

Lights, Camera, Action: Attracting Media Coverage

By forming close relationships with reporters, editors, and broadcast producers, your shelter will be better equipped to reach its goals.

But to do so, you'll have to better understand their needs. Like a telephone line, the media serve as a link between an organization and its public, transmitting news and information they deem worthy of publication. Members of the media may appear to be your most bitter enemies when they publicize a negative story about the shelter, but they can also be your most valuable allies when you need to appeal to the public. After all, newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and television broadcasters are interested in one thing: selling an interesting story. And they'll most often do whatever is necessary to accomplish their goal. If your shelter can provide the images and information they need, there's a good chance the relationship will favor all parties.

Besides running weekly columns or features that focus on adoption, newspapers and radio and television stations are also enticed by other stories with popular appeal, including those about cruelty investigations, disaster planning, traveling with pets, and programs that help people keep their pets. The shelter's public relations coordinator—whether an executive director, a director of public relations, or a volunteer—should constantly consider stories from the perspective of the public and the media. Connie Howard, executive director of the Humane Society of Greater Burlington in Vermont, says that shelters can find great stories for the media by simply taking a closer look at the things they take for granted, such as returning an animal to his owner or rescuing a dog found wandering the interstate. "It's everyday stuff to you," says Howard, "but to them it's newsworthy."

How do you find out where to pitch these stories? If your shelter isn't already referring to a media contact list when sending out press releases, find out if a community media guide already exists before creating one from scratch. Groups such as the United Way, Women in Communications, and the Public Relations Society of America may have local guides containing contact names, phone numbers, and other important information about the local media. If no list is available, call the news outlets directly and ask who covers these issues or just pay attention to the local network affiliates and newspapers and see which reporters tend to cover animal-related stories.

Meet the Press

With this list in hand, call reporters, introduce yourself and your agency, and set up a face-to-face meeting. Humane agencies located in or near big cities may face stiff competition when pitching stories, but because stories about animals are so popular with the public, shelters have a distinct advantage. During your meeting with reporters and producers, explain your

organization's mission, then present some of your current issues and ask for their support in publicizing them. Before leaving, find out how best to meet their production needs and deadlines.

Public relations experts say that the most important part of fostering a relationship with the media-or with any group, for that matter-is honesty. "The first thing I did [when I started] was establish a line of communication," says Paulette Dean, executive director of the Danville Area Humane Society in Virginia. "[Members of the media] knew they could trust me. They knew that if they called, I would return their call and that if I didn't have the information, I would find it. Now they know we're a credible institution. When they hear unfavorable things, they give me an opportunity to respond."

Identify and train a few key staff members to act as designated media contact people and help them establish working relationships with reporters, as the Michigan Humane Society has done. "We've brought in people to coach us on dealing with the media on a pro bono basis," says Executive Director Gary Tiscornia. "[They help answer questions like] How do you interview?, What is a sound bite?, and How do you get your message across?" Once you get to know reporters and editors, you'll be positioned to respond to media inquiries not only during crises, but whenever members of the media have questions. "We are the experts in our field," says Carla Cox, executive director of the Humane Society of Indianapolis. "Once the media get to know you and value your credibility, they will call you to get the humane society perspective on other stories."

Dean recommends treating each station and newspaper equally well rather than giving special story ideas or information to the same organization every time. And after a story is published, follow up by sending a note to the reporter thanking her for the story and letting her know of the response you've received.

The Medium Is the Message

Although your relationships with newspaper editors and television and radio producers will be similar, the methods of communicating within each medium differ greatly. The print media, including newspapers, magazines, and newsletters, all rely on the written word and photographs. Radio stations obviously depend on sound-scripted public-service announcements (PSAs), for example, or on-air or taped interviews. Some shelters have even had success bringing animals on the radio thanks to a well-placed meow or bark. Television stations, however, depend on stories with visual elements. Although news anchors occasionally read news stories on air, broadcasters are much more interested in filming events with strong visual elements such as rabies clinics, pet parades, puppy training classes, and children's programs. Regardless of where your story appears, however, the major tools at your disposal are often the same: media kits; audio-, video-, and print news releases; PSAs; and news conferences.

Media Kits. A folder or "portfolio" containing background information on the shelter, the media kit provides an easy way to introduce reporters to your shelter and all it does. Kits can contain a recent newsletter, fact sheets (on your organization and various issues), photographs, articles, brochures, PSAs, news releases, even a "canned" feature story ready for publication. You can

also include testimonials from your shelter's supporters, including board members and other community leaders. Reporters can use the background information to flesh out their stories and perhaps create new ones. Your media kit is a calling card that reflects on your agency so make sure the design of the materials is consistent, attractive, and orderly. Visit a print shop and purchase a few dozen professional-quality binders, or stop by the local office-supply store and pick up some inexpensive folders. Put your shelter's name and address on the cover so reporters will have contact information at their fingertips.

News Releases. One of the most prevalent media relations tools, the news release briefly profiles an item of public interest, and encourages reporters to contact a spokesperson for more information. Send a news release to local media outlets before holding a special event and after hiring a new director, receiving a grant, or renovating your facility. You can even send out releases about issues that may not fit the traditional definition of "news" but that are nonetheless helpful to readers and viewers of local media. For instance, to warn pet owners of the dangers of chocolate, Cox sends out news releases before Halloween, Valentine's Day, and Easter. Remember to send your releases to broadcast outlets, too; although radio stations and television stations can't print your release, reporters may decide to interview you or develop a story around one of the sources you've quoted.

Audio and Video Releases. Just as a print news release provides items of interest, so do audio- and video news releases. If you're about to announce a rabies clinic at your shelter, you may want to send footage of last year's clinic to a local television station. Of course, putting together audio- and video releases requires more production capabilities than do other public relations tools and may appear out of reach for smaller shelters. But don't discount them entirely. There may be budding videographers, producers, or radio broadcasters among your board members, volunteers, or supporters. Other shelters, advertising agencies, and national organizations might also be able to help. Remember that if you can use innovations that other nonprofits aren't using, your chances for exposure improve. For example, whereas even small-town newspapers may receive hundreds of print news releases every week, local broadcasters receive very few audiotapes and videotapes, which means your issues are that much more likely to be aired.

Public Service Announcements (PSAs). Whether provided as scripts for radio and television broadcasters, as print ads for newspapers, or as taped announcements, PSAs will allow you to deliver your message directly to the public without incurring any great expense. Although the Federal Communications Commission requires broadcast stations to set aside a certain amount of air time for public or community service messages, the stations' producers decide which PSAs to run and when to run them, usually favoring the most creative, effective pieces. If your shelter's PSAs have been overlooked in the past, talk with other shelters to find out what has worked for them, consult with an advertising agency, or use PSAs created by national animal protection organizations like The HSUS, the American Humane Association, and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

News Conferences. Few shelters find the need to call news conferences, but they're effective when a shelter has to get important information to the media quickly or wants to broadcast a truly spectacular message to the community, like the opening of a spay-neuter clinic. Before calling a conference, however, ask yourself if a news release will do. If you do decide to hold a

conference, don't release the news before your event; otherwise the media will have no reason to show up.

While you're working with local media outlets on a more regular basis and experimenting with various communications tools, keep a file on the specific needs of every news organization: When are their deadlines? Should you send news releases by standard mail, fax, or e-mail? What format should audiotape or videotape be in? Keep in mind the needs of the public and the needs of the media, and you'll be better able to meet the needs of the animals.

Public Relations Without the "Middle Man"

Although the media can provide many powerful public relations options, you can also reach your public directly, without all the cameras, wires, and printing presses.

Though the media present the opportunity to send a broad message to a large number of people, you can use community events, newsletters, web sites, and other tools to win over the public one person at a time. Your shelter can tailor smaller community-oriented programs to individual groups, with special events for children, speaking engagements before civic groups, and, of course, newsletters to inform your members.

Shelter Tours: Instead of sending the message to the public, many shelters are bringing the public to the message. Montgomery County Humane Society (MCHS) in Maryland invites elementary classrooms, scouting troops, and other groups to visit the animals and learn about the shelter's role in helping those animals. Children listen to a 25-minute presentation about pet care, the responsibilities of pet ownership, and the proper way to act around unfamiliar animals. Students are given stickers, coloring books, and cards identifying them as honorary humane society officers who promise to be responsible and kind. "I think it makes the children feel special," says Heather Bancroft, director of humane education and public relations. "They feel they can make a difference."

Speakers Bureaus: Providing speakers to local schools and community groups such as the Rotary Club, Lions Club, and Kiwanis Club not only allows your shelter to bring your message directly to the community leaders, but also enables you to get feedback from the community. Speakers from the Dane County (Wisc.) Humane Society have made presentations on a variety of issues, sharing information about wildlife, animal care, local animal control laws, and the link between animal abuse and child abuse.

Web Sites: Often begun as special projects launched by volunteers, shelter web sites are an effective way to spread a message to a broad group quickly and inexpensively. By including instructions for people who have lost their pets, MCHS helps return animals to their owners, and by advertising animals available through the shelter foster program, MCHS finds new homes for others. Each week the nearby SPCA of Anne Arundel County's web site has approximately 2,000 visitors, many of whom visit the site to see shelter animal photos, updated daily.

Cable Programs: When the media aren't broadcasting your message for you, you may just want to broadcast it yourself. The SPCA of Anne Arundel County, Maryland, produces a community-

access television show that appears in 100,000 homes twice a week. The cable company provides the camera person and assistance, and the volunteer host provides viewers with information on a range of animal issues. Each show features a segment on shelter animals available for adoption, and a segment with a veterinarian discussing animal-care issues.

Newsletters: If you're looking for a way to speak to your constituents in your very own words, there are few tools more effective than a shelter newsletter. Like many shelters, MCHS displays copies of its newsletter at the front counter and sends thousands of copies to its members, veterinarians' offices, and libraries. Animail contains interactive pet-related activities, pictures of shelter alumni, and stories about malnourished or abused cats and dogs who have been nursed back to health and adopted. "Happy endings get people's attention," says Bancroft, and they also increase the likelihood that readers might respond with a contribution.

Contests: A contest not only appeals to the media, but also motivates entrants to provide your shelter with promotional tools for its own use. For instance, every year MCHS asks schoolchildren to create posters promoting Be Kind to Animals Week, awarding a \$50 U.S. savings bond to winners from three different age groups. Local malls then display many of the entries, providing plenty of publicity for the shelter. The Humane Society of Indianapolis (HSI) holds an annual photo contest, drawing entries from more than 200 budding photographers and pet lovers alike whose photos eventually appear in television segments or in the shelter's newsletter and brochures. In Washington, Pets DC holds a Pride of Pets Dog Show to publicize the organization's commitment to help those living with HIV to care for their pets. Prizes are awarded to the most adorable pets, most obedient pets, even "movie-star lookalikes"-a sure way to line up dozens of entrants and draw plenty of media attention.

Special Events: If you're interested in getting people to visit your shelter, remember that everyone loves a party. Every Valentine's Day HSI hosts "Heavy Petting into the Night" and every Halloween the shelter invites people to a "Howl into the Night" open house where they can enjoy games, a raffle, and a cakewalk. Hundreds of people attended this year's Valentine's Day event, touted as a singles' night in various news releases, PSAs, and fliers: "Looking for a furry Valentine? Choose a Valentine with four legs instead of two." More than a few people took home a special someone as a result of that evening.