News Coverage to Promote Outdoor Recreation Businesses

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The value of news coverage is different from the value of advertising. Obviously, you don’t pay for it. But from your standpoint, you are interested in news coverage for the same reason. You want promotion. You want people to know you. News coverage has the advantage of credibility and reader trust; news stories give the impression of truth.

I’ve heard it said that probably the best way to advertise is by word-of-mouth. News stories are a kind of substitute for word-of-mouth. Say John Q. Jones around the corner had a good time hunting, fishing, or whatever, at your resort, and you put something in the paper about him. His next-door neighbor might read it and think that he could have a good time there too. News stories build an image, an image that says, “This is an interesting and fun place to visit.”

However, news stories have built-in disadvantages from your standpoint. You cannot control the usage or the placement of the story. You may not be able to control the timing or the frequency. But perhaps one news story in a year can do as much for your image, and sell as much for you as a six-month ad campaign. It has a long-lasting value to people who read and remember it.

One of the similarities between news and ads is that you need to know the people you are trying to reach. You need to know what they read, what they listen to, and what influences them. For instance, find out what outdoor magazines they read; you might be able to place a story in one of those periodicals. Find out about clients that you have already; what attracted them to your place? You can then project from these clients to the people you are trying to attract.

What kinds of stories are newspapers and magazines looking for? Well, in preparation for this talk I wrote to the sports editors of all the newspapers in Washington and asked them what kinds of stories they would be interested in. The answer? Human interest, and that’s extremely difficult to define. In general, it’s something unusual. If a woman catches the biggest fish, especially if she’s about 4 feet 10 inches tall, and the fish is bigger than she is, that’s human interest.

Small children are a prime source for human interest stories. They’re the biggest news getter. I just finished covering the Western Washington Fair, particularly the 4-H exhibits and programs. We put out about 49 news stories about award winners; kids that will go to Chicago, and kids that will compete for scholarships. When award winners were not being named, I wrote other human interest stories. The story about the rabbit that looked like a basset hound got the most play. Another was a picture we took of a goat eating its sign which said, “Yes, Virginia, goats do eat everything!” As I said, human interest is hard to define.

Papers are interested in human interest stories. Once more, it’s very difficult to tell you how to recognize a human interest story, but it’s the kind of story that strikes your fancy when you read it. They contain the little things you remember—the “rabbitish” basset hound, the sign-hungry goat—little things that can often

be covered with just a photograph, with your place of business mentioned in the caption.

You can do a great deal with pictures. Perhaps you don’t always need a news story, but just a picture. Do you know how to operate a camera, or do you know somebody who does? There is great advantage in hiring a freelance photographer to take some unusual pictures.

Send pictures to hometown papers. Maybe The Seattle Post-Intelligencer or The Seattle Times won’t carry just any picture of somebody holding up a fish and grinning, but some of the smaller papers like the Bellevue American might. Find out which small papers are located in your customers’ areas, and then send them pictures. A customer of yours will be delighted to see his picture in the paper.

Competitive events and contests are news stories. There is a difference between what we call hard and soft news—I don’t know how much hard news you produce. A hard news item is a story about a contest winner. It is the type of news story you most often see. Soft news would be a feature, a picture story, a mood piece such as you would read in a magazine. I wouldn’t recommend your trying to write either. To reiterate advice given earlier, seek professional help. You should have contacts with newspapers and magazines that reach your clientele. You should know if they will accept a story from a freelancer or whether they want somebody from their staff to do the story.

The sports editors that I contacted indicated that they wanted two things: to know who you are, and to be able to trust your honesty. Frankly, most of them don’t. One sports editor said that he had learned over the years that most people tend to exaggerate, even lie, to get some mention in the paper. Because he has been taken in the past, he has developed a basic mistrust of stories submitted from unsolicited sources. The editor goes on to say that so many resort managers have taken advantage of his acquaintance with him in the past, he can no longer call on a resort when he’s out fishing. The situation is the same for operators of ski resorts. It’s up to you to get around that.

The same editor also said that he would not, however, turn down a good story; stories about people catching big fish, or particularly stories of children and women doing well. He won’t use a hero picture, unless it’s highly unusual. This of course varies from paper to paper. That’s why you have to know what kind of things each paper wants.

The papers in Spokane will not accept gratuities of any kind—that is their policy. The writers for The Spokane Chronicle and The Daily Spokesman are not allowed to accept free stays at resorts, and are not even allowed to take a boat out without paying for it.

A reporter from the Spokane Spokesman Review said that while most managers are honest, some have a habit of telling outright lies about fishing and water conditions. The only way you can get around this bias is to know the paper’s sports editor. Although only a few people are guilty of this offense, everyone gets blackened by the same brush.

They don’t have quite as strict a policy about accepting freebies in Seattle. The Post-Intelligencer and The Times do not object to their reporters accepting an invitation to a resort, as long as the reporter’s coverage is truthful. Since fishing opportunities change because of weather conditions, fish runs, and other influences, they frequently need to hear from you, so that they can get these changing conditions in the news. Likewise with skiing.

A reporter from the Post-Intelligencer said that he would like the opportunity to go out on a fishing trip and write a story about it. Because he’s an outdoorsman, he would also like to go skiing or horseback riding; this could yield valuable publicity.

But the emphasis has to be on honesty. One editor said that if he ever gets burned again, he’ll never accept another unsolicited story. So it’s to your advantage to be honest.

What if you are not a writer and you don’t want to hire one? The people I contacted said that if you give them the information, they will write the story. They need to know the who, what, when, and where. If you are giving the who, for heaven’s sake, make sure you’ve got the name spelled right. John Smith is going to be very unhappy if his name appears as Smyth. The writers want accuracy; so if it is John E. Smith, that should be clear. You can’t be too careful about getting the name right.

Next, the what: was it a fishing contest or a fashion show? The writer needs to know this, as well as when. If it was last month, forget it. It’s not news anymore. If it was yesterday, it is still news. Be sure of the where, why, and how. Make that information explicit.