



Communications Workgroup Biannual Retreat Notes

January 10, 2018

Participants

Catherine Krikstan, UMCES-CBP (Chair)
Deb Klenotic, PA DEP (Vice-Chair)
Rachel Felver, ACB-CBP (Coordinator)
Gregg Bortz, MDNR
Jeremy Browning, ACB
Paula Combs, Piedmont Environmental Council
Kim Couranz, NOAA/Fisheries GIT
Jody Couser, Chesapeake Conservancy
Alicia Crawford, Potomac Conservancy
Margot Cumming, CRC-CBP/Habitat GIT
Kelley Galowina, VCN
Adam Garber, PennEnvironment

Mary-Angela Hardwick, ACB
Caitlyn Johnstone, ACB-CBP
Sonia Keiner, Chesapeake Foodshed Network
Megan McSwain, Chesapeake Conservancy-NPS
Chris Novak, PA DCNR
Will Parson, ACB-CBP
Kristin Reilly, CCWC
Joan Smedinghoff, ACB-CBP
Marissa Spratley, ACB
Darius Stanton, CRC-CBP/Diversity Workgroup
Corinne Weaver, National Aquarium
Stephanie Wein, PennEnvironment

Engaging the Media

Corinne Weaver | The National Aquarium

- Conservation is a tough sell. Much of our success comes from the following:
 - Communicating, contextualizing and visualizing data the public can connect with.
 - Infographics the public will connect with
 - “Saving enough plastic spoons to make four elephants”
 - Hopeful messaging; brand voice is helpful
 - Here’s the one action you can take
 - Asset: people
 - Showing individuals what they can do to help.
 - People inherently care for the environment—they just don’t put time toward considering how to do so.
 - Connecting the animals inside our building to the impact an issue might have on the animals outside of our building.
 - Highlighting local ties: how does an issue affect our constituents and communities?
 - Note: Reporters don’t always want to cover an organization’s “halo,” and may be more interested in exploring the complex and interconnected problems a community is facing (only some of which may be directly tied to the environment).
 - Considering the timeliness of a story and taking advantage of “the news of the day.”
- Once you get coverage of a story, how can you keep the narrative going?
- Your goal is not the press release; your goal is to reach the media, and a press release might not be the best way to achieve that goal. Could your own content, for instance, be the vehicle through which you promote your own stories?
- Reporters are going to ask for everything; know where your organization is comfortable in going
 - They don’t want to do extra work—you can give them a lot: photos, b-roll, quotes, etc., but know where and when to say no

Adam Garber | PennEnvironment

- How do we tell a story around the facts? How do we articulate the impact—on people—of an issue? If a reporter’s job is to sell newspapers, our job is to articulate stories that people will want to discuss around the dinner table (which means we have to gut check our story ideas with people outside of our industry as often as possible).
 - For example: [Rough Waters Ahead: The impact of the Trump administration’s EPA budget cuts on the Delaware River Basin](#)
- Be creative. Keep substance at the heart of your story, but get creative or even kitschy in how you tell it.
 - For example: [Delivering hundreds of valentines to directors of the governor’s regional offices asking him to “be Pennsylvania’s climate sweetheart.”](#)
- When you know a large story will be coming up, do as much prep work beforehand as you can. Write out all of your materials, photograph/video impacted communities. Take the time to check everything multiple times.
 - Planning gets you to the moment, but once the story has passed, think of how you can continue the narrative. “Ok, so now what?”
- Putting in the elbow grease can help push the stories that aren’t quite good enough into the spotlight.
- Build relationships with reporters.
 - Communicate when things are quiet. (Twitter allows you to connect with reporters on a personal level.) Grab coffee or a drink.
 - Relentlessly pitch (and consider pitching stories that aren’t even yours). Don’t think only of your story or issue area.
 - Every once in a while (i.e., once or twice each year), give out an exclusive, or advance materials.
 - If you don’t think you’re the right person, try to find them a new contact so they will see you as someone who’s willing to work with them.

Q&A

- How do you use Twitter to engage the media?
 - Most of it is done through personal, not brand, accounts. Most journalists are required to tweet, and contacting them through a personal account helps them see you as a real human, not just someone who spews talking points.
- What kind of reporting mechanisms have you created to get data (e.g., from a cleanup) from field groups?
 - PennEnvironment has a database app to input data, and reports information to the rest of the team at weekly staff meetings. The Aquarium works with outside organization to get data and also relies on local context for numbers (e.g., Waste Management).
 - Social media: [Falcon.io](#) and [Crimson Hexagon](#)
- How should we engage new media outlets within new communities?
 - Reach out to organizations who already have relationships within the community you hope to tap into and inquire which news outlets they or community leaders consult for news and information.
 - Use Twitter to determine which outlets are covering shared issues or similar organizations.
 - Make cold calls to reporters for a “getting-to-know-you” conversation.
 - Approach reporters with a “we’re in this together” attitude.
 - Look for new reporters who need to build their bank of stories and relationships, and who may be more open to engaging with you.

- Articulate a story in such a way that reporters can't avoid covering it.
- Maintain organizational knowledge of the media landscape: record and share everything you know about reporters and news outlets for those colleagues who may come after you.
- Don't chalk up failures to the media being busy.

A Reporter's Perspective

Pamela Wood | The Baltimore Sun

- Reporters are spread thin, and must often cover “the news of the day” rather than a beat. Because there are fewer reporters on the environmental beat than ever before, the reporters you interact with may not have the background knowledge that would help them understand why a story is important. This means you have to highlight the most essential facts and put things in plain English.
- Types of stories
 - Daily: all in one day, quick, straight news
 - Sunday stories: longer-term, couple days, more in-depth, video to go with it
 - Project stories: months-long work, e.g., three-part series on renewable energies
- What does a reporter want?
 - To be pitched the highlights of a story over the phone (before receiving a fact sheet or a press release).
 - To be connected with your subject matter expert, whether it is the scientist leading research or a resource manager leading restoration. This is the person a reporter will want to interview and quote (and if the source is too technical, you can be there to facilitate the conversation and give background).
 - To get out in the field—especially on a trip that takes half a day or less—because visuals sell a story.
 - To be asked about her deadlines.
 - Does she plan to cover your news as a daily story? A Sunday story? Or a “project” story, which is the most in-depth and time-consuming option?
 - Note: Press releases can be helpful (esp. for small outlets who run them verbatim), but are not the be-all end-all for getting a story published.

Meg Viviano | Chesapeake Bay Magazine

- News outlets have less manpower, less time and fewer resources. Should this change how we reach reporters?
- When environmental stories start to look the same, you must consider what sets your story apart.
 - When reporters are time-crunched—and readers are consuming information in bits and pieces on their phones—clarity is of utmost importance.
 - People matter. What is the human element of your story?
 - Visuals matter. Can you provide a reporter with images and video? Or pitch stories that lend themselves to visual coverage?
 - Tip: Whether it is a reporter or an editor, find an advocate within a newsroom who can push for the coverage of your stories.

Q&A

- Reporters receive *a lot* of emails (and are usually reading on phones). Unless your subject line is grabbing, it will likely get ignored.
- Diversify the pool of reporters you pitch stories to. Should you send a story about an oyster farmer to a reporter who writes good profiles? A story about green schools to a reporter who covers education?
- Send our media advisories a week or two in advance. One reminder a few days before is ok. DO not follow up an advisory with a call.

Media Relations Training

Greg Abel | Making the News: From the Tried and True to the Digital Edge

- It's too risky to rely on the traditional news media to make a living. While traditional public relations might be at the core of your work, new communications channels are critical to tap into (and may require you to frame your success measures not as media hits but as engagement in the digital space).
- What should you know about reporters?
 - They are not on the marketing/advertising team
 - They are ideally motivated to serve readership
 - They want to impress editor and colleagues
 - They are typically on deadline and somewhat rushed
 - They might only know a little bit about your industry, maybe nothing at all
 - They are your "old Aunt Alice": well-meaning, but have no idea about what you do
- What makes something newsworthy?
 - It's timely.
 - It's local.
 - It's out-of-the-ordinary.
 - It's personality-driven.
 - A story should make one of the following statements:
 - You're at risk.
 - Your world is changing.
 - You need to know this to get through your day.
 - Get a load of this!
 - Why him/her/it? Why now?
- How can an expert or a thought leader help you expand your media coverage?
 - The ideal expert is experienced, credentialed, generous, available and bold.
 - The ideal expert provides credibility, awareness and improved morale (which contribute to more and better business).
 - Experts should write, speak in public, win awards, join boards and appear in the media.
 - If an expert is hesitant to add her voice to a story (e.g., by writing an op-ed), you can remind her that (a) the news cycle is so fast-moving that this story could disappear in a week, and (b) our communications channels are so vast that this story could be kept alive in various contexts for a long time.
 - The "you talk, we write" approach can help, as it is often easier for an expert to edit a column you have written (based on a Q&A with them, for instance) than to write something from scratch.
- How can you create coverage opportunities?
 - What's happening in the world that's interesting and what do we have that's relevant?

- E.g., pairing hearing loss with Restaurant Week: how to make a restaurant environment that aids the hearing-impaired
- What can we teach people? Can these lessons become a story in a trade publication?
- Can we give out an award to a community member?
- Can an expert write an op-ed about a recent headline or trend?
- Should we consider paid rather than earned coverage? (Instead of placing an ad in a news outlet, explore whether you can pay to place your own editorial content.)
- Tips:
 - Respond quickly and provocatively to the news cycle.
 - Tell stories visually.
 - Go direct, via social, email and grassroots coverage.
 - Interact with reporters on social media to build relationships and more easily, casually and authentically pitch story ideas.

Group Discussion

Successes:

- Visuals help pitch stories and generate interest.
- Highlighting the unique aspect of a restoration site (like [the fact that it is an historic cemetery](#)) can generate more coverage than highlighting the restoration alone.
- Having subject-matter experts and being able to connect them to reporters.
- Keeping the story going: after the budget announcements, CCWC responded quickly with a press release and lobbying day. Afterwards, they looked at the stories behind the budget numbers. What is the human element of the budget?
 - \$12 million to Maryland in on-the-ground restoration
 - WYPRL travel the watershed and see the stories of those who are going to lose money

Challenges:

- Marketing our own content to small publications.
- “Having” to communicate uninteresting topics.
 - Is humanizing a report always worth the time? Or should we put minimal effort into pitching the story in order to please our management and move on?
- Connecting with local reporters.
- Pennsylvania environmental education grant announcement: lessons learned
 - Media event: secretary, CEO of Capital Region Water (a recipient), classroom teacher who benefitted from CRW program, students planting a rain garden
 - No media showed up, event was around Earth Day (tough time)
 - Reached out to reporters three days before; media release
 - Tips
 - Send out media advisory two weeks in advance and send a reminder three days before
 - Send out a follow-up with thank you and visuals
 - Pitch your ideas to the workgroup and see what they say. Get some feedback from the group on your idea(s). External review for constructive criticism.
 - Send to local newspapers
 - Send out the announcement that it’s happening and over time, find local events to go to

- E.g., Ocean City boat ramp: MDNR sent out a release in February about the grant. The city planned the boat ramp opening event, and all MDNR needed to do was send the secretary. Governor came as well.

Who is generating their own content? What is your audience?

- UMCES-IAN: posts 2-3 days a week, peer to peer, many different topics, can accept guest blogs
- Alliance: 2-3 blogs a month, audience: people who buy into the Alliance's work, can be more technical posts, environmental listicles do well
- Virginia Conservation Network: doesn't create their own content; have thought about branching into that, but worried about the time commitment
- PA DCNR: Every other week online newsletter, feature: blog post, original content
- PEC VA: Quarterly print newsletter, eight pages; work with staff to write content; passionate staff emails, save and reuse email about bees; the stories don't necessarily need to be hard-hitting (e.g., favorite hikes)
- CBP: 2-3 blogs a week, audience: interested public; plan editorial calendar; send ideas to Bay Program if you can't cover it

What will you do differently after this retreat?

- Use Twitter to develop relationships with and monitor the interests of reporters.
- Post my organization's work on my personal social media accounts.

What should our Workgroup do differently after this retreat?

- This workgroup is a great place to go to for subject matter experts; use the workgroup to amplify messages, speak on certain issues.
- Create a shared media document with their interests, when someone talked to them know what they're interested in, what they want to cover
- People with relationships with reporters can help pitch ideas from other workgroup members
- Guest blog on one another's websites
 - Someone would write a blog post and it would be posted on another site using their name and logo
 - CCW will post the first few paragraphs of a blog with the link to the rest of the article wherever it was posted
- Issue joint press statements, which allow reporters to pick and choose the quotes and content that work best for them and give us an opportunity to ensure our network's members are coordinating
- Develop an outreach plan for Chesapeake Bay Awareness Week
- Share [Twitter list](#)
- How can the nonprofits in the workgroup support the message? Can they help find local stories?

Next meeting: February 7