

Celebrate the Morgan: September 10-11, 2005

Media, and How To Get It

Everyone talks about the importance of media coverage, but how do you get it? Unless your career or volunteer work has focused on public relations, the media track can be hard to navigate. The usual questions are, where do I begin and what do I do after that? Hopefully this article will demystify the experience for you.

There is one important caveat to remember. Give journalists what they need most: A story. If the story needs a twist, give it a twist. Always make it relevant and interesting.

View media relations from the journalists' point of view. What do journalists need? They need a story. Dissect your "Celebrate the Morgan" event and find the story.

Will it be a social event with the mayor and other community leaders in attendance? Are champion horses or athletes involved? How about local school children? Is there a charity involved? Will you be doing something that has never been done before? Is it a big social event? Are there ways the journalist can participate, such as taking a riding or driving lesson, washing a horse, being the master of ceremonies?

Drill down and find the story. Self-promotion and "fluff" won't sell. The journalist's job is to ferret out stories that will interest those who read, watch, or listen to his or her report. Each has a style and a constituency. It's your job to identify the story you have to tell and then identify who would be interested in knowing about it.

Do your homework; identify the journalists most likely to be interested. Read local newspapers and magazines. Listen to local radio broadcasts and watch local news shows on television. Know who reports what, evaluate their styles, become familiar with each reporter's point of view and topics of interest. Your chances of success are linked directly to having a good story and telling it to the right journalist.

What you want to avoid at all costs is making two classic mistakes: Not having a real story or telling a good story to the wrong person. For instance, if a journalist's beat is religion, a story about "Celebrate the Morgan" probably won't cut it.

If you have partners in your event, such as a charity or a school, don't hesitate to ask them for help. Your partners may already have media relationships in place, which will make it a lot easier.

You must know what reporters need, then find savvy and imaginative ways to satisfy their needs. Every news organization (newspapers, magazines, radio, or television) has a constituency; a defined audience whose interests they must satisfy to remain in business.

Make yourself a good and reliable media source. Develop a reputation for being honest, knowledgeable, responsive, and polite. And for being savvy about media needs, requirements, and limitations.

Develop a media relations plan. Start by outlining the story you have to tell. Include every detail and apply the "who cares" rule to each. It's important to be sure your story is interesting to more than people who are related to you.

Make a list of all the journalists who have reasons to be interested. Under each one's name, list the relevant factors of the story that matches the journalists' interests or style.

Then, capture the essence of your story in a sentence or two. Visualize this as a headline. Don't say what everyone else is saying. Find your own voice, be original and imaginative; distinguish yourself from the others. Position yourself as a leader. Think of it as your two-minute commercial. The two-minute commercial you will give in response to the journalist's predictable question, "What's this all about?"

Journalists don't have time to hear a long, drawn-out story. They want to know right up front if you have something that will work for them. Practice your two-minute commercial until you can deliver it effortlessly. Ask friends to critique your delivery and role-play with you.

There are basic rules that must not be violated when working with the media. They include knowing the journalist's needs, being knowledgeable, responsive, polite, and honest. Good humor counts too.

When you have prepared your media plan, identified your targets, and formulated the two-minute commercial, you're ready to write a release. Which will be most successful if written from the journalist's perspective. Focus on how your story meets the journalists' needs and why it will interest his or her audience.

The purpose of the media release is to capture the journalist's interest and make him or her want to know more. Don't try to tell the entire story and don't oversell. Journalists never want to feel as though they are being sold.

The first sentence is the attention getter. It must succinctly identify what the story is all about and capture the reader's interest. The rest of the story unfolds after that (remember though, not the whole story). Think about how articles are written. They always have a headline that whets your appetite for more.

Keep the release to no more than a single, double-spaced page. That's right, one (1) page. Use a ten or 12-point font, such as Times Roman or Palatino Linotype. Don't indent paragraphs.

Look on the AMHA website for a media release template. You'll need to click on "Celebrate the Morgan" to get there. Use your own business letterhead (not AMHA's) and follow the template example.

Remember this important point about the contact number you include. Be sure it's one where you can be reached 24/7, usually a cell phone. Reporters work on odd schedules. If it's not easy to reach you, it's easy to move on to the next story.

Include captivating visuals. Nothing captures the media's attention faster than great pictures. In fact, the truth of the matter is that most broadcast news producers will air a story with great visuals before one with great content. Broadcast is a visual media. So is print.

If you are not an accomplished photographer or don't have an appropriate camera, hire someone. A good tactic is to call the photo editor of your local newspaper and ask for recommendations. If you have a newspaper photographer take the pictures, not only will you get photographs the news media can use, you have an insider doing it and raises it the odds of getting the photo(s) into print.

If you take your own pictures, be sure to shoot with the highest resolution possible. High resolution and low compression are what's needed for the best reproduction quality. Take pictures that tell a story. Make them as dramatic and exciting as possible. Add a catchy caption and send it to the photo editor.

Don't oversell in your news release. Make your information clear, compelling, and straightforward. Avoid those overworked "fluff" words that are a guaranteed turn-off. "We're the biggest, the best," or phrases such as, "our horses are so friendly and pretty and they've won all sorts of championships. And their bloodlines are. . . ."

Be timely. Find out the lead times for sending releases and adhere to them. Doesn't do any good to send a release too late to be used.

An easy way to research media is to go to a website intended for you to contact your members of Congress. The good news is that you can contact your congressperson and research media all in the same place! Go to www.congress.org and click on "Media Guide."

The other way to research is to go to your local library and ask the reference librarian for the Bacon's Publicity Checkers. The librarian can show you how to use them (it isn't hard). A word of caution; people move around. Always call to ask if journalists you have identified are still with the organization. If not, ask for the name and number of their replacements.

Then before you send anything to anyone in the media, pick up the phone. We're assuming that you've have done your homework and are calling the right person.

The reason for your call is to inquire if your story is of interest to the journalist. When you connect, identify yourself and the reason for your call. "I'm calling because I have a story about ___that I believe would be of interest to your readers/viewers/listeners." If told the time is OK, launch right into your two-minute commercial. The best times to call are usually between 11 a.m.-12 p.m.

If it's not a good time, ask when you should call back. The reporter may say, "You don't have to call again, just send me something." Politely try to get around that by saying, "I'd really appreciate having five minutes of your time to be sure I'm presenting the story in the best way for you." Your goal is to have a conversation and begin building a relationship with the journalist before sending anything.

If the journalist insists that you send something, thank him or her and do it. Call about a week later to follow up. Tell the journalist you're calling to be sure he or she received the release and to tell him or her a couple of new facts about the story. Be concise and don't ramble. Thank the journalist for his or her time. When you do receive coverage, be sure to write a thank you note.

Always know what the journalist needs. Know his or her beat and constituency. Be knowledgeable, honest, and gracious. And most importantly, have a good story to tell.