

TELLING OUR OWN STORIES:

– A WORKSHOP FOR COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS TO INCREASE OUR LOCAL MEDIA PROFILE

A workshop by Denise Roche for the Zero Waste Conference, Kaikoura, April 2005

Introduction

One of the main tasks of a community organisation that deals with recycling or waste minimisation is to attempt to change the attitudes and behaviours of the people where we live. Our role is to encourage our people to reduce the amount of waste that goes to landfill and we certainly can't do that without the goodwill of the people in our communities.

As community organisations we exist within the communities where we operate. To effect change we need to get our people to 'buy in' to our aims so that they will participate in waste minimisation activities. Most of us are under-funded and - while we recognise that we do need to constantly promote good recycling behaviour and attitudes – most of us can simply not afford to spend money on a major advertising campaign that may or may not work.

We can however take control and get our messages out to the community in a cost-effective way by telling our own stories in our local media. This workshop is devised to equip participants with some skills to do so. Its focus is dealing with the print media.

Dealing with the media – Why should we?

Common experiences may be: they got it wrong; didn't print what I said; I didn't know that's what they'd say.

The media is called the '*media*' because first and foremost print publications and TV and radio are all a *medium for communication*. Having looked at it though you'll notice that it is a one-way communication. The readers (or listeners, or TV watchers) are taking it in but not giving it out.

. Common complaints include:

- They got it wrong;
- They didn't print what I said;
- I didn't know that's what they'd say;
- They made me (or my organisation) look bad (or stupid etc.)

It's no wonder that many large organisations hire public relations people whose job it is to talk to journalists and put their own 'spin' on an issue. These organisations understand that by putting some effort into it they can communicate the stories that

reflect well on them. Most community organisations can't afford to buy in this type of expertise. However we can train ourselves to communicate our own important messages by building relationships with our local news organisations and taking control of what we say and how we say it. If we are dealing proactively with the media we have the opportunity to tell our side of the story in our words and we may be able to minimise the negative impacts that could occur. By doing so we not only promote our recycling messages but we can also become more accountable to our communities.

What is news?

To get a good grip on dealing with the media we first have to find out what they're interested in.

Different media outlets specialise in very different types of story content. There is a significant difference in what stories are published and how the stories are written in the *Women's Weekly* and the *Listener* for example. The readers these magazines are aimed at (the people who buy the magazines) are quite distinctly separate markets. We can assume that these two readership groups are interested in reading different types of articles in each of the magazines. There is also a significant difference between the stories published in a large daily newspaper and a small local one that comes out once or twice a week.

As a rule of thumb most news stories contain several of the following components: -
They are:

- Timely (the events reported on happened recently)
- Is of local, national or international interest
- Interesting (may contain elements of conflict or action)
- Grabs our attention
- Makes the reader feel happy, sad, etc
- Explains or informs
- Contains human interest.
- Has elements of tragedy/comedy
- Can be an opinion
- Provokes thought

In the print media photos also help to tell the story and grab attention – and quite cynically – help to sell the publication. Where the photo is placed is designed to draw the reader in. Media research has shown that most people look from top right area to bottom right to top left side and then to the bottom so most stories and photos are placed deliberately.

By examining the types of stories that are included in the different media outlets we can get an idea of what sorts of news they are interested in and subsequently target our stories to them. When we write our stories we are more likely to be published if we understand who are most interested in hearing/reading our stories and quite apart from what we want to tell them – what is that audience most interested in hearing about?

Taking Control – Understanding the Newsroom

Every news outlet has deadlines. Every day on a daily newspaper there is a cut off point where the paper must go to print and journalists race to get their stories completed for that deadline. Radio deadlines can be every hour and community papers that come out once or twice a week will often have their deadlines one or two days before publication day.

Investigative journalism is different. For a major several-page article for *Metro* - or a similar magazine with a monthly deadline – there may be months of work involved for the journalist to follow the leads, do interviews and write and re-write the story before publication. Most journalists would agree that a longer timeframe is a luxury – most smaller media outlets don't have the resources to invest in allowing reporters the time to find and research in-depth stories.

Most good journalists will however follow a lead – that is, follow up on information that comes into them. We can provide that lead by writing the story for them. One of the benefits for a journalist of using a story that we have written as a press release is that they can follow up if there are questions not answered in the story and it's a reminder to them of stories that they haven't got around to yet. News outlets mostly like getting press releases. - In the print industry most journalists agree that they feel overworked. If our stories meet all their requirements for a well-written, newsy story then they don't have to spend too much time on it and so it lessens their workload.

Be warned though. A smart journalist will often investigate a press release further and may well ask hard questions. – Questions that you didn't want them to ask. So if we are writing a story we need to be mindful of that.

This following section explains how to write a story for publication so that we can initiate our own news.

The Inverted Triangle

When writing a story for publication (or broadcast) most news articles will generally follow what journalism tutors call the “inverted triangle” since the bulk of the

information is contained at the start of the story. The reason for this is that most news editors work around space constraints and can reduce a story by chopping it from the bottom without having to re-write it or losing sense.

1. The Introduction - Includes the answers to who, what, where, when, how and why or as many as you can fit in. Also includes the angle.

2. Follow up explanation to the questions not already answered.

3. Supporting information – Quotes or interesting facts.

4. Other points of interest or other angles.

5. Supporting information
and background

6. Summary.

Note: Everything in the story supports the introduction. If the story needs to be reduced it is quite possible that a story can be cut to just a one-line introduction in a news brief.

Story Content – The Crucial Questions

The introduction is probably the most important part of any story. It sets the tone for the whole article. It can take a lot of effort to write a really good introductory sentence but it certainly is worth it as it will grab the reader's attention and make them want to read on. Here's an example of an introductory paragraph:

On Waiheke Island last year's must-see event was the second annual Junk to Funk wearable arts/fashion extravaganza/recycling in action performance in August. The young and groovy, the old and crusty, broke or affluent, the brown, the white and the Greens (and other political persuasions as well) packed the primary school hall to well past its legal capacity to celebrate the efforts of our children and adults to create wearable art from rubbish.

This introduction answers the basic questions that make up the normal news story. The first sentence covers: "where, what, when." The second sentence covers: "who" and continues to explain "what." The "how" and "why" comes later in the story.

A bit more explanation about the six crucial questions:

“Who?”

Who was involved? What is their relationship to me? What is their full title?

“What?”

What happened?

“When?”

Was this a recent event or was it long ago?

“Where?”

Was it a local event? Was it near us, the reader?

“Why?”

Why did this happen? What was the motivation? Could this happen again?

“How?”

How did this happen? Any back-story needed here?

Answering these questions gives us the body of a story and is a good way to check after we've written a piece that we have covered the basics.

Writing the media release

Having covered the importance of writing an interesting introduction and answering the crucial questions the following points also need to be addressed.

The Angle

What is the theme of the story? (For example – is it a success story?) What are the main points you want to cover? The theme - or angle - will continue throughout the story.

Language

Clarity is important. Choose the words you use carefully and avoid using jargon as doing so assumes a level of understanding that may not be present in the audience. Writing for a readership with a reading level of about aged 12 helps to keep concepts clear and easy to understand.

Quotations

Attribute opinion to a speaker. Direct quotes introduce a person to the story (the who of the crucial six questions) and back up the body of the story. Most quotes are taken from interviews with the one of the 'who' characters in the story. When including them try to choose quotes that are as interesting as possible. It is useful to include quotes as they can be re-written if needed by the editor or journalist. For example:

“ Our community should be congratulated for continuing to do their best to recycle their waste,” says Waste Resource Trust educator Denise Roche.

Which could be re-written in a shorter form as:

Waste Resource Trust educator Denise Roche says the Waiheke community deserves to be congratulated for their recycling efforts.

Style

It is useful to try to replicate the style of the publication you are hoping to publish your story. Keep in mind who your readers/listeners will be and write for them. This will help develop the style required for the publication.

Content

Facts are important. For a news story, (as opposed to an article that is described as an opinion piece or column) opinion should be kept inside quotes. It is **essential** that the story is accurate and truthful. There are media laws around slander so if you are unsure either check your facts or don't write about it.

Spelling and grammar

Names, particularly, need to be double-checked for spelling and getting the grammar right lends clarity to a story.

Getting published and not getting published

Having written the story – which can take time as it involves crafting the introduction, thinking about the angle, getting the facts right, interviewing the subject, then putting it all together in clear and interesting way – the next step is to get it published. If you've gone to all this effort – not seeing the story in print can be rather demoralising. This section looks at why this might happen and how we can do our best to get our stories in print.

The decision to publish or not publish a story rests solely with the editor of the news outlet. They determine what stories go where and their decision-making is based around their own sense of what their readership are most interested in reading as this will encourage people to buy the publication. The main source of income for newspapers (especially the free community ones) are the advertisements that they publish and these are placed first and so determines the space left for the editorial (written stories) content. These two considerations: what will help sell the paper and how much space is available after the advertisements are placed? – are the key issues that editors deal with every time they are putting a paper together.

For us this means that our stories have to be newsworthy and not simply designed as a free advertisement for our cause.

One way to avoid the disappointment of not getting a story accepted is to ‘pitch’ it to the staff (either the journalists or editor – and for small publications it’s often just the one person) publication that you have chosen as the best readership audience for your story. This is useful for two other reasons: 1) it gets us into the habit of developing the angle before the story is even written and 2) it is a way of developing a relationship with the journalist/editor.

A good working relationship with your local journalists can never be underestimated and it involves trust on both sides. Honesty and the ability to front up and answer the hard questions are what journalists want. And having a sympathetic journalist who knows that what you say is true and accurate increases our ability to get more stories published.

As well as the personal contact any assistance we can offer to make our stories more publishable should be followed up. If the story provides a ‘photo-opportunity’ and a picture will help tell the story then do your best to arrange for a photo to be taken or deliver one yourself with the story. This is where digital cameras and email can be extremely handy.

Always include telephone numbers and email contacts and someone the journalist can talk to for added material in the copy you send out.

It’s also wise to remember that despite all these efforts there still may be occasions where your story gets ‘bumped’ because something of huge importance happens and takes precedence for the publishing space. In these circumstances it is best not to let your disappointment show and send in another – or the same story updated- when the news has died down.

To summarise, the following is a list of steps to follow to get your story published.

Step 1: Decide on your news outlet

Step2: Find out when the deadline is

Step 3: Decide on your subject for a story

Step 4: Gather your information

Step 5: Interview the main participants

Step 6: Check facts

Step 7: Write the story

Step 8: Double check facts, spelling, quotes

Step 9: Pitch it to the news outlet - describe the angle (help to organise photo if required.)

Step 10: Deliver the story

Step 11: Follow up with further information if required

Format for a press release

Writing the story is the important bit – but sending it out to the news outlet in the standard format for a press/media release may make it clearer for the news organisation to handle. The following is a real example (and it did get published):

Story for Gulf News – for immediate use
January 5th 2004

RESULTS OF THE BATTERY AUDIT

The Waste Resource Trust reports the results of the public appeal to prevent used batteries from contaminating the landfill has been a success.

The Trust started the battery appeal two months ago and waste educator Glenda Andrew-Neal says that a total of 1128 batteries were collected from five drop off bins located throughout the island.

“The response has been great,” says Glenda. “We launched the appeal to collect the batteries to highlight the need for them to be separated out from the waste stream. There’s so many different types out there and lots of them are highly toxic when they end up in landfill.”

Local businesses helped with the appeal by setting up the battery collection bins in their shops in addition to collection points at the Transfer Station and the Waste Resource Trust office at Artworks.

“We would like to thank Placemakers, Gulf Sound and Vision and Hammer Hardware for their support for this initiative,” says Glenda.

The results of the audit are being fed back to the Auckland Regional Council who is responsible for recycling or disposing of all hazardous waste collected in the Auckland area. Glenda says the ARC will use the audit information to explore further options for battery disposal or recycling.

ENDS

For further comment please contact Glenda Andrew-Neal or Denise Roche at the Waste Resource Trust office on 372-2915 or Glenda at home on 372-7750 or Denise at home on 372-6578. Email contact is: denise@wrt.org.nz

The standard format for press releases contains the following:

Name of publication you are sending your story

Date (or date of embargo if necessary)

Headline or story title

Body of story

At the end of the story write 'ENDS'

Include name and contact details

Summary

Writing our stories and getting them published does develop our profile in our communities. We work for organisations that are remarkable in that we are attempting to make changes that benefit our whole world. We can be proud of that and should let people know about it.

About the workshop author

Denise Roche is a community waste educator for the Waste Resource Trust on Waiheke Island in Auckland. An average of 2-3 stories about recycling or rubbish are published every month in the three local weekly papers on the island. Most of these are generated or written by the Trust staff.

Denise spent most of her career as a campaigner and educator in the union movement and trained as a journalist through Auckland University of Technology in 1991. She developed this workshop using the AUT teaching material and her experience in the field in an effort to give educators and activists from other community organisations "something else to add to their toolboxes."