

Planning and the Media

The media is a link between planners and the public. Letting reporters know how to use planners as a resource is key to facilitating this exchange. Planners can also more actively address the media by preparing for media inquiries and pursuing media coverage.

BECOMING A RESOURCE

Reporters view planners as objective experts. The media generally supports efforts in planning and understands local planning issues are popular news topics. Teaching reporters about planning increases accuracy in reporting. If reporters are unclear about planning issues, they cannot clearly explain them to the public.



Issues of confidentiality are rare in planning. Planners should be open and cooperative when answering questions. If the information a reporter wants is confidential, planners can call the reporter when that information becomes public to reinforce a sense of trust and openness.

TWO-WAY APPROACH

Planners must have both a plan of response for media inquiries and a plan of action to pique media interest in topics not being covered.

PLAN OF RESPONSE

Communication with media outlets should occur before circumstances make the media seek or demand information. To initiate a media strategy, a public information officer may be assigned to designate staff members with expertise in specific areas to answer questions about a given topic.

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Reporters may not always question the same people. Therefore, the planning department should distribute an inquiry response card. The card will provide department positions and include a section of frequently asked questions and answers. Department officials outside the planning department should also have access to inquiry response cards.

Planners are required by law to provide specified information to both the media and the public. Planning departments must catalogue and make these records accessible. A plan to do this may address the following: assignment of responsibilities; regulation of accessibility (i.e., use of copy machine, hours available); design of request form and procedure; and inventory of records and filing.



In some cases, planning staff will respond to media requests by doing research. Researchers should keep a written record of the request, including the name of the reporter and the questions being asked. The researcher must be aware of the reporter's deadline. If no information is available, the researcher should tell the reporter, but also remind the reporter that the planning department is always receptive to media requests. If the researcher does provide answers to a reporter's questions, that information should be logged and filed.

PLAN OF ACTION

Get to Know the Media. Local libraries usually provide mailing lists of local media outlets. *The American Journalism Review* website offers statewide lists of newspapers and the APA press office maintains a database of press contacts for APA members. Reporters who routinely cover planning issues should be on planning agenda mailing lists to increase the likelihood a story will get exposure.

The broadcast media offers the best and most immediate means of reaching a large audience. Broadcasters aim to expand their audience by reporting stories that deal with conflict or human interest.

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Develop a Rapport. Confidence and trust increase when there is rapport between staff and media. Media tours of planning offices or project sites are a great way to introduce the media to planning. A media kit is another way to describe planners, planning resources, and planning issues. Media kits may include contact lists to aid reporters in directing their inquiries; fact sheets to provide a primary source for a story; newspaper clippings to provide credible background information; and photographs and diagrams to illustrate the main points of the story.

Engage the Public. In small and midsize markets, planners have a realistic chance of appearing on talk shows and publishing op-ed pieces in local newspapers. Regardless of market size, tying planning issues into current news greatly increases the chance of media coverage. Also, having a well-known community figure write or appear for the planning department adds to the message. In many markets, public service announcements are a free or low-cost option for planning agencies to publicize issues or events.

Write a Press Release. Press release headlines draw interest. News releases are written like articles, with the most important information first. Subsequent paragraphs should tackle the remaining points of the issue, in order of priority or newsworthiness, so the editor or reporter can quickly decide whether to run with the story. A note to the reporter about how the story relates to the reporter's line of journalism increases the chances for publication. Even if not printed, press releases keep the media current on planning issues. Press release examples:

- *Proposal of a comprehensive plan.* Discuss aspects related to human interest or current events, including schools, parks, or downtown revitalization.
- *A report release.* Describe the findings of a study in real consequences (e.g., average commute time will double over the next five years).
- *Announcement of an annual conference.* Include excerpts from speeches, featured speakers' biographies, or conference outline and material.

CHOOSING THE PROPER MEDIUM

Print. The print media allows for greater depth and diversity than broadcast media. Newspaper journalists often specialize by topic, so planners can establish contact with the reporter(s) covering their field. Journalists are more likely to use the background information included in a media kit.

Publishing requires an understanding of the media market. Daily papers in large markets typically have short and concise articles. For local publications, including suburban dailies or neighborhood sections of major newspapers, greater depth is allowed. Weekly publications that feature a cover story provide even greater depth. Planning issues are far-reaching. Business, real estate, development, and environmental publications also may be interested in running a planning story.

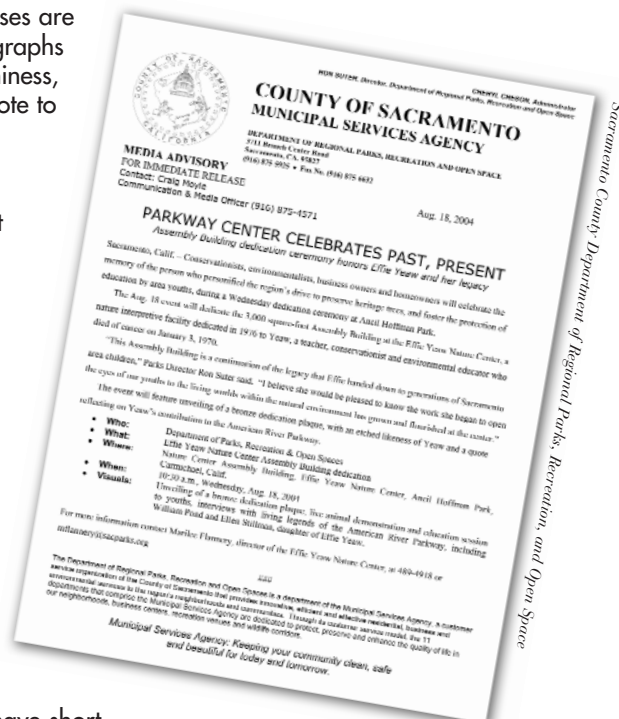
Broadcast. The broadcast media offers the best and most immediate means of reaching a large audience. Broadcasters aim to expand their audience by reporting stories that deal with conflict or human interest. To this end, purely informational planning stories are not likely to be aired. Because broadcast media is time sensitive, planners should avoid releasing stories during major media events. Deadlines in broadcast media also are more urgent than in print media. A reporter typically has less than three hours to prepare a story before airtime, so planners should write clearly and concisely, engaging the reporter and providing only the necessary facts. **Franz Heitzer** ■

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