

Tips for Working with the Media

Interviews:

- ✓ Be sure to designate a spokesperson. The president and several backups make great spokespersons for the association or board to handle all media interviews. Or, develop a list of possible media interview topics with a spokesperson for each!
- ✓ When speaking to the media, be accurate. If you don't know the answer to a question, check. Never guess. Chances are you'll guess wrong, your error will be printed or broadcast, and you'll be in trouble with your membership.
- ✓ Never promise media an interview with a source and then not follow through.
- ✓ In an interview, say only what is necessary. Don't ramble. Say only what you need to say. If there is silence, let the interviewer fill it.
- ✓ From the moment you walk into an interview, especially for television, until the time you leave the studio, you are on the record. Air check tapes are always rolling, so even if you are not on the air at the moment, anything you say is being recorded and can be used. Remember, when on camera, your actions can speak louder than your words.
- ✓ Trick: Before entering a television station for an interview, put a penny or a pebble your hand to remind you that until you put it down after the interview, you are on the record.

Nearly Every Gloom & Doom Story Has A Bright Spot

- ✓ When an issue crisis hits: Diffuse rumors and misinformation by keeping news media and other pertinent organizations up to date on the situation at hand. Quickly decide who will serve as spokesperson for the issue. Make sure the spokesperson is able to tell the association's story confidently and positively. Also, make sure the spokesperson is available on short notice.
- ✓ When communicating with the media, be the first to acknowledge negative news. You are more likely to get your story accurately reported by the news media. You are less likely to be on the defensive. You may get credit for honestly admitting the problem. You will establish the association as the source of information (The Voice For Real Estate®), a position most reporters will think twice about exploiting.
- ✓ Remember, bad news will not go away if you refuse to comment. Refusing to cooperate with the news media during a crisis situation may only expand the story and keep it around longer than if you had addressed the crisis immediately. You cannot hide behind the shield of "no comment." NAR research shows that home buyer compensation to buyer brokers is becoming more important. No comment is the worse comment that you can make. The reporter will assume that you are hiding something and simply saying nothing may damage your image. It is much better to get all the facts out into the open as soon as possible. Always maintain a professional stance no matter how controversial the issue.
- ✓ Making negative news positive: The median price is down. A median is a midpoint—half the prices are higher and half are lower. When a median price drops, it does not necessarily mean home values are dropping. Usually, it indicates that greater volumes of homes are being purchased in a lower price range.
- ✓ Example: "REALTORS® always say 'buy now.' Consider discussing how everyone's situation is different, and that a person thinking of buying should focus on what he/she needs, wants and can afford. If possible, try to talk about various financing programs for entry-level buyers, letting renters know that homeownership might be more accessible than they realize. Becoming comfortable with the working media allows you to help raise the public's level of understanding about real estate and its many issues. As this understanding increases, hopefully, so will enthusiasm for your association's programs.

- ✓ Example: Housing isn't a good investment anymore. This erroneous assumption is based on a relative short-term decline in home prices. Explain that housing is not a quick-in, quick-out investment, that it is a long-term investment producing increasingly favorable returns the longer it is held.
- ✓ Example: Sometimes homes sell for less than they did the previous year. But, there is a big difference between reducing a price and losing equity. Often, people confuse the two. It is a mistake to set an unrealistic price in a buyer's market. Having to lower a price does not automatically mean a seller is losing money on the property. Consider the following: a seller paid \$150,000 for his property and probably could have sold it for \$200,000 two years ago. Now, the market has changed and a more realistic selling price is \$190,000. Has the seller lost \$10,000? No. He stands to gain \$40,000. This situation is analogous to the "half-full or half-empty" glass—focus on the positive, not the negative.
- ✓ Remember: The media generally views homeownership benefits only in terms of appreciation. Emphasize the return a homeowner receives on the down payment, plus the added benefit of mortgage interest and real estate tax deductibility.
- ✓ It is the job of reporters to report both bad and good. They will report market declines and other real estate-related stories with or without your analysis. Ignoring "bad" numbers or "bad" issues won't make them go away. Refusing to acknowledge or release figures and facts gives the impression that you are being defensive. In the long-run, the reporter probably will not seek your insight for future articles. Establishing yourself as a credible source of relative information and advice is absolutely the best form of image enhancement.

Pitching stories and developing contacts:

- ✓ Develop a news media contact list to distribute information about the association and its programs. Include a contact name for each media organization. The contact may be the real estate or business editor. In addition to members of the news media, contact lists should include individuals who have an interest in the real estate industry, i.e., savings and loan officers, mortgage bankers, etc. Also, include any organization that publishes an industry-related newsletter.
- ✓ Be responsive and sensitive to reporter deadlines. If you are helpful to reporters when they come to you, they will be more receptive to your news releases and requests for coverage.
- ✓ Never remind editors about the thousands of dollars that your members spend on advertising with his or her newspaper. If this fact is important to the editor, then the editor already knows it!
- ✓ When your association receives fair coverage from a radio or TV station or in print, write a letter thanking the reporter responsible. Don't wait to write a letter when you have something to complain about. When you do have to write a letter of criticism, do so in a thoughtful and helpful manner. Try to assume that a mistake or erroneous portrayal was made out of ignorance, not malice. Write the letter to help inform, not attack, the reporter.
- ✓ Media relations aren't limited to writing news releases and targeting them to editors. Rather, media relations are positioning your association as a credible resource for information on all real estate-related issues. It is responding to reporters as quickly and as accurately as possible. It is knowing when to refer a question to another source and how to best "frame" your policy.
- ✓ Newspapers often choose to support worthy association projects with an editorial. If you're engaged in a project that will benefit the civic, social, educational, environmental or recreational life of the community, contact your newspaper editor to discuss editorial support. The long-term professional relations you are able to establish with the news media—combined with the credibility of your association's position—will determine how reporters handle your news and cover the real estate industry in your area.
- ✓ Remember: Radio is an "active" medium of communication. Unlike TV viewers, radio listeners are usually simultaneously doing something else. Therefore, your message needs to be strong to capture their attention. According to the Radio Advertising Bureau, Inc., there are more than 500 million radios in the United States and 99 percent of All-American households have at least one radio.

Tools: News Releases, Fact Sheets, Media Kits & Events

- ✓ Before writing a news release, ask yourself one question: “If I were a reader or a listener without any real estate ties, would I care about this story?” If the answer is yes, proceed. News editors receive thousands of news releases each month, many of which may never be read. By distributing only newsworthy releases, the editor will quickly learn that your releases are substantive. A well-written news release will stimulate editorial coverage. To ensure inquiries are generated by editors, produce a balanced release that tells enough of a story to generate interest, but not as much as a journalist might want to know.
- ✓ Try to include as many facts as possible in your news releases. Although your position should be the focal point, it’s important to include some information on both sides of the story. This will add credibility to your news release.
- ✓ A fact sheet is an alternative to a news release. It is an event outline that presents your news in the form of itemized facts. A fact sheet has two distinct advantages: it enables you to include more information than you could get into a routine news release; and, it permits news reporters to write their own stories, rather than having to edit yours.
- ✓ Media kits are packets of specialized or general information about an organization or particular program that are supplied to the media for background material. Media kits are a good idea for every association and don’t have to be expensive endeavors. They should include: news releases; biographies of leadership; black-and-white photos of leadership; and a history of the association. Specialized materials like Q & A sheets, fact sheets and camera-ready artwork and video or audio tapes should be added to help customize kits being distributed for publicity on a specific issue.
- ✓ News features are similar to news stories but in addition to the 5 w’s -- who, what, where, when, why— news features stress the “how” information. A news feature is generally more personal, highlighting the human element in the story. Collect the most dramatic facts and organize your materials into a fact sheet that will help you sell your story to the editor.
- ✓ News features often become the “exclusive” stories of print and broadcast media. Remember, if an editor agrees to print your news feature, do not offer the information to any other newspaper.
- ✓ The editorial page of the newspaper is one area where media outreach can be most effective in presenting the policy views of your organization, and for commenting on the news carried elsewhere in the newspaper. Editorial positions evolve over a period of years and generally reflect the philosophy and attitudes of the publisher and senior editors.
- ✓ Every picture tells a story: Remember, pictures add visual impact to stories about your association’s activities. So, whenever possible, include a photograph with your news releases. Also, always provide a photo caption that identifies people from left to right, places and the event taking place.
- ✓ Association events provide wonderful photo opportunities, even if a story is not worthy of front page news. Let newspapers know about these opportunities with a short statement attached to a news release about the project. Always list a contact name and number at the association.
- ✓ Canceling an event: If for some unforeseen reason an event your association planned to host must be canceled after the media has been notified, call reporters immediately. If they show up for the event only to find it has been canceled, you may find it difficult to get them to cover any future events your organization sponsors.
- ✓ Photos and the media: Always keep a supply of professionally taken, black-and-white head shots of the association’s president and other officers to send to newspapers upon request. If you send a general information media kit to a newspaper or other media outlet, include a photo of your association’s president.
- ✓ Letters to the editor are not limited to print media. Broadcast news shows often will air letters received from their audience or provide an opportunity for the association spokesperson to be taped giving a statement. Contact local stations to determine possible broadcast opportunities. Don’t forget, radio is a great method of communicating information, particularly for associations that do not have the resources to use television. When conducting a media tour: Follow up all interviews with thank you letters to each reporter who completed an interview. Monitor coverage received on the tour by clipping newspaper stories and tuning into broadcasts.