



Yes, there's a learning curve, but don't let that dissuade you from mastering the art of media relations! Tell your district's or association's story far and wide by following this guide to building and maintaining relationships with members of the media.

How to handle media requests for interview and comment...

When you receive a request for comment or interview from a media professional, find out:

1. The reporter's name, plus his or her phone number and/or email address
2. The reporter's deadline
3. The reporter's media affiliation and who his or her primary audience is
4. When the story will be published and whether it will be published online, in print, as a live interview, or some combination thereof
5. The subject of the interview requested and why the reporter is interested in writing the story
6. Date, time, and length of interview and whether it will be live or recorded

Don't be afraid to:

1. **Ask for sample interview questions to prepare with.** Sample questions can give you a better feel for what sort of perspective a reporter is looking to add to his or her story with your interview. Not all reporters will be willing to supply them – but that doesn't have to be a deal breaker if you feel comfortable and confident discussing the interview topic in depth.
2. **Say "No, thank you."** Sometimes your district or association is not the best source for a story, or maybe your district or association doesn't feel comfortable providing comment on the topic in question. That's totally ok!

The best next step is to provide the reporter with contact information for an individual or organization that might be better able to help, if such a contact exists. You may also use this opportunity to pitch an alternative story idea to the reporter that you would be willing to provide comment on.

If you're not comfortable redirecting the reporter's request or pitching a different story idea, simply say "Thank you for thinking of us and reaching out. We appreciate the work you do and are sorry we won't be able to help you with this story. In the future, if the opportunity presents itself, please don't hesitate to contact me again."



How to give a great interview that garners support, not trouble...

1. Know before the interview starts what information you want to communicate and in what tone. In the interview, stay focused on those key messages.
2. If you receive a question you don't know the answer to or how best to answer it, you should do one of two things: pivot or pass it off.

Pivoting is what all the best interviewees do to redirect a line of questioning to the topics they want to talk about. The best way to pivot is to take a word or idea from the tough question being asked in a new and different direction that you're comfortable with.

Passing off more technical questions or ones that demand specific answers is appropriate in many circumstances. Too many interviewees forget this: if you're not positive you can reference the right statistic or the right wording, etc., be honest! Tell the reporter "I'm unsure of the answer to your question, but it's important you get one from our organization, so I or (*INSERT NAME*) will follow-up with the most accurate information we have as soon as possible."

3. Say what you want to say, then stop talking.
4. If you must use acronyms while in an interview, tell your audience what each letter stands for and provide context as necessary.

For instance, when using "NRCS" in an interview with a local news station, spell the acronym out and give a brief description of what NRCS does and how it does it:

"NRCS – which stands for the Natural Resources Conservation Service – is the federal agency that administers many of the voluntary, incentive-based conservation programs in the United States. NRCS is housed under USDA – short for the U.S. Department of Agriculture – and has helped millions of American landowners and managers implement conservation practices over the last 80 years."



How to go “off the record” in the right way...

Chances are you shouldn't be going “off the record.” But sometimes, providing background information on an issue where the facts aren't clear or widely understood can help to set the record straight and ultimately benefit your organization. Providing “background” to reporters can also help you develop relationships with them, but only if you make your intentions clear:

Make sure the reporter knows you're providing background by saying, “I can provide background on this issue, but I'm not ok with being quoted.” If you think the reporter is writing down what you're saying with the intention of quoting you, remind him or her that “all of what I'm saying now is on background.”

When giving background:

1. Refrain from using obscene or questionable language, and don't ever use or allude to inappropriate jokes or sayings. Just because you're not being quoted doesn't mean you won't be judged for what you say.
2. Do not gossip, spread rumors, or speculate. It's unprofessional and reflects poorly on your organization.

If you are concerned that a reporter will misquote you or misattribute what you've provided on background, there's nothing wrong with recording the interview/interaction yourself and having the recording available for comparison just in case.

If you are misquoted, you can and should ask the reporter to correct the inaccuracy in the story if it's online, and/or if you think it necessary, to issue a correction in print, online, or on air. We all make mistakes, so as long as an appropriate correction is made, try not to take it personally or hold a grudge.

Sometimes, we need a reminder:

The vast majority of reporters – particularly those that cover agriculture – are not out to get you or present you or your organization in an unfair or negative light. The vast majority want your voice to be heard because they see it as valuable. Just like you, reporters want to get it right and be able to come back to you for comment and background in the future. The vast majority won't ask you “gotcha questions” or otherwise alienate their sources and contacts, intentionally or unintentionally.

When it comes right down to it, members of the media are the primary group of folks educating the electorate about public issues like natural resources conservation. Help them tell the most complete and accurate story by being readily available to provide background and clarification, meeting their deadlines for quotes and statements, and always being honest and clear about your intentions.



How to get reporters to call you...

If you want press coverage, you need a story that's newsworthy.

Many of the success stories conservation districts and their state associations have to tell can make for great human interest stories or articles on local governance, public priorities, environmental issues, and place-based, innovative projects. But it's important to be realistic about what stories have legs in which news markets, and strategic about how you tell them.

If you have a story you would like to get press coverage, try this exercise:

1. Ask yourself "Why is this story important?" Answer that question, plus the who, what, where, when, why of what happened in that story, in no more than five sentences. Now edit those five sentences down to three. Would you want to read more after reading those three sentences for the first time? If so, you've just written a story pitch to reporters AND a lead to a press release.
2. Next, ask yourself, "Who is this story important to? And who needs to hear it?" The answers to those questions will help you decide which news outlets or radio stations to send your story pitch to. Take that three-sentence pitch, put it in an email, add a few hyperlinks to related stories and/or supplemental information, and send it to those reporters with a catchy subject line – one that their editor might use to get their attention.
3. Now take that pitch and make it into the first paragraph (also called a "lead") of a press release. For a step-by-step guide on writing and formatting press releases, check out NACD's "Press Releases 101" PowerPoint presentation [available here](#).



How to keep reporters coming back...

1. **Be honest, timely, and available.** Help reporters tell the most complete and accurate stories by being readily available to provide background and clarification, meeting their deadlines for quotes and statements, and always being honest and clear about your intentions.
2. **Develop a symbiotic relationship.** Ask them if you can help promote stories they've written; send them personalized reminders about upcoming events you'd like them to attend or cover; and email them about stories they've already published to complement their work and/or give them an idea for a follow-up story.
3. **Don't waste their time.** Providing inaccurate or inconsequential information is not helpful. If you do it enough times, you're likely to lose press coverage.
4. **Don't make them pay.** Always offer complimentary registration for press that attend your meetings or conferences, and if possible, provide press with free meals if they are covering a full day of events.
5. **Make research easy.** Consider holding media summits and field tour events specifically for members of the press to attend and learn about your organization's policy and programmatic priorities; maintain an easy-to-navigate website; and have branded supplemental materials (like policy one-pagers and hand-outs on technical programming) at the ready.