

Some Media Relations Success Stories

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John (Jack) M. Sperbeck

Abstract

Twenty-nine faculty/staff members who work well with the news media were interviewed—the objective: to use their answers to help convince others to improve their news media work. Faculty members said they use the news media because they can reach many people fast, effectively and economically. They did not perceive the risk of being misquoted as a major problem, although some of their colleagues do. They generally found media people competent, professional and pleasant to work with. Almost one third of the respondents said the reward system—promotions and salary—does not take media work into account. Although most were self-trained at working with the media, several said training should be offered especially for new staff.

Introduction

A reporter from the *New York Times* calls and wants to talk to one of your faculty members about how homeowners can avoid water problems and expensive home repairs. You're excited—it's not every day that your organization makes the *Times*. But your expert source doesn't want to talk to the reporter—says it will generate too many phone calls and take away from valuable research time.

Or, one of your food safety specialists is giving talks saying there could be serious food safety problems this summer, but won't say so in a news release. Why? "We can't 'alarm' consumers" and the specialist doesn't want to answer time-consuming telephone calls from the news media and consumers.

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In both cases, you're a bit frustrated. With all the emphasis on marketing, public relations, and "imaging" in our organizations, you'd think these opportunities would look like gold mines. After all, the extension services and experiment stations of the Land Grant University (LGU) system aren't household words to most people. For example, a 1995 Minnesota Extension Service study involving 23 focus groups throughout the state concluded that many people know little or nothing about their state extension service (Krueger, 1995). One can safely say the same is true of the broader LGU system.

The examples at the beginning of this article aren't necessarily typical—most of us work with many expert sources who are very dedicated and professional at dealing with the news media. But scenarios like the two above prompted us to ask why some educators and researchers work with the media, while others don't.

We theorized we could take the "good examples" and use them as a guide to help encourage others to use the media more effectively. We thought that a consumer specialist, crop scientist or county educator would be more impressed with what a successful co-worker said about working with the media than with what people like you and I told them. (Perhaps you've also heard the story that anyone could be a communicator if they had the time).

We further theorized that we'd get a more meaningful results by talking to media "experts" on a national basis. A pending three-month professional development leave meant I'd have time to do an in-depth study.

A total of 31 people were interviewed on the use of mass media by educators and researchers in the LGU system. Two are media representatives and 29 are faculty and staff members from 13 state universities and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Those interviewed, extension service specialists, extension field staff and researchers, use the mass media extensively .

A total of eight Minnesota faculty members were selected by an informal nominating process by our media relations group—we asked co-workers to identify the extension staff and researchers who used the media often and well (every person we selected was mentioned by at least two people). To get names from other states, an e-mail request was sent to the Media Relations Special Interest Group of the Agricultural

Communicators in Education organization. Over 30 people from 14 states were suggested.

Except for personal interviews with faculty on the University of Minnesota's St. Paul Campus, all interviews were conducted by telephone. Interview length ranged from 20 minutes to over an hour.

They were asked these questions:

1. Why do you spend significant time working with the news media (radio, television, newspapers, trade press)? Please describe what you do and how you do it.
2. How do you "manage" your work with the media?—time returning phone calls, giving telephone number to media for broadcast or print—how do you handle an avalanche of calls?
3. Do you see positive public relations results for your program and your institution?
4. Is media work a valuable part of marketing for Land Grant institutions (Extension, Experiment Station, USDA)?
5. What are some barriers for you or your co-workers to making more effective use of the media?
6. Does the reward system recognize media efforts?
7. Do you know of some co-workers who are adept at working with the media?

Two representatives of the news media were interviewed as precursors to the faculty/staff interviews as an aid in developing the interview questionnaire. The media people were asked to describe what makes a good interview and offer suggestions for faculty members to be interviewed by the news media.

Faculty/staff responses to the first two questions—why and how they work with the media—were diverse. And responses to questions three and four were unanimously positive—every-one saw positive public relations and marketing results from media work.

Twelve issues emerged that were mentioned directly or indirectly by at least three participants in the relatively unstructured interview format. The 12 were grouped into three categories:

- I. Why respondents choose to work with the news media.
- II. How they work with the media—what have they learned?

III. Institutional concerns, or the role of administrators and colleagues in providing a favorable climate for media relations.

I. Why Work with the Media?

1. You Can Reach Many People Fast, Efficiently and Economically Through the Media

Bob Byrnes, extension educator in Lyon County, Minnesota:

We dropped our newsletter and concentrated on getting information out through the news media. Timeliness, cost and readership favor the news media. We used to do some direct mail and included some marketing information in the mailings. But we came to the conclusion that direct mail was not as effective as the news media. We didn't know if we were being read. And it was hard to keep the mailing list current—sometimes we were guessing whether people were dead or alive.

Michelle Herbert, extension educator, University of Alaska (The geographical district she's responsible for is the largest extension district in the country, stretching from the Canadian border to north of Fairbanks and encompassing the entire center of Alaska.): "I have an extremely small travel budget, and was looking for ways to reach my clients. So I developed my plan of work and program delivery plan heavily based on newspapers and radio."

Don Olson, assistant collegiate program leader for agriculture, University of Minnesota:

Media work is the lifeblood of extension—it makes or breaks extension. When you look at counties with impact, they all have a heavy media impact. If we put a program together and can't market it through the media, I question whether we have a product to sell.

Speed is important when responding to unforeseen problems like floods and early frost. If we can't mobilize a response within five days, forget it—someone else will. And media is the only way to respond this fast.

Ann Schaubert, extension agent, Oregon State University (She does a bi-monthly, 500–600-word column in three newspapers that reaches more than three fourths of the people in the county every other week.): "I started my column after I

asked myself how I could talk to every family in the county. I could do it through newspapers. Then I went in and talked to every editor and they said yes—I was amazed.”

David Baltensperger, crop science professor, University of Nebraska:

We use media extensively for marketing. If I have recently done a story with them and call with something I'd like done, they seldom say no. Perhaps that is one of the rewards. My meetings are better attended since the media treats them well.

Bob Williams, office of the vice president, Mississippi State University:

Not enough people realize the tremendous assets that good relations with media people are in helping get good, timely information to our clientele. I used to drive 100 to 125 miles to talk about marketing soybeans and spend 20 to 30 minutes with producers. Some of this is necessary—we need to stay close to clientele. But when we look at limited resources—fewer specialists and people in county offices—media work is one way to get fairly wide distribution.

Steve Duncan, extension human development specialist, Montana State University (His bi-monthly “Family Matters” column is carried by newspapers throughout Montana.):

The column is an opportunity to reach large audiences with practical information. It takes four to six hours per story to develop. The cost to the system is nothing. It's an extremely valuable public relations tool. My personal mission is to be sharing something of value in every community and every family in the state—potentially reaching every single person.

Dick Crum, extension agent, horticulture, Purdue University (He has thousands of readers and listeners in the Indianapolis area and throughout Indiana.):

Every time I can, I mention the extension service. This has a ripple effect. Say I mention a grub control product. Extension offices around the state will get calls. So we send all news stories via our computer system to all counties. They need to know what I said in my newspaper column. Otherwise they'd be 'dead'. Keeping them informed is a must.

Rick Brenner, researcher, USDA, Gainesville, Florida:

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Interactions. Applied communications are more important. It is nonsense not to be moving this way, and fast. First, the payback is that scientists are seen as doing something relevant for people. We're profiled in a positive manner. That's an awfully good feeling—personal satisfaction. Secondly, ultimately our customers go to Congress and tell their elected officials what a bargain we are for taxpayers.

2. It's Worth the Risk of Being Misquoted or Quoted Out of Context

Tom Turpin, extension entomologist at Purdue University (He just finished coordinating his Sixth annual "Bug Bowl," which drew 10,000 people. It started as a cockroach race thought up by entomology students looking for extra credit.):

The media have focused some on the sensationalized parts, but we've done pretty well through the years at getting the educational story across. Even radio and TV, though they're more prone to talk about the fun parts, usually talk about the educational aspects. **But it doesn't bother me if they sensationalize a bit. If we get three lines of the educational aspect, that's three more lines than we'd have gotten without the sensationalism.**

Mike Duffy, agricultural economist, Iowa State University: "Overall, media people I have dealt with have been fair. Some make mistakes more out of ignorance (usually due to lack of subject matter background) than by design.

Bob Williams:

Some faculty members say, "Well, if I do an interview with a newspaper or magazine on the phone, sometimes I'm going to be misquoted. **But we have to expect that 80 to 90 percent of the information will be correct and we must live with risks of being misquoted.** With current communications technology, in most cases we can review an article (quickly) and accuracy should be above the 95 percent level.

Michael Boehlje, agricultural economist, Purdue University: "I have not been misquoted that often—it's a minimal risk. And, I can usually work through any problems."

Val Hillers, extension food safety specialist, Washington State University (Her story on safe manure applications on vegetable gardens had appeared with a "Killer Vegetable" headline around the country. Sensationalism? Probably, and it created some problems for Hiller; however . . .): "It did

make a difference in people's lives. Many heard the message about safe use of manure on gardens. We did increase awareness."

Mark Seeley, extension agricultural climatologist, University of Minnesota: (He has been especially disappointed with sensationalized television coverage.): "They will tell you anything to get an interview, then select a video portion or sound bite that's out of context. I'm not negative about using the media, but go in with lower expectations now."

3. Media People Were Generally Highly Regarded

Michael Boehlje: "I have a very high regard for the majority of media people I've worked with. A few are inexperienced or have not backgrounded themselves enough to ask good questions."

Gyles Randall, soil scientist, University of Minnesota, Waseca: "What stands out (in my media experiences) is the comfortable, two-way relationships I've developed with national agricultural writers. I started working with the media early in my career, and it's one of my greatest satisfactions."

Joanne Slavin, professor of food science and director of graduate studies, University of Minnesota: "Media people are just like us. If they sense a cover-up they start asking tough questions."

Des O'Rourke, director of an international commodities marketing center, Washington State University:

From a public relations standpoint, 99 percent of the time media results are positive. But you're always walking on the edge. The media has no responsibility to be nice to you or to make you look good. The media's responsibility is to excite readers, so being open and quotable can be hazardous.

4. Measuring Results Is Difficult but Sometimes Possible

Tom Turpin:

In recent years (department) enrollment has gone up and classes are bulging at the seams. A few years ago we were the lowest ranked department in student-to-faculty ratio. Now we're second from the top. We've sold the program, not as high science, but people begin to recognize us for our science and that's why they come here. It's just like football—you need to keep in the public view.

Media work results in positive public relations. Suddenly the legislature votes to give 4 percent vs. 3 percent raises, or a 10 percent increase in operating money instead of a cut. Why? It's hard to say—public relations is an intangible.

Don Black, extension forest resources, University of New Hampshire:

When budget time comes, legislators who you involved in media events and made the news will remember. But more than that, when decision makers understand what you are doing they can make an informed decision. If you get voted down by informed decision makers, that's fair.

But many times they're not informed about our programs and are still forced to vote.

Joanne Slavin: "There is no formal tracking system so it is difficult to document media efforts and results."

Dick Crum:

If I want to really 'touch' people, the trouble with the media is that it's not easy to document results. You can get success stories, and thousands read and listen to you. You don't know what the results are, but they certainly know that I'm around.

Michael Boehlje: "We do not do a good job of documenting the results of our media efforts. We must do a better job of documenting what we do."

Robert Griesbach, USDA researcher:

Some people opposed genetic engineering. After we explained what we were doing, a typical reaction was 'it's not as bad as I thought.' So working through the news media is very good public relations. The more exposure, the better we can explain exactly what we're doing and there are fewer misconceptions out there. One of the worst things we can do is hide from criticism. We need to look at it as an opportunity to educate.

Roberta Mosely, extension agent, New Jersey:

Mass media is great for public relations and marketing—your name gets out there. People will say "you're the person I heard on the radio." That's interesting, since they remember your name better than the name of the agency (extension) or the program's content. It appears the program may not scratch the surface in terms of teaching subject matter.

II. How They Work with the Media

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1. Personal Relationships with Reporters and Editors Are Very Important

Deb Brown, extension horticulturist and Dial-U coordinator at the University of Minnesota:

The key to successful media work is personal relationships, an 'attitude.' Be enthusiastic and friendly; avoid the 'I'm so busy' scene. Give media people your direct phone number and return calls promptly. We must be somewhat assertive. If we 'sit back' they'll only come to us in a crisis.

Don Black:

First, meet with editors and see what they consider news, in the context of what you are doing in your job. They will tell you one of three things: it is not news and they're not interested in the story; they are interested and will send a reporter; or they can't send a reporter but will use a story and picture if you supply them.

Dick Crum:

How do you get started working with the media? Mainly just hound them in a friendly way. Be persistent. In the days before computers I would always show up at the newspaper office with my column and chit chat with the editors—get to know them. You need to build that kind of a relationship. You can't just call them—be a real person.

Steve Duncan:

When I go around the state, I stop at newspaper offices, introduce myself, thank them for running my column and ask how we can be of better service. This is also a chance to talk the land grant mission and philosophy of extension. I tell the editors we're impartial, unbiased and not out to make a buck. It takes time to develop contacts and relationships.

Joanne Slavin:

It's important to know media people on a personal basis. For example, a television reporter and I have children about the same ages and we trade kid stories. This reporter calls me frequently because of the personal relationship.

Bob Williams: "Good relations with the news media are important. Get to know them on a first name basis. Then you can pick the phone up and call someone . . . when you need to get a story out."

2. You Must Be Accessible and Respond Quickly

Don Black:

I make myself available to the media at any time of the day. I have my home phone number on all news releases. I tell media people I'm a night owl and don't mind getting calls at any time. I am a public servant, and I'd rather be disturbed at 2 a.m. so they get the story right.

Deb Brown: "I put a priority (even during the busy yard and garden season) on returning calls from the media first."

Don Olson: "Media work is hard and time consuming. We must go the extra mile and be accessible beyond the 8 to 5 day."

Des O' Rourke:

No one recognizes why we (the Center he coordinates) get good press. They don't understand why we get cited a lot, though many departments may be working on the same things. Part of it is that they're not accessible. I try to return telephone calls from reporters within a few minutes.

Connie Crawley, extension foods & nutrition, University of Georgia:

It is not unusual for me to get a call at 3 p.m. when the reporter has a 4 p.m. deadline. I usually respond when I get the call. It saves me time. I find it's too time consuming if I put it off. If I don't know the answer, I refer the call to someone else.

3. You Need to Be Regular, Dependable and Trustworthy

Bob Byrnes:

Consistency is important. I have not missed a week with my column in years. The paper is devoting the space, and if our stuff did not come through the newspaper would be scrambling to fill editorial space to support the ads. The newspaper is interested in consistency and accuracy. An editor friend of mine told me he trusts whatever I send him and knows it's accurate and timely. He is not interested in being an agricultural expert.

Bob Williams:

We must try to be as reliable as we possibly can. Over time the media will trust us and call us. We must also be easy to work with. Media people have deadlines. They may call at 1 p.m. and have a 4 p.m. deadline. It may be hard to drop what you're doing and dig out data, but if we can do it and put out reliable information, media people will come back to us time after time.

Mark Seeley: "It's important to work consistently with the media—build trust and regularity. It's good for our public image. And the message doesn't have to be entertaining . . ."

Don Olson:

A weekly media packet serves two functions. It provides educational information and helps market upcoming events and products. It should be considered a success, not a failure, if the media uses 10 to 15 percent of the material we send them. We must constantly put our name in front of reporters to remind them we have something to offer.

Dick Crum:

Media people monitor each other—between radio and TV they're "wired" to what the others are doing. So I never do the same thing twice for anyone. It always has to be different. You can attack the same subject from another angle.

4. Be Concise and Stay on a Central Theme When You're Interviewed by the Media

Des O'Rourke:

I try to emphasize one theme in my answers. You don't want to ramble for 30 minutes and have the news media pick up on what they thought was the key point. Try to have this thought out before you talk to the reporter. And keep bringing the conversation back to the theme—your bottom line. You want to emphasize two things: what you'd like to see in the story's headline and lead sentence.

Connie Crawley (The person who nominated her says Crawley is "very good at giving two-sentence answers to questions."). Crawley says, "Media people like quotable quotes and I have the ability to do that. Some people want to hedge too much with their answers."

Dick Crum also knows the importance of being concise. "I interviewed our university president once for my radio show. I told him I needed two minutes at most. He went on for over 10 minutes. What did I do? Cut it."

III. Institutional Concerns

1. The Reward System for Extension Workers and Researchers Doesn't Always Recognize Media Work

In some cases, especially for researchers and those closer to academic departments, it may even be punitive.

Four different answers were given in responses to the question, "Does the reward system recognize media work?" Following are the answers and a tabulation of their frequency:

1. Yes the reward system takes media work into account. (11)
2. Not per se, but indirectly it does. (7)
3. No. (two people laughed when asked the question and one of these said "penalized" came closer to describing efforts to do media work.) (7)
4. The only rewards are those received from communications contests. (1)

Of 26 responses to this question, 8 replied negatively. Those replying negatively tended to be in research and teaching, or at least more closely identified with traditional academia, opposed to extension work. However, there was an exception: the two USDA researchers said the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) does build media work into the reward system and is moving even more in that direction.

2. Most People Were Self-taught; New People Need Media Training

The majority of people interviewed were self-taught, although several had received training from their university or through a professional organization. Some had taken journalism or communications courses. Several commented that training is essential for those starting their careers.

Des O'Rourke: "I worked as a journalist before I went back to school, so I know about deadlines and the need for precision. When reporters call, they get concise answers in plain English. Many faculty members speak jargon, not English."

Tom Turpin: (No formal training, but his undergraduate degree was from a small liberal arts college.): "I was trained in a broader range of things and probably have more appreciation for writing than many of my colleagues."

Kent Thiesse, extension educator, Blue Earth County, Minnesota: "Staff development has not been emphasized. I was talking to a co-worker who's been in extension for over three years. He's had no training on how to do news releases or radio shows. We need training."

Joanne Slavin: "We need media training, especially in early career years. Many people are afraid of the media due to negative experiences early in their careers."

Don Olson: "There's a fear of dealing with the media. The first three or four years in extension were especially hard. Lack of training is a barrier. Presently people have to learn by doing."

Mike Pullen, extension veterinarian (public health), University of Minnesota (He has been involved in media training sessions through the Minnesota Beef Council.): "This would be good training for University of Minnesota Extension Service people."

3. Not Everyone Needs to Be a Media Expert

Tom Turpin:

We are all sales people for our profession. **But not all of us have to do this much selling or promotion** (through the media). Some can work in their labs and do Nobel Prize work—we need everyone doing various jobs well. But some must be proactive in working with the media.

Kent Thiesse:

Every person does not need to have that role, but some people should be designated to be media resources for clusters or statewide. It's important for the media to be able to reach extension quickly. If they don't call us, they'll call another source.

4. The Most Barriers to Doing Media Work Are Self-imposed

A total of 30 barriers to media work were mentioned. Eleven appeared to be primarily self-imposed; nine were imposed by the media. Another eight appeared to be institution-imposed and two were put in an "other" category.

Mike Duffy, Iowa State, said he viewed potential problems not as barriers, but as "issues to be aware of" when working with the media. At any rate, many of the perceived barriers or potential problems are interrelated. For example, not being accessible to the media could cause media work to be assigned a low priority. It could also be due to fear of being interviewed.

Following is a breakdown, listed in descending order by the number of people who mentioned the barrier.

Self-imposed:

- Not being accessible to the media. (4)
- The nature of scientists to concentrate on research as opposed to the communication of its results. (4)
- Time management—the time required compared to other job demands. (4)
- Fear of being interviewed by the media. (3)
- Working with media lower on priority list (3).
- Especially for radio and television interviews, some lack the energy or presence (some but not all of this can be coached). (3)
- Scientists cannot relate their work in simple enough terms so people can understand it. (2)
- Being a media celebrity is embarrassing in the office—jealous colleagues. (2)
- The discipline to make yourself sit down and write it. (1)
- Don't realize how well the media can deliver good, timely information to large audiences. (1)
- Inadequate subject matter background to give media interviews. (1)

Media-imposed:

- The need to drop everything when the media calls. (5)
- Sound biting—not enough time to go into detail. (4)
- The danger of being misquoted. (3)
- Sensationalism (3)
- Inadequate knowledge of subject matter by media people. (2)
- Lack control—can be bumped at any time by hot, more newsworthy items. (2)
- Harder to access media now—they use less of our material and we have more competition. (1)

- Media will sit on a story until it's important today or tomorrow. (1)
- Media only looking for established people—hard to break in (1)

Institution-imposed:

- Lack of training or staff development. (4)
- Lack of access to information staff—budget cutbacks. (2)
- Commenting on controversial topics is unpopular with administration, peers. (2)
- Political risk of going to the media without administrative approval. (1)
- Lack of staff in unit—would be overwhelmed by calls from the media and public. (1)
- Emphasis on basic opposed to applied research. (1)
- Fewer research and extension people with farm backgrounds. (1)
- No formal tracking system to measure clippings, track broadcasts. (1)

Other:

- Dry, boring nature of scientific information as perceived by the public. (1)
- Long geographical distance from campus to television station. (1)

Summary and Analysis

Responses from interviews with 29 faculty/staff members from 15 states were organized into 12 main themes, then grouped into these three main categories:

1. Why They Spend Significant Time Working with the News Media.

- They use the media because they can reach many people fast, effectively and economically.
- They don't perceive the risk of being misquoted as a major problem, although they say some of their colleagues do.
- Most media people are competent, professional and pleasant to work with, even though they have a different role than researchers and educators.

- And there's enough evidence of results—even though they may be intangible and hard to measure—to make media efforts worthwhile.

2. How They Work Effectively with the News Media

- Strong personal relationships with media people are important.
- You must be accessible—return calls promptly.
- You must be regular, dependable and trustworthy.
- You must be concise and stick to a central theme when answering questions.

3. What Is the Role of the Institution in Fostering Good Media Relations?

- Almost one-third (8 of 26 respondents) said the reward system—promotions, merit evaluations, salary—does not take media work into account.
- Training in media techniques should be offered—especially for new staff. Most were self-trained—learned to work with the media on their own.
- Not everyone in the system needs to be a media expert, but every subject matter or program area should be represented.
- The most frequently mentioned barriers to effective use of the news media are self-imposed. Barriers imposed by the media are next, followed by institutional barriers.

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