



The Pet Rescue Foundation

PUBLICITY 101

By Lynn Spivak

Does your animal welfare organization want more money, adoptions, or volunteers? Pump up the publicity!

Publicity builds credibility, increases community support, creates good-will and generates organizational awareness. And unlike advertising, PUBLICITY IS FREE!

With the assistance of four-legged scene stealers, it's possible for an animal welfare organization to consistently generate more than 100 media mentions per month (worth thousands of dollars in advertising). How do I know? I did it myself. Here's how:

Are you ready?

- **Publicity must be a top priority**
- **Perform an organizational assessment**
- **Focus the message**

Eight great publicity grabbers

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Are You Ready?

Publicity must be a top priority for the entire organization. This is the most critical factor, period. The drive for publicity has to start at the top and its importance should get communicated to the entire staff. The reason is simple. Generating publicity takes work and everyone will be asked to help in some way.

To get publicity, it's important to say yes to every opportunity, even if it means bringing a pet to a TV station at 5 am, doing a radio interview on Sunday morning or conducting a shelter tour at midnight. But these tasks require kennel staff, dog handlers, van drivers, more cleaning and so forth. If employees understand publicity is an organizational priority, these are not such onerous tasks.

If the Executive Director isn't interested in generating publicity, the 5 am in-studio visit or the weekend interview will never happen, and employees will simply resent media inconveniences.

The Executive Director will also have to allocate more resources for things like overtime pay and a person to oversee the publicity effort (one full or part time staff member for most organizations is probably enough). The new hire doesn't need a degree in PR, but the position does demand a good writer and someone with the verbal skills to "sell" the organization.

Perform an organizational assessment. The good news about publicity is that it gives the organization a high profile. The potentially bad news is that a high profile will bring greater public scrutiny. As a result, it's good to do an organizational assessment.

Review your physical plant and practices and look for vulnerabilities. Consider how you would feel if that one dilapidated kennel or that one particular rule or that one accounting practice were exposed on the 6 o'clock news. If you have any skeletons in the closet, deal with them now. At the very least, have a well thought out rationale for the situation or a plan for correcting the problem in the future.

And remember: a lot of good publicity will make your organization highly regarded throughout the community and that "good-will bank" can act as a shield against unwarranted criticism or accusations that may crop up from time to time.

Focus the message. When it comes to animals, people want to hear the good news. They really don't want to know how many animals you're killing, how much your organization is struggling or how irresponsible the public is. Focus on how many lives you're saving, the great services you're offering, the goals you've reached, and the great job your organization is doing.

Eight Great Publicity Grabbers

There are a lot of tools you can use to attract the media. They include:

- pets
- pictures
- humor
- heartbreak
- happy endings
- expertise
- controversy
- creativity

Pets. Animal welfare organizations have a huge advantage when it comes to publicity—pets. Organizations that want publicity should shamelessly exploit the fact. Dogs and cats are cute, engaging, funny, visual and almost everyone can relate to them.

Pictures. A good photo file is worth its weight in gold. Pictures of pets are a great way to spice things up and make your material stand out to the media. Paste pictures of pets on press releases, event announcements, flyers etc. Keep a camera handy and stay on the lookout for great photos: cute faces, happy endings, before and after pictures of abused animals, beauty make-overs, and so on. Try to take pictures of the animal looking right into the camera and crop the photo so the eyes say it all.

Humor. Most animal welfare organizations take themselves and their messages way too seriously. Lighten up! Whether it's an event, a PR campaign or a spay/neuter promotion, get silly and have fun. You'll get better media coverage and you'll have more fun doing it.

Heartbreak and happy endings. Shelter animal stories can bring a lot of emotion from sad histories of abuse, neglect, or injury to happy endings of reunion, placement, transformation. Publicize them!

Controversy. Nothing makes the media happier than controversy. If dog parks are a big concern in your community, step forward with an opinion. Take a position on the verdict in the recent dog bite case. Protest the local rodeo; go after the nearby puppy mill. By getting out front as an animal advocate, you also give your community a clearer picture of the mission and values of your organization.

Expertise. A great way to get the media knocking on your door is to establish your director as an expert on animal issues. When national, regional or local news about animals breaks, you'll be one the media turns to for a comment and local perspective. How do you become known as an expert? Good information and lots of media exposure.

Creativity. Publicity is more likely to come your way if you avoid the dull, boring, and predictable. Think of a clever twist to the same old message. Come up with a funny event. Create a wacky promotion. There are a lot of books on guerilla marketing—look them over.

What to Publicize

Here are a few ideas:

1. Achievements-record adoptions; record spay/neuters; record lives saved; drop in death numbers; awards; organizational goals that have been met
2. Events - grand opening; adoption fair; pet pictures with Santa
3. Conditions - caring for pets in a heat wave or cold snap; pets and allergies; flea season; dogs in hot cars
4. Holidays –July 4th dangers; Halloween dangers; Christmas dangers
5. Changes in shelter policies - new hours, days, fees
6. New programs - spay/neuter; dog training; pets visits to hospitals
7. New equipment – facilities; trucks; hi-tech gear
8. New community service-free spay/neuter; vaccination clinic
9. Needs for community help- volunteers, foster homes, towels and blankets
10. Special adoptions or happy ending stories - dog hit by car who is fixed up and ready for placement; cat injured in a fan belt, patched up and ready for adoption

11. Animal control stories – dog fight arrest; collector bust; abuse cases
12. Problems – too many kittens, too many black labs (Put a positive/fun spin on the problem. When the Tompkins County SPCA had too many beagles, they offered a dozen free bagels with every beagle adoption)
13. Fundraisers – mutt strut; rummage sale; fur ball
14. PR campaigns - homes for holidays; free spay/neuter for 30 days
15. Milestones and anniversaries - director celebrates 10 year anniversary; organization is 50 years old
16. Piggyback on national campaigns - shelter adoptathons, adopt-a-dog month etc
17. Shelter stories – an interesting pet (cat with 12 toes); an interesting adopter/visitor (from Timbuktu); an interesting story (two cats become inseparable buddies); an interesting surgery (rocks in tummy)
18. Beast to beauty – shelter grooming make-overs; behavioral transformations
19. Class offerings or speakers – dog bite prevention class; pocket pet care class
20. Profiles - an interesting staff member or volunteer (a manager who used to be a bank exec; a volunteer who is a long haul truck driver)
21. Your perspective on national/regional news relating to pets (national bring pets to work day)
22. Contests – dog house designs; pet names; essay contests
23. Giveaways - free dog collars; pet food; posters; a free pizza with every spay/neuter

Where to Publicize

Newspapers

- calendar pages
- donated space (Pet of the week)
- columns
- letters to the editor
- op/ed pieces
- editorials
- news

Radio

- psas
- news

TV

- news
- calendar listings
- public access

Magazines

- pet publications
- donated ad space

How to Publicize

- announcements
- press releases
- pitch letters
- letters to the editor

- columns
- opinion pieces
- editorials
- free ads

Announcements. These are easy and quick to write. Radio PSAs seem to be more accepted if they offer an important community service, e.g. free spay/neuter surgeries for pets of low income residents.

Press releases. There is an art to a good press release. A few tips:

- headlines and leads are key – spend a lot of time making them grabby and informative, conveying the most important points
- use language that paints a vivid picture-avoid boring abstract words and concepts
- keep the press release short (try for 500 words or less)
- have a clean layout so the release is easy to read; use visuals if possible

Pitch letters. Pitch letters are used to “sell” story ideas to magazines, newspapers, and electronic news reporters. They’re invaluable tools and it’s important to learn to write pitch letters well. A few ideas:

- The lead is key. Avoid boring, long winded introductions - jump right into the story.
- Keep the pitch to one page and tell the most compelling story with the most vivid language you can.
- There are websites and books that can help you learn about writing pitch letters and press releases. Check them out.

Letters to the editor. An easy way to get the organization’s name in print. Brevity is the key here. Condense you main points to just one or two paragraphs.

Columns. Writing a column for the local newspaper is a great way to get in the paper on a regular basis, build credibility for your organization/director and, of course, get your humane message out. You’ve got a wealth of topics you can draw on and get double duty out of your announcements and press releases at the same time. For example, one column could be on pets’ fear of firecrackers and how to condition dogs to noise. Offer the column for free. Propose the idea in a pitch letter. Follow up with a phone call.

Op/ed pieces. These are well crafted opinion pieces on topics of current community interest. Send the piece with a short pitch to the Op/Ed editor. Timeliness is everything!

Editorials. If your organization is about to embark on a truly groundbreaking endeavor, has reached an amazing milestone or accomplished a major goal, you can try to set up a meeting with the paper’s editorial board to convince them to write an editorial about your news. It’s a real coup if your organization can get this kind of endorsement.

Free Ads. Major newspapers generally don’t offer free ad space, but smaller weekly papers, “alternative” newspapers, neighborhood papers or “shoppers” will often offer free space for things like Pet of the Week.

If you have an attractive, professional ad on file that a designer has produced for your organization, you can sometimes get it dropped into local magazines or local editions of national magazines if the publications have a cancellation from a paying client. Give a call to the sales department and ask.

When to Publicize

Often. The PR person should be trolling the organization all the time, looking for stories and thinking about publicity angles. The staff, understanding the importance of publicity, should help by keeping a lookout in their own department and alerting the PR person to potential stories or photo ops. Ideally, several items should be sent to the media each month, even if they're only calendar listings. If little looks promising, manufacture something that's not too labor intensive— a publicity stunt; a goofy promotion or giveaway; a contest. Set a monthly publicity goal for media mentions (maybe starting with ten) and then work to increase it each month.

The beauty of regular features. Obviously, it's easier to reach monthly publicity goals if you have locked in commitments—a regular pet of the week feature, a newspaper column, a scheduled appearance on TV every week. The more of these you can generate, the better.

Good stories will never go unused. You've written a great little piece about the dog hit by a car who is now healthy and ready for adoption—but the media isn't interested. No matter! This is great stuff for your newsletter, website and solicitations.

A Few Publicity Do's

Do make it easy for the media to reach a contact person right away, without layers of voice mail. Avoid hearing reporters say, "I tried to call, but I could never get through."

Do call back every reporter in a timely fashion. Even if it's a story you'd just as soon not publicize, have the courtesy to call the reporter back or risk turning off a potential future ally.

Do find out if the reporter is on deadline. When calling a reporter ask, "is this a good time to talk?"

Do anything the media wants (within reason). You need and want the exposure.

Do feel free to ask the reporter about the nature of their story. Before you answer a question without knowing the context, you can say, "may I get a better idea of what your article is about?"

Do keep information on every reporter you work with (name, organization, phone, email, what they wrote about) so you can put them on your mailing list and possibly pitch them with story ideas in the future.

Do keep your media list current. Some media staff change outlets and positions fairly often. Code your list by the kinds of information to send each person. Is this the contact for calendars, for PSAs or for breaking news?

Do have several people proof every item you send out to the media.

Do make the most of good clippings. Attractively mount and reproduce them with the banner of the publication. Send them to your membership. Put them in media kits. Post them on your website. You can gain a lot of credibility with a published story in a well respected magazine or newspaper.

Do keep a log of all your media coverage.

Spokespeople

It's a good idea to pick one primary spokesperson to represent the organization. Generally, this is the Executive Director but it might also be the PR person or the head of Operations. (A back-up is good to have, too, so that if the spokesperson is out of town and a media opportunity arises, someone is there to take advantage of it.)

One spokesperson is best because it allows the community to identify the organization with one individual, and it's the best way to keep the message unified.

A really good spokesperson exudes energy, compassion and enthusiasm, has a good grasp of the issues, can think quickly on their feet, can formulate good sound-bites, and likes to be center stage. If someone in your organization fits that description, they will be a huge asset to your publicity efforts. Most organizations aren't so lucky. However, many larger cities provide media training classes where spokespeople can sharpen their skills and build their confidence.

A celebrity spokesperson is another great publicity asset.

Media Markets

This article is geared toward publicity seekers in medium to large cities. It's clearly easier to get publicity if you are in a big media market with several radio, TV and print outlets. Proximity to the source is also helpful. The organization two miles from the station will probably get more TV coverage than the organization in the neighboring county that's fifteen miles away, even though they're both in the same media market.

Organizations in small communities where the local newspaper is practically the only media outlet must implement a slightly different publicity strategy. This will be the topic for another article.

Publicity Creates Publicity

Good coverage often creates a "bounce," triggering coverage of the same story from other outlets.

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And the more publicity you get, the more credibility you have, the more you are asked for your opinion and the more publicity you get. It's a beautiful thing.

About the author: Lynn Spivak publicized the activities of the San Francisco SPCA for sixteen years, often generating 350 media mentions or more per month. Stories appeared in the New York Times, the Wall St. Journal, USA Today, Dateline, ABC World News Tonight, NPR radio and dozens of other national, regional and local media outlets.