

Relating to the World: Community and Media

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From the outset, most environmental groups find themselves faced with a problem of communications: how to reach their community with their message.

Part of the solution to this problem, inevitably, lies in using the communications media: newspapers and magazines, radio, TV. The media may not have a monopoly on communications, but it's the business they're in. As many environmental groups have already learned, you'll use the media; the media will also use you.

Meaningful Relationships with the Press

I. The Art of Journalistic Massage

Why, you may be asking yourself, would I want to develop any relationship with the media, let alone a close one.

Simple.

If you depend entirely on your ability to write a good press release you may still find that it doesn't get used. Even if you get it there in plenty of time.

And if it is used, it still may get buried somewhere on a back page where hardly anyone sees it.

From the media point of view, a press release from a previously unknown group is a bit like a proposal from a stranger. If your press releases are going to do their job, you need a media strategy. And the easiest strategy is to get to know the journalist or editor receiving your releases, so the journalist or editor knows you.

One way to start getting acquainted — if you're beginning from scratch — is to take a press release in to the office personally and ask to see the editor. Introduce yourself and your organization. Present your press release. Expand on the content briefly. If it deals with a newsworthy event, ask for a journalist to cover it. Be polite. Be reasonable. Be brief.

If your release is used, or a story is based on it, phone the editor and be appreciative but not effusive.

This method is fine with most community weeklies and often with local radio stations. With a little adaptation, it'll also work with local correspondents for dailies. All of them actually want to use your press release; editors and program directors have recurring nightmares about white space and dead air; local correspondents often get paid depending on the amount of copy they send to their dailies.

The personal touch is more difficult when dealing directly with the dailies, CBC, and the networks, all of whom receive far more press releases than they have time and space to use. Editors and producers won't want to find the time to talk to you unless you have more than a run-of-the-mill press release to offer.

You'll need another tactic.

Professionally speaking, all journalists are only interested in one thing.

A story.

If you can feed a journalist a story, particularly one which doesn't require a lot of

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additional work on the part of the journalist, you are on your way to developing a meaningful relationship with the press.

You are, whether you have yet realized it or not, in an excellent position to provide stories and story suggestions. As environmentalists and environmental groups, you have developed specialized knowledge and interests in environmental issues. You are on the receiving end of a whole slew of other people's mailing lists with environmental information. You are in regular communication with other environmentalists and other environmental groups and networks.

You know more about the environment than the media know.

Not all your story suggestions will be used, of course, but some will. In addition, you and your group will become recognized as sources: you'll begin to get calls from journalists looking for background, comments, and reactions to stories that you didn't initiate. You'll also find yourself answering a lot of questions and wondering if it's all worth it.

Some rules for your new relationship:

- Be sure of your facts. An image as a flamboyant dingbat ready and able to produce powerful quotes and sound bites may get you lots of press, but unless you couple that with reliability, it won't be "good press".
- Never say anything to a journalist you'll regret seeing in print with your name attached. Further, expect that you'll be quoted out of the context in which you spoke; that way you won't be astonished when it happens, and you can be

You can minimize the chances of out-of-context quotes if you are focused, direct, and clear, but you can never eliminate the risk.

- During a TV interview, make your answer short.
- If a radio journalist talks to you on the phone, always ask if you're being taped.
- Before the interview begins, you can ask what the questions will be.
- If you need time to react to a question, or want to check something out, tell them you'll get back to them.
- You set the limits for the interview and the relationship: don't let yourself get pushed beyond them.
- If you don't want to answer a question, don't. Take a lesson from politicians: "Well, that's an interesting point. The area I think needs to be explored is..." and go on to what you want to get across.
- Never ask to see a story before it gets published. This may sound like a perfectly reasonable request to you — to make sure that the facts are right and so on — but it makes journalists get all huffy and imagine they're about to be censored by someone other than their editor, publisher, or themselves. Not a good relationship-building tactic.
- Never forget that the motives of the journalist in "your story" are not the same as yours. The journalist wants a story that will advance her/his career, please his/her editor/producer/publisher, and not turn off readers/listeners/viewers and advertisers.

- Remember that the journalist will have other relationships; some, perhaps many, of them with people or agencies or interests whose points-of-view are not in harmony with yours. The story which results will likely try to take all of these into account. Don't act betrayed when it does.

You can make use of media to get your message out without necessarily depending on press releases, news stories, or close relationships with journalists.

For print media, the easiest and one of the most effective methods is the letter to the editor. Publications differ in the amount of space they allocate to letters, and the sorts of letter they will print, but in most local weeklies — and in many other publications — the letters to the editor are avidly read. Generally speaking the shorter the letter the better. Not only is a short letter more likely to be printed, it is also more effective. A variation is the disguised letter to the editor which begins “I am sending you a copy of a letter I have sent to [politician's name]”. This form allows you to attach a letter much longer than you would likely have got published otherwise.

Letters to radio and TV stations/ programs tend to result in a sentence or a few words excerpted and broadcast, if they have any public result at all.

Many local radio stations have call-in programs: if there's a particular issue, you may be able to get yourself invited as a guest, and you can always phone to express your group's opinion. Most stations also will provide — within limits — on-air support for community causes in the form of public service announcements.

Cable-TV channels often have available time and have an obligation to provide community access.

Start your own media. The best way to communicate with your community is as directly as possible. With a computer, printer, and a little work you can turn out a regular newsletter to quite professional standards. The same tools — combined with a modicum of talent in design — can provide your group with posters, brochures, information sheets, flyers, and any of the other fragments of the information explosion. If you're totally inexperienced in this sort of communication and feeling intimidated, resort to crime: steal someone else's brochure design and use your own words. Every environmental group should have a file of other people's publications to use as models.

II. The Press Release

People inexperienced in communicating with the media are apt to regard press releases as either impossibly difficult and time consuming to prepare, or as insignificant bits of piffle to be done with little thought at the last moment. The truth, as is usually the case, lies between these extremes.

For any environmental group, the press release is your primary method of reaching beyond your active membership into the general public. Ineffective press releases are indeed wastes of time; effective ones are important organization-strengthening tools.

Here's some suggestions for writing effective press releases.

We live in an age of diminishing attention spans. (Still remember what you

read on the previous page? Good. You're probably above average.) Journalists suffer from this too, but your press release can survive if you:

Keep it simple.

Keep it short.

Few press releases need more than a page. Hardly any need more than two pages.

What do you actually put in it?

Follow this recipe:

mercial radio stations in your area even if they originate outside it. To reach the maximum number of people, your press release should also be sent to your members or supporters and any organizations you work with. You can also get the word out by posting the press release on the NBEN's website and on your Facebook page. For some releases you may want to include the TV networks and head offices of the dailies. You may also want to include municipal governments and even selected government departments.

Plan ahead. Figure out when you need your press release published or aired in order to reach the public. Make sure

SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE

May 1, 2011
 For immediate release
 [Headline:] Environmentalists Seek Action
 [Paragraph 1: a short statement of the major point]
 [Paragraph 2: a quote from someone connected with the organization]
 [Paragraph 3: a short statement of the action you want the public to take: time and place of the meeting, etc]
 [Paragraph 4: another quote or piece of additional information]
 -0-
 For information: (your name and phone number)

No paragraph should have more than two sentences.

Now that you have your press release written, what are you going to do with it?

Your basic media distribution list should include weeklies in your area, local correspondents for the dailies sold there, local radio, CBC-radio, and cable TV. You'll probably want to include the most commonly listened to com-

mercial radio stations in plenty of time.

A weekly that goes into distribution on Wednesdays, for example, may have a noon Monday copy deadline, but most weeks will have most of its space already filled before then. Unless your press release is hot news, it'll have less chance of being published if it arrives at 11 o'clock Monday morning than if it had arrived the previous Thursday or Friday.

The best method to get press releases out is to send them by email. However, keep in mind that the people on the receiving end get hundreds of emails. So, make sure your subject line is concise and to-the-point. If you are attaching large images or files, your email may get blocked. To prevent this, just include smaller photos with your message and indicate that high-resolution images are available on request. You can also follow-up with a phone call to make sure it was received.

The media can help you reach out to your community, but it can't ensure that the community reaches back with helping hands. Communications is only part of the problem, particularly for environmentalists who often have unpleasant truths and uncomfortable realities to communicate.

How do we get the community to reach back, to translate that often-polluted high rate of concern about environment into support for environmental organizations?

Building Community Links

Building solid community alliances and relationships is like any other construction project. It requires planning and the right materials, and it takes time.

It is also crucial for any local environmental group, and an area in which environmental organizations, historically, have been weak.

It's not hard to see why relationships between environmental groups and the communities in which we live and work have often been rocky. As environmentalists, we are sort of the "not-necessarily-Loyal Opposition," usually seen as public opponents of something

someone else is doing or proposing to do. If it damages the environment, we're against it.

For many people in the community, however, and for most of the community structure represented by other local groups, this may be a tough attitude to support, let alone to actively share and be seen to be sharing. It's the old "Jobs vs Environment" conundrum at the community level, and the amount of environmental damage communities will tolerate from any proposed policy or project is higher when economics are bad locally. Put another way, fewer people will be prepared to oppose an environmentally unsound development if times are hard and they or their relatives or their friends or neighbours may get some economic benefit from it. They may not like it. But it may be hold your nose and don't rock the boat time.

All of which means that it's not easy being Green.

Particularly when economic times are hard.

So what can we do about it?

Defining Community

In a former life I edited a high school social studies textbook. One of the most difficult single tasks was defining "community" in a way that the sociologists, the publishers, the teachers, and the education bureaucrats could all agree on.

As environmentalists and environmental groups, the job is easier. For us, there are two basic communities:

- A "downwind community" which has more-or-less definable geographical and/or political

- boundaries, encompassing the area with the most to lose (or gain) environmentally speaking;
- an “issue community” consisting of people and other groups with an interest in the environmental issue(s) whether they live downwind or not.

For example, the Atlantic Salmon Federation, an NBEN member, has a geographical community consisting of actual and potential salmon habitat in Atlantic Canada. But its issue community includes not only salmon anglers living in the immediate watersheds, but, primarily, people who come there to angle for salmon and who may live anywhere in the world.

Building good community relations involves looking at both “communities,” examining them in terms of communication, needs and interests, volunteer potential, information flow, funding sources, etc.

For most environmental groups, particularly small ones, the downwind community is the crucial one. Environmental groups that don’t get and keep support from their local communities burn out the handful of volunteers trying to do too much work in keeping them going, dwindle to insignificance, go into hibernation, or collapse entirely.

So how do we get and keep that support?

- **Be there for the long run.** Any multi-issue environmental group should have a clear intention of establishing a continuing and permanent presence in the community. Any single issue group should be around until the issue is resolved whether it takes six months or six years.

- **Be open.** Let people know what you’re up to. Environmental groups are often perceived — and sometimes with good reason — as being closed cliques composed of environmentalists with fixed positions and dogmatic opinions who are not really open to new members. Actively counter this image. Send out press releases. Hold regular meetings. Produce a newsletter: even a single page once or twice a year sent to a mailing list of other local groups, municipalities, businesses, schools, and actual or potential supporters/members is a community-building tool well worth the time and expense. And go out of your way to welcome and accept new members.

- **Be positive.** One of the greatest barriers to long term community support and involvement for any local environmental group is an image of gloom, doom, negativity, and naysaying. Our passionate opposition to the host of evils which are destroying the integrity of the environment must be coupled with positive, workable remedies presented with equal vigour. If not, initial support based on anger and fear of an environmental threat will be eroded by powerlessness into passivity and apathy.

- **Be proactive.** Do something practical, not abstract, to benefit the community. Planting a grove of hardwoods in a park won’t reverse global warming. Distributing a few dozen backyard composters isn’t a total solid waste solution. But both

of those actions are steps to a healthier local environment and to better overall community relationships for any environmental group sponsoring them.

- **Be candid.** Don't hedge about the consequences of what you're proposing or opposing. But don't exaggerate either. One trend in environmental politics has been to present the worst-case scenario in any issue situation. This may be justified as a way of raising public concern — particularly at the national or international level — but it seldom leads to improved long term local support. This is not a suggestion to downplay seriousness or trivialize issues. But if the sky doesn't fall on schedule after the first couple of predictions, then people become less tolerant about listening to warnings.
- **Be visible.** Take your issue and your concerns out to your community whenever you get the chance. Go to other groups, go to schools, have displays in public places: be a constant public reminder of the issue.
- **Be patient.** Every environmentalist feels a sense of urgency, but the fundamental changes required to restore environmental harmony will not happen overnight. Forget sudden paradigm shifts; dump the old 'hundredth monkey' panaceas into the realm of fantasy where they belong. Rapid change is only likely in response to threats which are more personally immediate than most present environmental threats for most communities.

Developing relationships with the "issue community" is less of a problem. In fact, for most environmental groups the only problem is the amount of time it takes to maintain the contacts. Just participating in the issue-based causes of NBEN and CEN can lead to as many relations as your group is prepared to accept. You'll have grandnieces and second cousins twice removed popping up in the most unexpected places wanting to tell you all the family news and hear what you're doing. Time invested in this is time well spent. Knowing what others are doing and experiencing helps to break down the feelings of isolation we are all subject to. It also adds context: virtually every local environmental issue is repeated in many other localities: thousands of little pictures make up the big picture.

Making Allies

For an environmental group to become a full and effective member of any community requires developing other sorts of relationships as well. Active and passive support from individuals is essential, but it's also important to develop mutually supportive relationships with other voluntary community groups.

- Begin this process by reaching out: go to other people's meetings; don't wait for others to come to yours. Many community organizations have guest speakers at their meetings: this is a good way to introduce your group and your interests.
- Remember that one of the keys to developing good relations and alliances lies in the word "mutual." It is unrealistic to expect other (non environmental)

community groups to support our proposals, positions, and projects unless you are prepared to support theirs. This doesn't mean you have to be total 100 percent enthusiasts for whatever-it-is, but helping the Lions or the Labour Council or the Women's Institute in their efforts at community improvement makes it a lot more likely they'll provide some help with yours.

- Move cautiously. Don't take on roles and responsibilities that are beyond your capacity. Choose which groups and projects to support. Bring your environmental "angle" to other people's projects, but be prepared to do much of the work of incorporating it. If your involvement is perceived as making things more difficult for others, you're apt to wear your welcome out!
- Don't expect immediate change or immediate acceptance. It is impossible to over-emphasize the need for a long-term point of view. Environmental improvement, at a voluntary community group level or at a global level, is only one of a host of needs clamouring for energy, time, and money. Convincing others that it should take priority is a lot more difficult than convincing them that the environment is deteriorating.
- Building community alliances is a balancing act. Almost any environmental action group will be perceived as threatening some existing community interests. You will inevitably find yourself in the position of having to choose between compromising your environmental interests or

damaging your relationships with some other community groups. Your challenge is to chart a course which allows you to build or participate in alliances around certain specific projects or issues while still maintaining your independence on other issues.

- Begin building strategic alliances. Every region of the province, for example, has a solid waste commission. Each of those commissions has a vested interest in implementing environmentally sound solutions to solid waste problems. Many of the members of the commissions may feel slightly frustrated at their apparent inability to establish large scale diversion to recycling and composting programs. And they may well be interested in discussing small scale possibilities with local environmental groups. They may also have the budgetary leeway to carry them out. Almost every community has a rec council. Recreation needn't have a solely sports focus. Just because wildlife groups and nature groups have different motives for supporting forest management policies which emphasize habitat protection, neither should forget that they will have a stronger voice as allies. Base your strategy of alliance-building around these shared concerns and interests.
- Get in to the schools. We often repeat the belief that children are more environmentally aware than their parents as if it were a permanent state of affairs or a self-fulfilling prophecy. This may be true, or it may not. What is true, and what provides an opportunity for every community environ-

mental group with the time to invest in it, is that environment is an actual or potential presence in curricula at every level from primary to senior high. Find out who's teaching courses and classes that include environment and see how your group can get involved. Your involvement can range from providing teachers with access to resources they might not otherwise have to providing guest speakers on particular topics to helping to develop class projects.

- Pay attention to communications. Successful alliances depend on good, clear communications with your allies and potential allies. They have to know exactly what you're doing before you do it: don't let them find out about an action by reading about it in the papers.
- Ask for help. "As soon as we see an enemy, we ask him for advice," says Karl-Henrik Robert, originator of a Swedish "consensual approach to environmental issues" called **The Natural Step**. "We say 'Would you please help us to sort out this problem?' When [we] get the answer, very rarely is it a threat to what [we] want to do."

Using media and building community both require getting out there. As if we weren't too busy already, eh?