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Organize a Media Program

The purpose of having a media program for the conservation partners is to turn that power into a force for conservation. Skillful work with the media can help gain public visibility and support. Great media coverage can attract volunteers and build a relationship with other groups by making them interested in working with you.

Some guidelines for you to follow for organizing a media program are:

- Appoint a lead person – Giving the media a contact person for the district
- Build a committee - Work with partnerships that have the same goals
- List strengths and weaknesses of current program – Identifying these components will better your target areas
- Set program objectives – Find out what your customers want or are needing
- Select the audience – Become familiar with your customer base
- Select the most effective media – Know what your area has to offer for media outlets, is there a local paper, radio station, or TV Station.

Build Relationships with Media Sources

You will first need to identify the four media groups:

- Television
- Radio
- Newspapers
- Magazine

For each of the above media groups, list the names of reporters, editors, and producers who seem to be generally interested in our same issues. The key to building a good media relationship is establishing a trusting, cooperative and mutually beneficial to both. It is essential to develop a strong working relationship with at least one person in each of the four media groups. Get to know your reporters and editors. Invite them to conversation meetings, tours, and workshops. Inform them on upcoming events you are holding.

Get to know your contact person with each of the media sources make an appointment and remember to stick to the specific purpose for each visit. When you meet with the contact person take a long a good news item or a public service announcement. Make sure you point out what you like about the media agency and ask them what they need from you and always provide the requested material on time.

Collect Information for the Media

One suggestion when working with the different media groups you create a file for each of them. Also list in the folder your contact information and archive any previous stories they have done for you. Develop one strong contact at each targeted media and ask them to provide additional contacts. Be sure to have key contact information; telephone number, hours they work, when they need the information, and in what format they prefer. Keep this information in your media file. It is important to put your media contacts on the mailing list for your district newsletter. Consider also preparing a packet of conservation and reference material. Some media people want you to develop and write the story others may just want the basic information. If you have them write the story it is best to ask them if you could proofread.

A photo can be worth a thousand words. One good habit to get into is to take lots of pictures of your outreach activities. It is key to make sure you label your photos by category/events for faster reference. Make sure when supplying any photos to your media contact you ask them their procedure – meaning black and white, size, and format. Photographs of achievements are helpful.

Submit annual reports to your media sources. If the report features achievements and people it is a way to reach a wider audience. Consider writing a regular column and spot light anything that is current or on going in the district. By writing a regular column remember this is a continuing commitment you must stick too. Think of creative twists – ways to get a spark in your stories. A good idea is to quote local people or to cite local situations throughout the story. If the readers are able to identify in some way with the article, then their interests will be peaked and remember the stories message.

Get Involved in the Media

Writing News Releases – can save you time and get the facts to everyone quickly. What should you include in a news release.

- Lead or begin with the most important facts
- Answer the five questions of who, what, when, where, and why
- Be brief, factual, and lively
- Let the facts tell the story and avoid opinion
- Keep paragraphs and sentences short
- “Paint a Picture”
- Use statistics when they help
- Use simple words
- No more than two pages – one page is BETTER

Read your release aloud to see if it “talks well.” Be accurate. Check your copy to be sure details are correct and double check for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Ask someone else to proofread and edit your release. An event must be presented to the media quickly as possible. In cases where events are scheduled in advance the information should be provided to the media prior to the event. Media should be alerted one to two weeks in advance of a scheduled event and phone contact should be made one or two days before the event. Always THANK the media for their involvement and support.

If you are asked to do an on air interview you need to be PREPARED. Study the facts and thinking ahead to the points you want to make. You should be able to address a beginning, middle and end but be brief. Prepare yourself for any negative feedback.

HOW TO CONTACT LEGISLATORS

How to Communicate Effectively with Your Legislator

Personal Visit

A personal visit is the most effective way to communicate directly with your elected officials. You may do this either individually or with a group. Don't be bashful; personal visits are easy to set up.

Legislators will often meet with their constituents locally but it is also very effective to bring your message directly to the State House. This type of visit will underscore the importance of the issue you wish to bring to his/her attention, but it also allows you to have their full attention for your issue.

If you are going to be in Washington, D.C., call the member's office as far in advance as possible. Generally, the appointment secretary will require some written information on the issue(s) you will be discussing, who will be attending, etc. If you are unable to arrange a meeting with your Congressman, ask if you can meet instead with the pertinent staff member covering the issue at hand.

Invite them to your business. It is very appropriate to invite your elected officials to visit with you at your place of business. Conducting a tour of your business is a perfect way to get your local officials to better understand how your business operates. It is also a great way to introduce them to your employees, which are likely to be voters within his/her representative district. This way you can convey your message in real and human terms.

Know your issue. Before you call to set up an appointment, know what issue you are going to address and decide what you would like to get out of the visit (ie: a commitment to vote for your issue or you may decide the visit is simply informational).

Allow time for small talk at the outset of the meeting, but not too much. Remember, it's your visit. If it is a group visit, decide who will start the discussion and put your agenda on the table. If you go in a group, keep your group small – 4 to 6 people is appropriate.

Don't stay too long. Keep your visit short. Try not to take up more than 20 minutes meeting with the elected official. Try to get closure on your issue within the first 10 minutes of your visit. If you hear what you had hoped for, express your thanks and leave. If you reach an impasse, thank her/him, even if you are disappointed. Remember, you are there to build a relationship, and if nothing less, you have educated your elected official on an issue important to you.

Follow-up is important. Be sure to send a thank-you note after the visit. If commitments were made in the meeting, repeat your understanding of them. If staff members were present, write to them too. They can often be important allies. Leave any informational materials with your legislator in support of your issue.

Calling Your Legislator on the Phone

Phone calls are appropriate especially when there is not enough time before a key vote to visit with your legislator or to write a letter. Telephone contact is best utilized if one is asking a legislator to support or oppose a particular bill before a public hearing, a committee vote, or a floor vote. A phone call conveys a local concern which is why your legislator has been elected to serve to represent **YOUR** interests in the first place.

If you don't know your elected officials' phone numbers, you can call the State House Switchboard and ask to be connected to the appropriate individual. If you are calling your Washington representative, the U.S. Capitol Switchboard telephone number is 202-224-3121.

Use your own words to tell how you believe a bill will affect you or those workers that you employ. Put the issue into human terms as much as possible.

Writing to Your Legislator

If you cannot personally visit with your legislator, or make a phone call, a personal letter to your legislator is the next most effective form of grassroots lobbying. Letters may be formal or informal, typewritten or handwritten. Letters are read and they elicit responses. They represent votes.

Keep it Short and Simple

Write about one issue at a time and try to limit your letter to one page -- two pages maximum.

Include Specific Bill Reference Information

It is very helpful if you can reference a bill number and title of the legislation. This provides the legislator with an immediate reference point. Chamber staff can provide this information to you.

Include Basic Information

Legislators are dealing with multiple issues at one time, and they may not immediately be familiar with your issue. Write from the assumption that the legislators are not familiar with the issue. Briefly summarize the legislation and your position.

Legislators appreciate intelligent, well-thought-out letters which present a definitive position, even if they do not agree. Even more important to them is a valuable statement of the reasons for your position, particularly if you are writing about a subject in which you have specialized knowledge.

Ask for a Response

Be specific with respect to what you are asking your legislator to do (ie: support, oppose, or amend a particular piece of legislation). If the bills attempts to address a problem that you recognize acknowledge the problem and tell them what you think a better approach or solution might be. Be direct. Ask if the legislator has taken a position on the issue, and if so, what it is. Let the representative know that you will be following up with a phone call to discuss his or her position on the upcoming vote.

Include key points in support of your position. Wherever possible, include examples from your own experiences.

Offer Further Assistance

Thank the representative for considering your concerns and express your willingness to answer further questions on the issue. As a taxpayer and business owner, you can serve as a long-term resource for the representative on business-related issues.

Use Your Company Letterhead

It is best to use your company's letterhead when writing your legislator and have your SCD Board Chairman sign the letter.

Addressing the Letter

Letters to your representatives should be mailed to one of two locations:

- * the representatives home address; or
- * the representatives Washington/State House address.

To the U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable (Use full name)
US. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman or Congresswoman (Use last name)

To the U.S. Senate

The Honorable (Use full name)
US. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator (Use last name)

To Your Local Legislator(s)

State House Address

- **State Representative**
The Honorable (Use full name)
ND House of Representatives
State House
Bismarck, ND 58505
- **State Senator**
The Honorable (Use full name)
ND State Senate
State House
Bismarck, ND 58505

Getting Information on Legislators

Other Helpful Tips

"Sincerely yours" is appropriate as a complimentary close.

Letters should be timed to arrive while the issue is alive. Members of the committee considering a bill will appreciate having your views while the bill is ripe for study and action.

E-mailing Your Legislator

E-mail is becoming the preferred form of communication with legislators, especially with our Congressional delegation in Washington. Some legislators embrace e-mail correspondence more readily than others. Some legislators are inaccessible via e-mail.

In e-mail, please follow closely the general good form for regular letter writing.

Tips for Communicating Effectively with Your Legislator

Identify Yourself

Tell your legislator where you live within his or her representative district.

Be Brief

A legislator's time is limited. So is yours. Use your time wisely.

Be Specific

Refer to a specific bill, the bill's title description, and current place within the legislative hopper. Ask for a specific action (for example, support, oppose, amend, further study, etc.).

Be Informative

Give reasons why a bill should be supported, opposed, amended, or further studied. Offer solutions if appropriate. To the extent possible, let them know how the legislation will positively or negatively impact your business.

Be Courteous

Don't expect a legislator to be an expert on every bill. It's impossible. Each Session, over 1,000 bills are introduced. If your legislator's not familiar with the bill you're talking about, don't be surprised or offended. It may be the first time they've heard about it.

Be Appreciative

Always be positive and polite and never demand or threaten. You get more with honey than you do with vinegar. Don't burn your bridges. It's natural to be disappointed if your legislator doesn't vote the way you ask him or her to. But don't let one vote destroy your relationship. Remember, you're going to need their support on many other issues. Acknowledge your legislator's efforts and convey thanks for current action, even if he or she is not supportive of your point of view.

Legislators have to vote on many matters with which they have had little or no firsthand experience. Some of the most valuable information they receive comes from facts offered from people who have knowledge and expertise in the business community, namely, **YOU!**

- **When working on legislative issues you may not use NRCS's computers, fax machines, or phones! All legislative activities must be conducted outside of the office.**

LETTER WRITING / CORRESPONDENCE

Good correspondence should be pleasant and helpful. To accomplish this you should do the following:

1. Be complete by including everything pertinent. The person receiving it should not have to ask you for more information.
2. Be very clear and use familiar words. Spell out acronyms before using them in your letter.
3. Use a friendly tone just as you would in person
4. Make the sentences and paragraphs short but don't sound choppy.
5. Use the active voice or the passive such as "We received your letter" rather than "Your letter was received"
6. Use proper format
7. Proofread your letter for errors and sentence structure
8. You should save a copy of all correspondence in landowner's folders
9. Use your District's letterhead for all correspondence and make sure envelope has return address