a quote from the ALA president, but they will listen if the Mayor talks about the value of the library to the community.
- **Your release failed because you called me on deadline.** I admit it — I'm petty, and even if you have a good story, I'm apt to drop it to the bottom of the stack or to the round file if you didn't have the good sense to know when I was on deadline. Will I answer my phone on deadline? Yes — because there might be news happening somewhere. But news of your new ABC WonderWidget is just going to tick me off.
 - **What to do?**—Know what the newspaper's deadlines are and respect them. They're sacred, so don't ask the newspaper to come out and take photos when you know they're putting their newspaper to bed. Deadline doesn't just mean the actual time immediately before printing. Some days are busier than others, depending on the schedule of local city council, school board, or county board meeting. If you want the newspaper's participation in, or coverage of, an event, don't schedule it on the days they are apt to be busiest.
- **Your release failed because you made me work too hard.** Here's the thing: We all have beats and we're all working those beats to develop original, interesting, above-the-fold stories faster than the competition. PR can do two things for me: It can alert me to something genuinely newsworthy and unique (which happens rarely) or it can spoon-feed me a story that, while not Pulitzer material, will be a slam-dunk to do because you're providing so much information. If you send me a release and it makes for an easy story, I'm in; if not, I've got better things to do.
 - **What to do?**—As you prepare your press release, think about the 5Ws (who, what, when, where and why), and if appropriate also include the how. Newspapers have to write many original articles each week, so they're unlikely to spend a great deal of time drafting an article on a computer class or children's performer for the library. Therefore, the more questions you can answer in your press release, the more likely it is they'll use your material.
- **Your release failed because you made me feel used.** The flip side of the point above is that if you make me feel like a tool, then I'm going to get all journalistically indignant on you, and that's the surest way to not get covered. So don't offer to write the story for me (yes, that actually happens!), don't send me endless streams of food, and don't act like a friend and confidante unless we've known each other for a decade or more.
 - **What to do?**—There was a saying on the typesetting machines (pre-desktop PCs) when I was working on the college newspaper that said, “Writing is easy! All you have to do is stare at the keyboard until little drops of blood appear on your forehead.” Newspaper editors and reporters work long hours for little pay. Be nice to them, respect their work, and don't be condescending. Treat them like the professionals they are and understand when they are unable to meet your needs. Sometimes there just isn't space for another article or photo, or there isn't time for them to attend another activity/event. The best thing you can do is make sure they can quickly and easily get all the information they need for an article. Be responsive to their requests for information, and make yourself and other staff available for interviews.

Press Release Content

As you work to promote programs and events at your library, here is a brief list of information you should have ready before you talk to the media or begin writing press releases and other informational pieces.

- **Remember the basic “5 Ws” (who, what, when, where, and why), and also plan for the how if appropriate.** It’s amazing how many times press releases are written that don’t include this basic information. Newspapers and other media should never be required to call the library to ask the time an event starts, the room being used, must you register ahead of time, who is the performer/teacher/lecturer, who should attend this particular event, or why it should be of interest to the newspaper’s readers.
- **Always include a contact person.** Newspapers will sometimes see more of an article in your press release than you do, so make sure you provide a name, phone number, and e-mail address. This person must be able to answer questions for the media. Nothing kills a story faster than calling the contact person and learning that they can’t answer your questions. You also need to make it clear that this contact person should return calls promptly. Newspapers work on deadlines that are very firm. If you fail to call them back, you may miss a very good opportunity.
- **Have local resources available to provide quotes.** Newspapers are always looking for the local angle, and they like to quote local residents that their readers know. If you’re announcing an event or class, have a past participant who can talk about the value of this sort of programming. This is also an ideal opportunity to have others help tell your important story.
- **Remember that less is more.** Be selective and don’t overwhelm the newspaper with press releases. Newspaper space is valuable, and if you request free space too often you will start to get turned down. Hopefully your newspaper has a calendar or notice section that you can use regularly, but you should save press releases for more important items. If the newspaper knows this, you’ll get more notice.
- **Work ahead and plan with the newspaper.** You should take the time to plan your programs for the year as thoroughly as possible and do it in conjunction with the newspaper. If you know you’re going to need newspaper coverage to promote an event, you don’t want to schedule it so that need falls the same week the newspaper is doing its annual bridal or garden section. They’ll appreciate the advanced planning and will be more willing to work with you.
- **Try to avoid busy times.** You can’t always know when the newspaper will be busiest, but you can bet that budget times for the school district, city/village/town, or county will be busy times. So is back to school, end of school year, and certain holidays. Make sure you know your newspaper’s deadlines and production schedule so you can avoid making requests at the wrong times.
- **Target feature articles.** There are significant down times for newspapers—like the week between Christmas and New Years—that are perfect opportunities for feature articles about the library (non-timely pieces). This and others may be good times to plan feature stories. The newspaper will be thankful for the copy, and they can work ahead and have articles ready. Planning ahead with the newspaper will let you identify these times so you can prepare accordingly.
 - *Take the opportunity to have the subject of the feature tell your library’s story. It may be to talk about the extraordinary value the library provides, it may be the depth of the library’s holdings, or it may be the special programming that is offered. It’s what you decide, but prep people to tie this issue to the interview.*
- **Review Newspaper Archives.** It’s important to take time each year to review what your local newspaper has covered in regard to the library, how that coverage compared to the press releases you sent, and what sorts of articles and photos the newspaper used. This should help you refine what events you choose to promote, and how you promote the events. (See Activity Planning Checklist & Promotion Suggestions)

Activity Planning Checklist & Promotion Suggestions

Note: This checklist is intended to help maximize media coverage of your library programs. Working with local media during the planning process of your programs can pay significant dividends in terms of activity coverage. These are only suggestions, and should in no way be construed as the only way to work with your media. If you already have a good relationship that is working, continue those efforts.

| | Task | Completed |
|-----|---|-----------|
| 1. | Determine the weekly production schedules of your local media and plan accordingly. Don't schedule photographic events such as performers, games, or activities at times when newspapers or TV stations won't have reporters/photographers available. | |
| 2. | Determine if the local newspaper accepts photos taken by the library, and whether they prefer color prints or digital photos. If they accept photos, see the document "Photographic Considerations When Planning Activities" for suggestions for taking photographs the newspaper will use. | |
| 3. | If you're planning an event with contests of any sort, be sure to invite the local newspaper editor/reporter or radio/TV on-air personalities to be judges, then plan according to their schedules. Their involvement will improve your chances of media coverage. Also work with local business and civic leaders, coaches, teachers, and other well known local people to get their involvement. | |
| 4. | As you plan the schedule of performers/presenters, consider the local TV/cable access channel schedule. Many programs may lend themselves to broadcast in the community, so ask performers/presenters if they will allow their programs to be videotaped for rebroadcast on the local channel. | |
| 4a. | As you plan for newspaper photographers, and if you've received approval to videotape performers for rebroadcast on cable access, work with representatives from both to ensure the performance space is set up in a way that allows them to get good photos and footage. You want to ensure they can get photos/video of both performers/presenters and patrons together in one shot (not the face of the performer with the back of patrons' heads). | |
| 5. | Plan out your yearly schedule as thoroughly as possible and get it posted in the library, schools, churches, grocery and other stores, city hall, food pantry, day care centers, restaurants (especially fast food establishments when the programs involve children), municipal swimming pool, and other places patrons meet. | |
| 5a. | Work with the local newspaper, radio, and TV/cable access to get your weekly schedule publicized | |
| 6. | As you plan your schedule, consider having your Friends group and other volunteers create a presence for the library at parades, concerts in the park, festivals, etc. Hand out coupons from a local business for a free something (ice-cream cone, bagel, 10% off a purchase, etc.). To collect, a patron has to come to the library and check out a book or attend a program activity. These sorts of efforts are particularly effective with children's programming. | |
| 7. | As you plan activities, give serious consideration to hosting some intergenerational events with a local nursing home or senior adult day care/assisted living facility. These partnerships will provide great opportunities for photos and are a potent outreach effort for the library. | |
| 8. | As you plan your program activities, especially those for children, do so with an emphasis on activities that lend themselves to photos or video. Suggestions are outside games that let kids be active, get dirty or create things, or programs that take the library to the community. | |
| 9. | Work with the local municipal swimming pool or other recreational programs to tie in with some of their promotional events. If they have special evening programs for families, make sure you have a library presence. Agree to help promote their activity through your program. | |

Photographic Considerations When Planning Activities

Note: This page provides suggestions for planning events and activities that will be more conducive to photographic or video coverage. It also includes suggestions for improving photo composition and considerations about room arrangement, plus tips about lighting that will improve your photos.

| Photo Planning & Event Suggestions | |
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| 1. | It may be helpful to spend an hour at the local newspaper looking at the archives. See what photos have run in the past to get a better idea of what the paper is looking for. Compare where and how large they run their own photos (the ones they take) with those you submit. Pay particular attention to the differences in the photos, such as composition and lighting. |
| 2. | Once you've reviewed past photos, try to plan activities that will give the newspaper something new. They're more likely to run photos of something that is new and different, and they're more likely to pass on photos that are the "same old thing." |
| 3. | When activities/programs involve kids, consider something so kids are active or physical, getting dirty or wet, building something, interacting with senior citizens in the community, doing science, or performing some sort of community service. |
| 4. | Once you have your schedule finalized, sit down with the newspaper editor/reporter/photographer and determine which would present the best opportunities for photographs. Ask them for any suggestions they have in terms of preparing the room. They may have some specific needs of which you are unaware. |
| 5. | If possible, plan activities outside to take advantage of lighting and space. If that is not possible, try to plan activities in large rooms with lots of natural light. Small rooms pose real problems when it comes to photos, even if they are well lit. If a small room is your only option, consider structuring your activity so only several patrons are in the room at a time. Fewer people in the room make it easier to take photos of events. Newspaper photographers will most likely want close-ups of participants, but they need some space between individuals so they can compose the photos they want. |
| 6. | Lighting is a real issue. If you have an event or activity that requires low light levels in the room, let the photographer know that ahead of time so they can plan accordingly. Offer to re-enact (stage) a portion of the show before the actual performance. That way they can get the photo they need with good lighting, and they don't have to spend a great deal of time getting it. |
| 7. | When you tell a photographer to be at the library at a certain time, make sure you are ready at that time. Newspaper reporters/photographers are busy, and making them wait past the scheduled time is not only inconsiderate, it reduces your chances of getting future coverage. |
| 8. | When photographers come to the library for planned events, be sure you have secured permissions from participants/parents beforehand. Don't put children in front of the camera whose parents don't want them photographed. Also, have someone available to help the photographer identify the names (and ages, when children) of those photographed. |
| 9. | Make sure you have a stool or step-ladder available for the photographer in the event they need it. |
| 10. | Don't ask newspaper photographers to take photos they don't need (like lineups of all the children present that day). If you want those photos for your own records, take them with a library camera. |
| 11. | If you're going to ask a photographer to take a "check passing" photo or an award presentation, try and be creative. Most newspapers prefer not to print photos of people standing in straight lines. If someone has donated money for a piece of equipment or materials, wait until the item(s) are purchased and then schedule the photo. If they donate books, get a photo of them reading the book to some children (you can pose it). Too often we want to take the photo when the donation is made, but the better photo is when the money is used for its intended purpose. In many cases the photo will be used in either case, but it becomes an issue of placement and size. A better photo opportunity will result in better placement and larger size. |
| 12. | If you're setting up the room for a performer or activity, you may want to consult with the newspaper photographer to see how he/she would like the room to be set up. Working with them will increase the likelihood that they'll be able to get better quality photos, which they'll use. |
| 13. | Try to avoid placing the performer in a corner of the room. It makes it much harder for the newspaper photographer to get photos of the performer and children. |
| 14. | Don't invite the newspaper photographer to every event or activity. Give them a schedule for the year, but issue a personal invitation to only those that you think will offer the best opportunities for photographs. |

Sample Media Permission Slip

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|---|--------------------|
| <LIBRARY NAME> Public Library MEDIA PERMISSION SLIP | Date |
| <p>I, _____, give permission to the</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><LIBRARY NAME> Public Library</p> <p>to make or use pictures, slides, digital images, or other reproductions of me, of my minor child _____, or of materials owned by me or my child, and to put the finished pictures, slides, or images to use without compensation in productions, publications, on the web, or other printed or electronic materials related to the role and function of the <LIBRARY NAME> Public Library.</p> | |
| Address Street, City, State, ZIP | |
| Signature ➤ | Telephone Area/No. |

Sample Media Permission Language

Note: The language on this page should be used in fliers, brochures, posters, and other materials produced by your library to ensure parents and guardians are notified that photographs of their children may be taken by newspaper reporters, library staff members, or others for use in various print, web, or electronic media.

Children and adults participating in <LIBRARY NAME> Public Library's <PROGRAM NAME> Program may be photographed by newspaper or television reporters/photographers, library staff members, or others involved with the program. These photographs may appear without compensation in newspapers or in productions, publications, on the Web, or other printed or electronic materials related to the role and function of the <LIBRARY NAME> Public Library. Parents who do not want their children photographed should notify <STAFF PERSON NAME>, <TITLE>.

Resources

This is a list of resources you can use to help manage your library's communication efforts. I've included advocacy materials because there is a great deal of good information in these documents about different types of information that should be shared whenever you communicate with the media.

It's important that you take every opportunity with the media to tell some facet of your library's story. You need to keep it fresh and ensure it is relevant, but don't miss the chance to sell your programs, staff members, volunteers, facility, or impact within the community.

WLA

- **Advocacy Resources**
 - <http://wla.wisconsinlibraries.org/legislative/advocacy/advocacy-resources>

SCLS

- **Online Advocacy Toolkit**
 - <http://www.scls.info/pr/advocacy/>

ALA

- **Public Information Office**
 - <http://www.ala.org/offices/pio>
- **Library Advocates Handbook**
 - <http://www.ala.org/offices/ola/libraryadvocateshandbook>

Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition - Charting A Media Relations Strategy

- www.sparc.arl.org/resource/media-map-charting-media-relations-strategy

LibTalk Blog—Inspiration for library communicators: thoughts on public relations, communications, and marketing.

- <http://libtalk.blogspot.com/>
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