



Working with the media

Gaining positive and consistent coverage in the media can have a very positive impact on your Landcare group. If people know what you have achieved and what you are planning to do, they are more likely to look at you positively and give their support.

This Landcare Note provides some ideas on how you can work effectively with the media and get some positive publicity for your projects.

Working with the media

When we talk of the media here, we mean primarily television, newspapers and radio. Newer forms of mass communication such as the internet are also growing in importance (see Landcare Note 6.3: Using Technology). Regardless of the media type, the basic elements of communication are relevant.

The aim of exposure in the media is to tell the story about your concerns or ideas (e.g. expanding salinity), the activities you're planning (e.g. a tree planting day), what you have achieved in the past (e.g. improving water quality) and when you are looking for new members, volunteers or resources.

The media is so varied, you can target any audience you want to reach, no matter whether it is local, national or international, by finding out where that audience gets most of its information.

Most groups will concentrate on their local media including local newspapers and radio and TV stations, but you may be doing things that should be seen by a wider audience. State rural newspapers and industry-specific magazines are potential avenues for a good local story.

How to do it

Contrary to popular belief, journalists are not there to perform a community service. They want stories to interest, excite and entertain their audience.

Your job is to capture the imagination of the journalists so they are enthusiastic about what you want to promote so they have a good story to write.

This may not be as easy as you think because the media may not have your knowledge or enthusiasm for what you are doing, and you are also competing with a lot of other people who also want media attention.

When approaching the media, you need to consider the following:

- The message you want to get across
- The relationship (or not) that you have with the particular media outlets you want to use
- Your understanding of how the media works – what's attractive to them and what isn't
- Who you want to reach with this information
- What form the message should take – including how readable/acceptable it is to 'non-believers'.

What is the message?

It is important to be clear about what you want to say. Information that is clear to you may not be to others.

Giving directions for a field day may be obvious to your local members but not to outsiders who are less familiar with your area. If you're asking for volunteers, you need to give some idea of what they will be doing, especially if there is skilled work involved. The message needs to be accurate and truthful.



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Writing a media release

A media release is the information you send to media outlets to inform them of the issue or event, and how they can get more information about the story.

A handy thing to keep in mind when you're writing it, is the 'golden rules' young journalists are taught to ask (and answer) when they are learning their craft: who, what, when, where, why and how.

Here is a check list for your media release:

- A letterhead or easy identifier
- The date
- A catchy title – think of a strong angle to grab their attention
- Keep it to one page and write it simply
- It needs to be a report on a real event that is happening, a new story
- Include a 'ready-to-use' quote from a key member of the group
- Details - what day, time, location
- Who is involved in the story and, where possible, a 'public face' or human element
- A credible story with supporting evidence
- Who to contact for further information and photo opportunities

Building a relationship with the media

Writing a media release and sending it off does not guarantee it will be published or presented 'on air'.

Your message has to compete for attention and space with others so you can improve its chances by building a good relationship with the media so they are familiar with who you are and what you do.

You should try to be in a position where you can easily ring the journalist or editor to tell them about something that's happening and provide clarification if necessary.

Many groups have a media person/publicity officer who should be the prime contact with key local media. If you take on that position, find a name or a position in the news room such as a journalist, environmental writer, or a news editor and try to be on first name terms with them.

When you send your media release, address it to them. Get to know the type of stories they publish and consider inviting them to an event or meeting of local interest. If they publish your story and do a good job, call them and thank them.

Understanding how the media works.

Your task is to make the journalist's job easier, so do your homework, be well prepared and present a clear, simple story.

The different types of media use a story in different ways, based on their way of operating. You should consider these different types of media as well as the audience you want to reach:

A handy thing to keep in mind is that the average person speaks three words per second. Radio and TV news bulletins tend to use very short 'grabs'. Can you get your message across in 10 seconds – 30 words? If you are going to try for coverage in the electronic media, consider writing down your message until you can get it across in very short statements.

- Television news is high on visual impact, short on detail. They like quick interviews with people who can provide clear statements and high impact 'newsbites'.
- Radio stations are usually hungry for news and frequently run stories not covered elsewhere. Rural and regional radio is keen to highlight local events and stories that are well presented and documented. They often have specific programs on local news and events so you could target those programs based on the content of your story.



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- For talk-back radio, know what you are going to say, say it clearly and never get drawn into an argument – you won't win.
- Local newspapers provide opportunities for inserting specific event information (in a community news/announcements section) as well as interviews and stories.
- The 'letters to the editor' section is a very effective way to get over a clear statement on an issue. It is one of the most read sections of a newspaper, but little used by organisations. Urban Landcare groups have a harder time getting their message into city newspapers because of the competition with other news but some have been successful because they can tell a good story and 'cultivate' the relevant media well.
- Special interest journals and magazines provide opportunities to get your message to a wider audience. These sections of the media often have a wide distribution and easier deadlines (i.e. not daily or weekly) but their areas of interest are narrow and your message needs to be crafted specifically to fit those boundaries.

Whatever type of media you choose, it is important to understand that journalists are busy people and under pressure to get out copy within printing or broadcast deadlines. So avoid calling them close to deadlines if possible. (Morning is best generally; never within the last 15 minutes before a radio news bulletin, or within a couple of hours of an evening TV news bulletin.)

Who do you want to inform?

Most readers and viewers are involved in their own lives. They are often busy, distracted, bored and tired, and not up to a detailed analysis of your group's problems and solutions.

You can get better results if you think about who your target audience is and then decide

what is the best way to reach them. You may want to attract a specific part of the community – say, all whose properties border a major stream in the area - or you may want to invite existing and potential supporters to a 'show and tell' of your future plans.

Linking your target audience with the appropriate media approach is one of the keys to success.

Creating the right message

Think about the messages or stories you see in the media that appeal to you. Put yourself in the audience's place and ask one important question: "Why should I read or look at this?"

Your message needs to be interesting to a large number of readers, not just to the converted.

Be prepared

Gather the names of your media contacts and their details and make a list so you are ready when a media opportunity arises and you can send out your release effectively.

Further references

Victorian Landcare Gateway:
www.landcarevic.org.au

Commonwealth of Australia (1996) - *Landcare Languages – A Communication Manual for Landcare* (edited by Valerie A. Brown):
www.daff.gov.au/_data/assets/word_doc/0018/29151/landcare_languages.doc

Related Landcare Notes

This Landcare Note is one of a series. These notes provide an excellent guide for the ongoing operation of your group.

Landcare Note 6.3: Using Technology

Landcare Note 6.4: Raising the Group Profile



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Landcare Note 6.5

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