

FIRST Publicity Tips

By Mark McLeod- Team 358 Robotic Eagles

“The greater portion of the editor’s job you can do, the greater your chances of getting into print”
– Richmond Times Dispatch

Do Your Homework

Who are your community’s media outlets (TV, radio, newspaper, newsletter). Become familiar with what each produces and figure out how you can best fit into their format. For example, a radio station needs short, snappy sound bites, while a newspaper’s weekly calendar might target events that interest young parents. Learn how the newspaper, radio or TV station operates. What stories do they like to tell? What audiences do they appeal to?

Keep Your Media/Contact List Up to Date

Identify and connect with the correct person to receive the release-network and socialize. What are their deadlines, when are they too busy to talk? Make sure you have current names, addresses, email, phone, and fax numbers. Do they prefer to receive information by email, phone, or fax? Releases are useless if released to the wrong person, at the wrong time, or to someone who no longer works there.

Take That Extra Step and Follow-up

Good PR is about serving editors’ needs as much as yours. Call to see if the release was received, thank them for coverage they give you. Become their key source of information about all things *FIRST*. Alert editors to significant events, such as an off-season competition, even if you aren’t directly involved. Become valuable.

Is It News?

Find an angle that’s newsworthy. A news release should read like a news item, not a sales brochure or something that merely promotes your team. Don’t bury the news, deliver it up front. The media isn’t likely to cover the same story year-after-year, e.g., “fundraiser kicks-off again.” So look for interesting and unique story angles developing variations from different points-of-view. Maybe a story about how the funds raised are used for community outreach, or how fundraising inspired a student to become a business major in college.

Find Your Point and Stick to It

Emphasize the benefits and significance of your news and save the superlatives to get right into what’s newsworthy. Develop a feel for what turns editors on, e.g., the unusual, significant change, trends, reader significance, history, name recognition, first-time events. Don’t try to cover the world in a news release. Keep the names and accolades to a minimum and avoid bogging down the release with superfluous information.

Customize Your Release to Target Different Media Markets

This usually just means a rewrite of the lead paragraph. For instance, if you release to both a local community paper and a regional or national media organization, then change the lead paragraph to clearly state the local connection. Watch out for implicit background assumptions or inside information. Things you assume your community of readers will already know, but people in the next town over will not know.

Think Beyond Traditional Media

Look for unique opportunities to get your message out. For example, business employee/customer newsletters, church information about community organizations, local Pennysaver-type publications, school yearbook, PTA newsletter. Community groups are looking for speakers – Rotary Club, senior clubs, Scout units, etc. Find a team student or mentor who is well-spoken and look for opportunities for them to tell the *FIRST* story.

Know your Community Leaders

Look for or develop links between *FIRST* and political, educational, professional, business leaders in your community. They can serve as important liaisons for your team. For example, any community leaders that are, or were engineers, or worked for a technology company at one time? Do leaders have *FIRST* age children? Cultivate relationships with them and ask for their help to network, make introductions and open doors.

Find Sponsors to Underwrite Promotion Costs

Hook-up with companies looking for complementary opportunities to promote their company name, logo and message. A company may agree to pay the costs to print professional looking posters in exchange for including their logo and other information on the poster to promote them too.

Leverage *FIRST* Media Support

Take advantage of the messages, statistics, and promotional material *FIRST* offers at www.usfirst.org under "About *FIRST*" "Media Center" to help develop and fill out a larger background to your story. They have a standard *FIRST* background paragraph to always include at the end of your news releases.

Who Else Gets Lots of Coverage?

Do you notice other local organizations that seems to have terrific exposure? Find out who's in charge of their promotion, it won't be hard. Meet with them and ask for guidance. There are mentors everywhere you look.

Use the Right Press Release Format

Date the release to give editors a sense of timeliness and urgency. Double-space it to allow for editor mark ups. Keep it to less than two pages. If you succeed in piquing their interest, and they decide to do a longer story, then they will call for more information. Accompany your article with fully captioned photos that are visually arresting-identify everyone in the photo and the activity. Check the NEMO website www.firstnemo.org for the Publicity *FIRST* manual describing press releases. Also, check usfirst.org, local Regional websites, NASA, and the general internet for real or sample press releases you can customize to your needs.

Make Your Team Contact Informed, Helpful, and Readily Available

The contact name you put at the top of your release must be easy to contact, fully informed about every aspect of your team and able to drop everything to get the editors what they need for the article to meet the publishing deadline. Keep up-to-date general background material, websites to learn more, etc. close at hand.

Give the Media Enough Time to React

For significant events, send in a release a month before the event takes place and follow it up two weeks before. When submitting articles after the fact keep them timely, within a day or two, don't wait a month.

Pick and Choose

Don't over saturate any one media with every little thing your team does. It will fatigue your media contact. Look at what is most important for your team and fits the criteria for newsworthy coverage. Spread stories around to different outlets. Send less significant items to multiple outlets for use as "as-needed" filler material. Sit down and plan your major press releases for the year. Set a time period (monthly, bi-monthly) and plan out an angle for each period with assigned deadlines to have articles completed and out the door. Unexpected things are great tie-ins to these planned major themes "Team 88 came back from Battlecry @ WPI with the win....come see their winning robot at their annual bottle drive on July 3rd in the Shaw's plaza", and even more important, fills that sidebar area in newspapers, which sometimes has shorter lead times than the rest of the page.

Always on Duty

Always be on the lookout for good press opportunities in the back of your mind. Keep a good resolution camera handy, even if it's just your cell phone, along with a pen and notepad for jotting down names and facts.