

Media Relations Skills for the Information Age

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The 21st century will bring increased consumer awareness, a global marketplace, and a deeper plunge into the information age. To compete and survive in such a climate, a REALTOR® association must maximize resources. One way to do that is to develop an effective media relations program to ensure that the media and public hear the association's voice on issues affecting the real estate industry.

Before you can plan a media relations program, you must recognize that associations and the media have a symbiotic relationship. Each needs and uses the other for mutually beneficial purposes. When Executive Officers help the media reach their goal of informing the public about important issues, the media in turn help associations excel in public relations and image enhancement.

The following steps can help guide you on the path toward an effective media relations program that will take your association into the 21st century.

1. Know the association

Be thorough. Compile statistics about employees, budgets, and trends. Review old copies of reports, research papers, and speeches. Write fact sheets about the association's mission, history, leaders, and staff.

Now look at the association's strategic plan. How can the media relations program help the association achieve its short-term and long-term goals? Tailor activities and messages to support the strategic plan and make goals and objectives specific and measurable. This will simplify program evaluation.

Next, conduct a communications audit. Take a close look at how the association currently communicates, what it communicates, to whom it

communicates, and whether anyone is listening.

2. Know the audience

Do you want to reach government officials, members, volunteers, homebuyers and sellers, special interest groups, the media, or others? Define who needs to know the association's goals and objectives and then focus on how to communicate with these audiences.

A word of caution: Don't expect your target audiences to remain status quo. Look into the future—What do you see? In the next 10 years, expect an aging population and more two-income and single-parent families. Until the nation solves some cur-

rent housing problems, you'll see more renters and homeless families. With the skyrocketing costs of education may come a decrease in college graduates. And constant technological advancements will bring new ways to conduct business. Computer data bases, modems, fax machines, and video news releases have already changed media relations strategies.

3. Know the media

Just as you'll need to adapt media relations programs to meet the needs of changing audiences, you'll need to adapt to meet the needs of changing media. What media do your audiences use and believe? Target your

Media Do's and Don'ts

It is essential for REALTOR® associations to maintain good working relationships with the media. This list can guide you in day-to-day media relations activities.

Do

- Become familiar with your local media's style, photo policies, editorial guidelines, deadlines, and so on. For broadcast media, listen to the stations, learn the programs, names of producers, and names of news and public affairs directors.
- Get to know the reporters who cover your beat (real estate, business, community). If possible, arrange a meeting with them. Know their first names, writing style, and topics they cover.
- Deliver what you promised.
- Update your media list on a regular basis.
- Be honest.
- Respect journalists' deadlines.
- Be accessible to reporters.

- Appoint a spokesperson for your association.

- Be objective; send newsworthy, not self-serving, information.

Don't

- Call reporters just to see if they received your release. Call them only if you can offer more helpful information.
- Say "No comment." (When you do, you lose the chance to tell your side of the story.)
- Talk off the record.
- Be afraid to say "I don't know." If you don't know, say "I'll check on it and get back to you." Then do just that.
- Overreact to a media error.
- Waste a reporter's time. ■

media relations program to meet the particular needs of each audience and medium.

How can you find out what local or daily newspapers or trade publications your audiences read? Ask them. What television stations and radio stations do they watch and listen to? Ask them again. Conduct informal surveys at your membership meetings or have officers and committee chairmen survey their coworkers.

To make the most of your media relations program, avoid a shotgun approach. Don't try to spread your message to every newspaper, radio, and TV station in your market. Instead, fine-tune your media list and target media your key audiences use and believe. This will help you manage and measure your program more effectively.

4. Set the stage

Plan and take the initiative. Go to the media and *tell them* you've got a great story. If you wait for a story to happen, then comment on it, you are being reactive. This means your efforts are an afterthought. When you are proactive, you have the power to set the stage for what you want to do and say. When you're reactive, you are shooting in the dark.


One way to establish a proactive media relations program is by becoming a reliable and trustworthy source of information. Establish the association's credibility when times are good, but don't limit your efforts to generating positive coverage. When bad news strikes, don't hide—take the initiative. Give your side of the story before reporters ask for it. Be a resource even when you don't want attention, such as during a housing slump.

How can you do this? Create a special event, provide a public service, or take a stand on an issue. Provide news releases, distribute media kits, and anticipate issues. Position the association as an expert information source and schedule periodic meetings with reporters to share the knowledge.


5. Use cost-effective tools


A media relations program doesn't require a big budget. Try implementing some of the following low-cost ideas:

- *Don't buy special news release stationery.* Use association letterhead and type the words "News Release" in bold. Style does not equal substance. The content of your news release will grab the reporter's attention, not the stock of paper it's printed on.
- *Take advantage of free airtime on radio and TV.* Pitch stories to talk-show producers. Mix timeliness with consumer interest by tapping into current events and trends.
- *Write letters to editors of opinion articles.* Respond to articles that appear in the local newspaper when those articles affect the association. This applies to all opinion articles, whether they're negative or positive.
- *Distribute a regular tip sheet.* Tip sheets can stimulate interest and story ideas from the media (see "Media Tip Sheet," this page).
- *Track your efforts.* Read the publications, watch the TV stations, and listen to the radio stations on your media list.
- *Use other media outlets.* Send your news releases to chamber of commerce publications and employee newsletters published in the area. Just make sure your audiences use and believe these sources.
- *Provide monthly multiple listing service statistics to the media.* Organize the information so it's easy to read, understand, and use.
- *Develop a speaker's bureau.* Provide speakers to local clubs, business associations, and other nonprofit groups. This establishes your association and its members as experts, and it provides a valuable community service.



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Highlights of Ideas You Can Use: August 1991

How the Recession Affects the Real Estate Market

- Housing is still a good investment. Housing is not a quick-in, quick out investment; it's a long-term investment producing increasingly favorable returns the longer it's held. A case in point—the median price in New York declined 4.7 percent between 1989 and 1990; yet it rose 96.3 percent between 1983 and 1990.
- The benefits of homeownership go beyond appreciation. Homeowners receive a return on the down payment, plus the added benefit of mortgage interest and real estate tax deductibility.
- This is a buyer's market. Consumers must house hunt, seize the chance for favorable financing and negotiate with sellers. No one knows exactly when a market will reach a low point. Buyers who procrastinate may miss out if they wait for the bottom. Sellers should price their homes realistically and make their property stand out from others.
- The average price of single family homes is down. This is good news for first-time buyers. According to the Burlington County Board of REALTORS® May 1991 statistics, the average price of a single family home in Burlington County was \$117,992. In 1990, the average price was \$130,318. In 1989 it was \$127,555. In 1988 it was \$120,181. When an average price drops, it does not necessarily mean home values are dropping. Usually it indicates that a greater volume of homes are being purchased in a lower price range.
- The number of single family homes selling is increasing. According to the Burlington County Board of REALTORS® May 1991 statistics, 373 single family homes sold. In April, 307 homes sold. In March, 206 homes sold. In February, 160 homes sold. In January 168 homes sold.
- Mortgage rates and prices don't often move in the same direction. People who wait for lower rates will likely find themselves paying a higher price. Additionally, today's mortgage market is more closely tied to other economic indicators, and thus more prone to temporary changes than the mortgage market of 10 years ago. It's difficult to be absolutely certain that a trend downward will be long-term. Therefore, smart buyers will take advantage of the current low interest rates hovering just under 10 percent.

To develop feature stories or interviews, please call Lisa Beach, Director of Public Relations, at (609) 829-0071.

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- Send your newsletter to the media. Offer reprint rights for your articles.

6. Evaluate your efforts

A lot of work goes into developing and maintaining an effective media relations program. Don't waste your efforts by failing to measure your program. Step back and ask "How did we do?" Then ask "How can we make it better?"

Can EOs evaluate a media relations program? They can if they monitor the media. Are newspapers and magazines printing association news releases? Are reporters and editors calling the association for interviews, referrals, and statistics?

Count your media relations success stories, such as the number of newspaper clippings or column inches that focus on or mention the association. Check the accuracy of the coverage you receive and analyze the content.

Copy and distribute these clippings to your board of directors. This shows the effectiveness of your media relations program. It also gives a

Don't expect your target audiences to remain status quo.

general overview of how the media views the association and interprets its activities. And, perhaps most importantly, it demonstrates your program's cost-effectiveness. Consider how many advertising dollars the association would have spent for the same amount of editorial space or air time that you received through well-placed media relations activities.

Interview media contacts for feedback on your performance. Where are the association's strengths and what areas need improvement? How can you help that specific reporter do his or her job better?

If you want to measure long-term successes, keep your eyes open so you can spot problems along the way and easily adjust your approach. If

you notice that a newspaper suddenly stopped publishing your releases, check to see if reporters or editors have changed jobs. Long-term measurement shows the impact of your efforts. Do more people use your services? Do other associations call you for facts and statistics? Do you get more media interviews? Do you carry clout with local politicians? For some quick media pointers, see "Media Do's and Don'ts," page 9.

Reach the Top

Remember, good media relations don't develop overnight. The process is ongoing and is cultivated over a long period of time. Arm yourself with these media relations survival skills and you'll take your association to new heights in the 21st century. ■

Ms. Beach has been with the Burlington County Board three years. She holds a master's degree in public relations.

On the Move

Arizona

Joyce J. Boyle, executive secretary, Carefree-Cave Creek Board (replacing Alisha Bellow Hall)

California

Mary Harris, executive vice president, Irvine Association (replacing Daisy R. Wilson)

Karen Leja, executive officer, Coastal Mendocino Board (replacing Gwen Cox)

Florida

Susan Pike, executive vice president, Coral Gables Board (replacing N. Hattie Van Laere)

Priscilla L. Rosenberg, executive officer, Greater Clearwater Board (replacing John Dunkle, CAE)

Iowa

Dale Zahn, executive vice president, Greater Davenport Board (replacing Reba Grayson)

Massachusetts

Mike Whalen, CAE, executive vice president, Greater Boston Real Estate Board (replacing Andrew F. Hickey)

Michigan

Jeanne M. Farley, executive officer, Detroit Board (replacing Curt E. Hacias)

Missouri

Stefanie Skala, executive vice president, St. Charles County Board (replacing Robert H. Welko)

Ohio

Rose Goin, secretary, Shelby County Board (replacing Jennifer Firman)

Linda Sharp, executive officer, Darke County Board (replacing Naomi Slick)

Robert Weisenborn, CAE, executive vice president, Ohio Association (replacing Almon R. "Bud" Smith, PhD, RCE)

Washington

Leonard G. Eddinger, Jr., executive vice president, Seattle King County Association (replacing Ann Hyde)

Wisconsin

Nancy Madison, executive officer, Wausau Board (replacing Mary Jane Peters)

Lynn Vanderwerff, executive secretary, Dodge County Board (replacing Donna Jacob) ■

Please send any REALTOR® association executive staff changes to Jeanne Beyers, NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®, 430 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60611-4087, or fax them to 312/329-5960.