Some Things to Consider

One of the primary ways a non-profit organization tells its story to its key audiences is through the press. You may not have a major television station in your area, but chances are you have a local newspaper, a local radio station, and perhaps a local-access cable television station. Before long, you also will be using the Internet, whether you post your news on someone else’s World Wide Web site or develop your own.

Media relations is only one part of a public relations plan, but it can be your most valuable and efficient tool. Once you know how to get your message not only accepted, but valued, as important news by your local media, you’ve made a big step toward the success of your program.

Publicity is not only low cost but has high return. Placing a news story about your event or your organization gives your message credibility and recognition, whether broadcast or printed.

Good editors and news directors, however, appreciate timely, well-written and well-organized news releases and will use them appropriately. They also like story tips that they can follow up on their own time. But don’t ask for blatant advertising to be treated as news. News professionals are very adept at recognizing real news and culling out thinly disguised ads. They know their audiences, and they know their continuation as a business depends upon advertising sales.

Four Basic Guidelines

- The first skill to develop is to recognize the difference between news and advertising. Do that by reading, listening and watching the local media to see how they treat news so that you can conform to their choices and styles. News is something unusual or important and/or affects a large number of people in a significant way. It must be timely. For example: Don’t announce your relocation after you are settled in. Feature stories also should be timely. If you keep on top of what’s in the news you might be able to tie today’s headlines to something in your collections. If your part of the state is bracing for a flood, what do you have in your collections that tell the stories of past floods? When the Legislature wrangles with school funding issues, can you find the records of a country school that operated on a small salary for a teacher, some slates and a pile of firewood? When June dairy days roll around, can you write a short piece on your collection of cream separators, or cowbells? Or offer to let the local paper photograph these pieces of history?

- Second, learn to write good news releases. Put the news in the first paragraph; don’t hide it under a paragraph about your organization (that goes last). Be brief, be clear, and be accurate. Neatness counts. Proofread three times, not just for typographical errors, but for content. Make sure your release has the “who, what, when, where, why and how” within the text. Every name must be spelled correctly. Using a quote from a credible source is great, but make sure it is lively.

Double space your copy. Indicate the end with a “-30-” mark or the symbols ###. If your release goes over one page in length use “more” at the bottom to indicate to typesetters that they should look for the rest of the release. But don’t write more than two pages. Newspaper space is valuable. Broadcasters will cut your news release to fit a very small time frame. You might want to write shorter releases for local radio stations. If they take Public Service Announcements, or PSAs, the rule of thumb...
Public Relations: Definitions of Some Basic Terms

There have been numerous definitions of public relations, but my favorite comes from Frank Wylie, a former president of the Public Relations Society of America. “Senior-level public relations people are likely to spend 10 percent of their time with techniques, 40 percent with administration, and 50 percent with analysis and judgment. At entry level it’s 50 percent techniques, 5 percent judgment and 45 percent running like hell.”

Most small organizations do not have senior-level public relations professionals working on their team, so that leaves the job to someone with many other duties, such as a museum manager, or to a volunteer, who might be anywhere on the scale from entry-level to pro.

PR is both an art and a science—essentially it means being aware of your audiences (your “publics”) and planning policies and actions that serve the interest of both the organization and the public.

Advertising is space purchased or time purchased to deliver a message prepared by the purchaser.

Publicity is information supplied to a news medium without cost. The decision to use it and its final form are controlled by the medium.

Media relations involves understanding the needs of the media you wish to deal with and meeting those needs. It includes meeting deadlines, making your news releases newsworthy and easy to use, and maintaining good relationships with reporters, editors and news directors.