

DEALING WITH MEDIA

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Why deal with media? Quite simply, because people pay attention to newspapers, magazines, radio and television — and because agriculture is in the news. According to a recent study, 84 percent of Americans watch TV every day; 75 percent take at least 45 minutes every day to read a newspaper; 75 percent listen to the radio (but most of them aren't paying full attention); 94 percent read at least one magazine every month; and 50 percent read a book a month. People say they're extremely interested in stories about the environment, and as ranchers, you're often part of the environmental news coverage (Yarbrough, 1991).

Take a good look at today's news. Almost every day the press, television and radio report on the many kinds of trouble faced by individuals, small businesses, farmers — and unfortunately much too often, ranchers. You've seen them.

- Grazing fees are too low, an unfair subsidy to ranchers who, the article says, shouldn't be on our public land anyway.
- Cows are degrading our desert lands, tearing them down beyond repair.
- Ranchers want to shoot elk because they're eating forage that belongs to the cattle.

- Ranchers are shooting, poisoning, destroying our wildlife heritage, and their cows are endangering tortoises.

Sometimes the words are inflammatory; sometimes the stories are more or less accurate; sometimes just the quotes are misleading. What's going on? Unfortunately, it's all too easy to automatically blame the reporters, the editors, the TV anchors. If blame is to be allotted, some of it belongs to you, as well as the media. To get your side of the story told, you need to be able to deal knowledgeably with media.

You need to know the rules when you play with the pros. Understanding how reporters operate — and why — can help ensure that both sides of an issue are presented accurately and fairly. Taking the time to understand how reporters work pays off.

You also may need to change your attitudes about reporters. Colleen Patrick put it this way in her book, *Mind Over Media*:

“It is always surprising for me to discover how intimidated people often are of the media. Seeing it as devil or angel, most non-media people tend to attribute a monstrous amount of power to the industry and the people who work in it. More often than not, this much adulation is undeserved.

Occasionally, the full impact of the communications industry devastates or inspires to a magnificent degree, but generally you (yes, you!) can also find a way to influence the coverage about which you are concerned. It means getting your message through to the right people and presenting it in a manner to which they will be receptive.

Remember, in the world of media you are dealing with human beings who work with a communications product—a communication product which deals with stories about people or that affect people in one way or another. You have as much a right to approach them as anyone else.”

(Patrick, 1987)

Most reporters are generalists, trained to be journalists, not ranchers. They know how to write news so it can be understood. In small papers, reporters may cover the general call-in news, schools, the local business community and even the city hall and police. On larger papers, reporters may rotate from one type of news to another. And, they're always on a deadline that allows little time for serious consideration of subtleties or details. Unfortunately, most reporters rarely are given the luxury of true investigative reporting, spending months learning about one topic in great depth.

The journalistic theory of "balanced reporting" causes more misunderstanding than practically any other practice. In the media, "balance" means that all sides of a controversy are given a chance to state their position. As a rancher, you and an environmental activist may fight it out in the same article, and the readers are supposed to make up their own minds.

Problems enter when one side states a position more clearly than the other. Or, one side may make arguments not backed by facts. Reporters are supposed to be totally objective, but they're human and bias can enter.

Environment-related stories sell here in the Southwest because we have what is recognized as a sensitive, delicate desert. Also, Tucson and Phoenix are largely populated by recent urban immigrants from vastly different climates in the Midwest and East. These migrants are unfamiliar with the West's wide open spaces and often have preconceived negative ideas about ranching. Reporters are often urbanites, too.

Your first step should be approaching reporters with the right attitude. If you start out by assuming the reporter and the editor and everyone else associated with media are biased, deliberately misinterpreting the facts—that they are liars and scoundrels—don't be sur-

prised if you continue getting a negative press. You're entitled to your feelings about the news coverage ranchers have received, but you harm your credibility if you lose your temper. **No matter what the provocation, keep your cool.**

No matter whether you approach the media or they come to you, you need to know what "news" means. And there are definitions — hundreds of them. Basically, "news" equals information that people **want** to find out about or **need** to find out about. A more cynical definition says that "news" is whatever an editor decides to print or put on radio or TV that day. If you believe you have a story that should be told, ask yourself:

- Is it local?
- Is it unusual? Unique?
- How timely — if the story isn't told this week, is it gone?
- How are people touched, involved, entertained?
- Which people? How many? Where are they?
- Does it solve a problem — or cause one?
- Why do people need to know? (That's the most basic question of all, and the one most often forgotten.)

All right, you have a story idea that will benefit ranchers; now what do you do with it? Abandon the idea that you must write a news release; that job is for the pros who work in the media. Let's assume you want publicity for an event — your local cattle growers organization is holding a meeting to talk about mountain lion predation that has suddenly increased dramatically. First question: Is the public invited? If not, don't bother calling the media because

they only give publicity to events their readers can attend. Second question: Are the media invited?

Is the meeting going to present worthwhile information? Nothing will hurt your credibility more with your audience and the media than a highly publicized event that just doesn't amount to much.

Plan ahead to publicize your meeting. If you want to use magazines, get the information to them at least three months in advance. Simply write a letter or call the editor; be sure to provide the famous "5 W's and the H:" **Who, What, When, Where, Why** and **How**. Whatever you do, **DON'T** call or write anyone until you have all your facts, figures and ideas well thought out.

You'll need the same information for daily and weekly newspapers, but don't send it to them until two weeks in advance. Direct your letters to the proper editor, by name not merely by title. If you don't know who that is, call the paper and find out.

If you want to involve television in meeting coverage, use a slightly different approach to the assignment editor. The TV news very rarely will give advance notice of an event unless it has widespread importance. They may send a reporter and a camera to be at the meeting if:

- your topic is controversial (The suggested meeting fits that criterion.); or
- your speakers are well-known; or
- your topic is greatly important to the area; and
- you have something visual going on (so-called "talking heads" are usually considered boring).

Persistence is another key to coverage. Keep trying to interest the media in your story. After you've sent the letter with

your news tip, call the editor. Be business-like but friendly. And remember deadlines. Deadlines are part of the everyday world reporters face, and the deadlines are always tight. Only the outbreak of a worldwide catastrophe "stops the presses," despite what you may have seen in the movies. TV Evening News goes on exactly on schedule, not a moment later.

In general, the following deadlines are appropriate (but always check with your media ahead of time, and never, ever call within an hour of the deadline):

- weekly newspapers often go to press on Wednesday, with deadlines for copy on the previous day;
- copy deadlines for morning daily papers are usually about midnight for the last edition;
- for afternoon daily papers, the deadlines range from 8 a.m. to noon, depending on the number of editions printed;
- television can go live, using their remote facilities. Otherwise, for a 5 p.m. newscast, reporters want to be back at the studio to edit their video by 2 p.m. The deadline for the late evening newscast is usually 7 p.m.
- If the radio station has regular newscasts, call the station just about any time; ask when the news director has time to talk.

News releases and newscasts are not the only way to get your story told. For example, if the newspaper has an editorial policy favorable to ranching, perhaps you can persuade the editorial board to express an opinion. This is a long shot except in smaller papers. If you're a good writer, try getting a column on the op-ed page; this is, logically enough, the page opposite the editorial page.

The “Letters to the Editor” section is one of the most heavily read parts of every paper, so it’s a good place to reply to news articles or editorials. Use such letters to correct mistakes rather than trying for a retraction; more people will read your letter. Here are some guidelines:

- Limit your letter to one specific subject.
- Use a news “hook.” Continue the debate on an issue currently in front of the public.
- Write in a calm, logical manner. Don’t rant or rave. Use unbiased expert sources and quote relevant statistics.
- Be careful about using humor or sarcasm. People either will not take you seriously or they will misinterpret. In either case, your point will be lost.
- Write to your local paper or specialized publications as well as the metropolitan papers. But don’t write identical letters or ones that look like form letters.
- If you write about the same subject too frequently, you run the risk of diluting your credibility. Ask a friend to write.
- Always sign your letters. Include your name, title, address and daytime phone number so the paper can contact you to verify that you actually sent the letter. At that point, you can ask that your name be withheld.

Radio and television have alternatives to the news, also. They both have talk shows, and talk shows need guests. Think it through before you decide on this type of publicity. You’ll be on the air much longer than you are during a 90-second news spot. How do you look on-camera? How do you sound on the mike? Listen to the show. How good is

the interviewer? How sympathetic to the guests? Even more important, does the show reach the people you want to convince?

Up to this point, I’ve assumed **YOU** want to talk to the media. It’s just as likely that the **MEDIA** will want to talk to you. Suddenly, you’re the pursued, not the pursuer. And, you’re in a new ball game.

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA — PRINT

If reporters call on the telephone, first get their names and where they work; then find out what information they’re interested in. At that point, decide whether you’re willing to cooperate. Is this an issue you know enough about? Is this a reputable newspaper? There’s a big difference between the Arizona Daily Star and the National Inquirer.

Encourage a face-to-face interview. You’ll communicate more clearly because you’ll be able to detect when the reporter doesn’t understand, and you can clear up confusion immediately. However, sometimes deadlines don’t allow a meeting in person.

When you’re talking on the phone, identify yourself clearly. Spell your name and have the reporter spell it back. If the reporter has only one or two questions — and you know the answers — give the information promptly. If you need to look something up, say so. If you’re not the authority they ought to be talking to, say so and suggest another name. Ranching is a complex business that varies from one part of Arizona to another. If it’s necessary to call back later, tell the reporter when you can have the information; ask if that will be convenient, and always follow through. If you have a FAX available, ask about sending information this way.

Never forget, an interview with a reporter is not a conversation, no matter how friendly. It's a highly structured situation, and your role is to communicate as much information as possible about a particular topic, probably as quickly as possible.

Reporters are always on tight deadline. Don't let this fact keep you from controlling the interview. Rarely will the information be valuable only today. Let the reporters know that you understand deadlines and respect them. But also let them know that you will not be pressured to rush into an answer until you get your facts straight. Many issues are complex, and there may be times when a written, not a verbal, answer is more appropriate. Don't try to explain a highly complicated issue over the phone to a reporter who doesn't know much about ranching. You're inviting a story with errors and misquotes.

"No comment" is a reply that will invariably get you into trouble. It will only make reporters suspicious and lead to innuendos or negative references in the story. People who read the articles will have their doubts about you, also. If reporters ask you for information you can't give out — or don't want to — say so and say why.

Sometimes reporters will ask you to comment on a controversial issue, promising that your name won't be used without your permission. "Off the record" is fine if you're a national politician; if you're not, stay away from it. Newspaper editors occasionally insist on using names — no matter what promises the reporter has given during an interview. Comment on controversy if you want, but only if you're willing to see your name in print. Also, anything you say at a public meeting is fair game for reporters. "Off the record" is legally impossible to uphold; don't even try.

When you give a personal opinion on any subject, identify it as such. Make sure the reporter understands that you

are speaking for yourself, not other ranchers or your professional organizations.

Answer questions seriously. Watch your sense of humor. Being flippant or funny may appear cold and cynical in print. Being friendly and casual are fine but quite different from making inappropriate jokes.

Don't talk jargon. Reporters are trained journalists and usually know very little about ranching. An "AUM" is incomprehensible. They can't write responsibly and accurately unless they understand exactly what you mean. Good reporters will dig until they're satisfied they know what you're talking about, but don't assume all reporters have the time, the expertise, or the willingness to interpret you. So, start out with uncomplicated language and try to explain what you mean in more than one way. Phrase your answers with a Phoenix reader in mind — someone who probably came from "back East" and couldn't tell a cow from a goat at six feet on a clear day.

If you know the subject ahead of the interview, think through your answers. Have in mind one or two key points that you want the reporter to mention in the finished story. Put them as clearly and as succinctly as you can. Get your points in early, even if you have to redirect the questions.

Think of stories that illustrate your point; use colorful language, but not profanity. Reporters will use a colorful, pithy quote word for word — accurately. This is usually (unless your quote is too colorful) preferable to a paraphrased quote that may or may not be accurately used.

Be positive, not defensive, even though the reporter may phrase the question in a negative way. For example, if the reporter asks, "Why

should you be subsidized with cheap grazing fees?" Resist answering, "Grazing fees aren't subsidies!" Instead, talk about the environmentally favorable things you routinely do on public lands.

Don't let reporters put words in your mouth. If you don't like the way a question is worded, either deny it or give a positive response. Don't simply repeat the question while you think of an answer. In other words, don't say, "Some people think grazing fees are a subsidy, but . . ." Tomorrow's story could read, "Rancher admits grazing fees are a subsidy." Don't be misdirected by the reporter's questions. Questions don't get printed; your answers do. Watch out for "So in other words..." Reporters are trying to interpret what you said and get points down clearly. Be certain their rephrasing is accurate.

Control the interview. Constantly remind yourself that you must remain in control. Don't wait for reporters to ask the right question; do it for them. Smile; look at them directly, and say, pleasantly, "That's an interesting question, but it's more important to consider. . . ." Take an active role; don't hesitate to offer pertinent information — a different angle — a piece of human interest. You're the expert, but make sure the information you offer backs up the major points you've decided to discuss. On the other hand, don't let reporters side-track you or lead the interview in directions you don't want to go.

Spell all names and double-check on figures. If possible support your interview with written material, if you have time to locate it before the reporters come. If you have a FAX machine, offer to send corroborating material to the reporter's office, before their deadline.

Sometimes the question is obviously biased — or contains what you know to be untrue. The reporter may be playing a game, hoping to get you annoyed,

hoping to get an off-guard comment. Or, the reporter may simply be misinformed. Correct the misinformation, but don't repeat it in your answer, particularly on a radio or TV talk show.

"The reason: *The more people hear the lie, the more they believe it. If the question includes the lie and you reiterate it before giving the accurate information, the lie has been heard twice, the truth only once. One response could be, "That's not true," then give the correct information.*" (Patrick, 1987)

What about "dumb" questions? If reporters had time to do some background research into ranching, they wouldn't embarrass you — and themselves — by asking totally irrelevant, inane questions. It's not a good idea, obviously, to belittle the reporters. They control what appears in the newspaper, after all. Just smile politely to acknowledge the question, and then say what you want to say; your answer need not directly relate to the question.

I can't repeat it too often: know what you want to say and how you can best get your point of view across. You may have days or hours to plan your side of the interview, or you may have to make those decisions in minutes. Very often, you can't afford to extrapolate, to ad lib. To be blunt about it, when you've said what you want to say — shut up.

A friendly, listening attitude is still one of the best tools a reporter can cultivate. Good interviewers ask questions that demand more than a "yes" or a "no"; they ask for the "why" and "how." They invite you to continue explaining. They listen deeply. They try by their questions and even their body language to inspire you to answer clearly and fully. That's all well and good, but don't be "listened" into saying anything you don't want included in the story.

If you've been misquoted in the past —

and you're worrying about it happening again — tell the reporter. Ask for cooperation; reporters want to be accurate. Volunteer to clarify any information, on the phone if necessary.

Don't ask to see the reporter's story before publication. You can't — you won't — and it's journalistically naive to even ask the question. Also, **don't** expect to see the magazine before it goes to print.

If you have complaints about the printed article, go to the reporter first. Talk to the editor, who supervises reporters, only if you can't get satisfaction from the reporter. A retraction may not be in order, but letting reporters and editors know about outright errors is important. If you don't, the error may be repeated in subsequent articles by other reporters using the original stories as background material. If the paper has an ombudsman, be sure to include that person in your complaint.

Another word about retractions. They're usually brief and buried somewhere on a back page. They rarely reach the same readers who may have paid attention to the error. On the other hand, realize that most people read quickly and forget fast; the errors may not be remembered. Well, you can hope they aren't.

INTERVIEWS — BROADCAST

Most of the preceding recommendations also apply to broadcast media, but here are a few additions:

Be brief. Summarize your major points in 15-20 second "sound bites". It's not easy, and yes, you leave out a great deal of important material, but whoever said television was fair? The average recorded quote in a broadcast news story runs under 30 seconds; it's more like 15 seconds. The shorter your answers, the less editing they'll get.

That doesn't mean you answer all the reporter's questions in 15 seconds. Just make sure that somewhere in your longer answer, you summarize. The average news piece is two minutes or less — unless the station is reporting a large-scale disaster or the latest sex-related, notorious trial. These time constraints mean that only the barest essentials of any story get on the air, no matter how complicated the issue seems to you. Avoid time-consuming details, rambling explanations and complicated answers. However, remember that as long as you're hooked up to the microphone, what you say can be used in the broadcast.

Deadlines for broadcast reporters are even tighter than they are for print reporters. News broadcasts occur within a fraction of a second of the time they're scheduled. Reporters really don't have much time to listen to casual conversation.

Photographers and TV camera crews want the most dramatic pictures possible. Again, you need to be in control. Show them your lushest pasture, and don't go by way of an eroded stream bank.

Of course, it's a different ball game if ranching is the topic of a half-hour or hour-long documentary; these literally take months to prepare and tape. If you're asked to be a guest on such a program, I suggest you get intensive training. You're apt to need it!

Because they broadcast so frequently, radio reporters can be demanding. They want your statement NOW! Again, don't allow yourself to be pressured. There will be another newscast in a half-hour or an hour. Trying to answer a question when you don't have adequate information is a quick way to get into trouble.

When broadcast reporters call you, they do so because they've received a specific assignment from their assignment director. They are under tight

deadlines; they're rarely interested in hearing ideas for other possible stories. Ideas go directly to the station's assignment director.

SUMMARY

The job you do (or don't do) when the media call on you can have a great deal of influence on what people think about ranchers and ranching. It's a job worth doing well. Always be honest, factual, friendly. You can only lie once to reporters; after that, they will doubt everything you say. Show that you're proud and enthusiastic about ranching.

If the article or broadcast is well done, tell the reporters. Better yet, tell their editor. Reporters don't get many compli-

ments, and they'll remember you favorably forever.

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