

PUBLICITY

Excerpts taken from Andy Funk, KB7UV

A good Public Information Officer (PIO) will make or break any organization. Does your club have and use a PIO? Do they make and use press releases? Have they been to the local paper and met the Assignment Editor? Is your PIO a good and reliable contact for the local newspaper? Are they proactive? Finally, the way newsrooms pick prospective stories.

A typical big-city newsroom will receive literally hundreds of press releases each day. Some come by mail, some by fax, and others by email. But watch out for email--just because they have an email address doesn't mean anyone will actually look at the messages in a timely fashion! So, for now, stick with regular postal mail and fax. Yes, I did write that they receive hundreds each day. How are they handled? Well, often an intern or entry-level newsroom employee is assigned to go through the stack and file them. Some are placed in daily planning folders, based upon the date of the event being promoted. Others are simply tossed into the so-called "circular file" (trash). So, if you send out a press release there are two essentials: making sure it makes it into the daily folder instead of the trash, and having it stand out among its "competitors" in the daily folder so it will actually be read by someone in authority. But there is another way to ensure your release is read by an appropriate person: develop a relationship with a planning editor or assignment editor so they will be predisposed to read anything you send. How? Well, the best way I know is to find something the planning or assignment editor needs, and meet that need. And, believe it or not, this can be real easy for people involved with Amateur Radio.

Breaking news! Often this is a story about an emergency somewhere, like a hurricane, tornado, or earthquake. Who are usually involved in providing communications during these emergencies? Ham radio operators. Who are the assignment editors looking for? Ham radio operators who can speak intelligently about what is going on. And one of the buzzwords for television news these days is "local." Assignment editors are always looking for local angles on big stories which are mainly taking place elsewhere. There's a coup in Pakistan? Find a local DXer who has just spoken with someone there. Something happened to a satellite?

Put together a list of hams you know who are experts in various facets of Amateur Radio. Find people who are available at different times of the day. Ask around. Talk to radio club committee chair people. Write a recruitment article searching for experts and ask area clubs to print it in their newsletter. (Also, ask for hams who work in the local media. Those you find may provide direct introductions to the appropriate people at radio and television stations and newspapers!) Then take the time to meet them, view their shacks, and talk for a little while. You might find that some of the people you've found are perfect for television, while others might be better suited for radio or newspaper interviews. (Remember that you're trying to get good publicity for Amateur Radio. While it's not "fair," how people look and speak has tremendous impact upon how their message is received.)

Once you have your list(s), put together a press kit on Amateur Radio. Begin with material from the ARRL, and add information on local clubs, your expert list, and 24-hour contact information for you and any other PIOs you are working with. And if you don't have a pager, seriously consider getting and carrying one. Put yourself in the position of a harried assignment editor. The news director is yelling, "Find me a local angle on this story!" If you had someone you knew who would return a page quickly and probably be able to provide that local angle, what number would you dial first? Now that your press kit is ready, call the newsroom at a time when they're least likely to be busy. First ask if they're busy with breaking news or on deadline, and if not, ask to speak with the assignment editor. Introduce yourself, and explain what you have to offer. Ask if you can take the assignment editor to lunch in the coming week. If not, try to make an appointment to stop by for a short visit. If you can't make an appointment, stop by anyway to drop off your press kit, (and bring some food--candy, pastry, or similar. News people love free food!)

Keep abreast of what's in the news, always looking for Amateur Radio angles. When you find one, first line up a good interview subject from your expert list. Don't proceed until you're sure the person is available and prepared! Then call the newsroom to pitch the story. The first words out of your mouth when you reach someone in the newsroom should be something like, "I have a local angle on the Taiwan earthquake." Make sure they know that talking to you will be to their advantage. They may not immediately jump at your story. Don't despair! They're probably extremely busy working on the primary story, arranging to get custom live shots from the network or a sister station, juggling satellite feeds, or otherwise frantic. The story isn't going away. Right then they have more material than they can use, but later that day, or the next day, when things calm down, remember the News Director will be yelling, "Find me a local angle on this story!"