



Celebrating 250 years  
of the veterinary profession

# Media Management Handbook for vets in practice



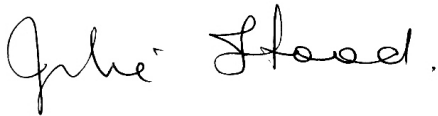
2011

This booklet has been developed for veterinarians who might be considering using the news media to promote their businesses or Vet2011.

The media can be a highly effective way of promoting yourself, and your business but without paying for advertising. To do so, you must understand what the media wants to be able to use it effectively.

For most vets, the best way to do this is to try and become an "expert" to your local journalists. That means you become the first person they will contact when they have a story about animals and animal care.

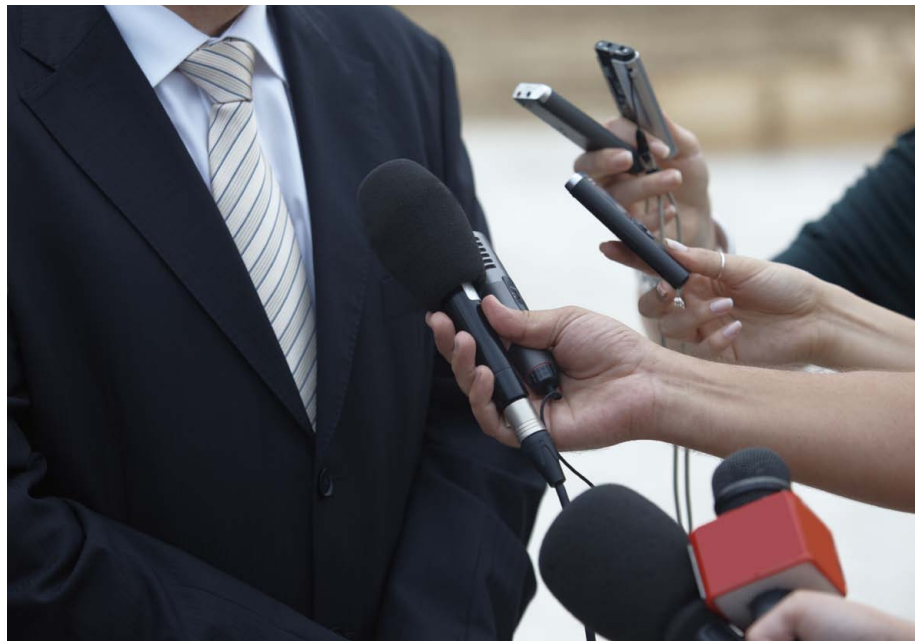
This booklet outlines what the media is, the journalists that work in the media and what they want, and how you can give them the best interviews to make them more likely to write about you.



Julie Hood  
Chief Executive Officer

## Index

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Introduction to the media              | 3 |
| Why do we use the news media?          | 3 |
| Who or what is the media?              | 4 |
| What does a journalist want from us?   | 4 |
| What is news?                          | 5 |
| How is a story assembled in the media? | 6 |
| The last word – it's theirs            | 6 |
| Embargoes and "off the record"         | 7 |
| The media's/the public's right to know | 7 |
| Preparing to talk to the media         | 8 |
| Approaching the media                  | 8 |
| The interview                          | 9 |



## Risks and benefits of using the media

### Benefits

- Significant reach
- Reputation management
- Brand building and enhancement
- Influence opinions/policies
- Cost effective

### Risks

- You get it wrong
- Media gets it wrong
- Bad publicity, reputational/brand/damage
- Unhappy stakeholders eg. customers, officials
- Lost business opportunities

## Introduction to the media

The news media is powerful in that it creates perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. It can make or break a personality, issue, political party, product, idea or person. It influences opinion leaders, consumers, voters, politicians, officials, your employees and your colleagues.

The news media is NOT primarily about entertainment, the dissemination of information or even a journal of record.

The news media is a commercial business. It thrives largely on advertising revenue and, in many cases sales. Thus the advertiser is the key audience as the newspaper, website, radio programme, or TV show will deliver listeners, viewers and readers to the advertisers' messages.

Radio NZ is an obvious exception, but it still has key performance indicators (KPIs) to report on.

Our stories, in whatever form they take, are the bits between the advertisements. Therefore news has to be interesting and grab the attention of the advertiser's audience.

Sounds odd? But yes, this is a fact, and when you look at the TV tonight, your local giveaway paper or a website, take a look at how the advertisements and the stories/articles complement each other.

More of that later...

This handbook is about how we can, by understanding the media and its needs, work with it to get our messages out to the audiences we want to address. These might be farmers, pet owners, politicians, officials or even school children.

## Why do we use the news media?

So while the media is driven by advertisers, revenue and ratings, it is hungry for stories to push those ads apart, to fill those news bulletins and to attract and hold the attention of their key target audiences.

This creates ongoing, endless opportunities to generate stories that fill these criteria. For veterinarians who deal with animals, we regularly see great stories about the important jobs vets do, often packaged as cute or animal rescue stories. And, on the other hand, we see shocking animal welfare exposés where vets need to be careful if they are asked to comment. We say careful in that there could be reputational, legal or commercial repercussions if the wrong thing is said.

The media is hungry for stories – and, what's more, readers, listeners and viewers believe editorial ie. the story bit, more than they do the advertising. IBM used to say that editorial is worth more than seven times the value of the equivalent paid advertising.

**Two thirds of consumers regard the media as their main source of information about new medications, rating it only 2% behind doctors (68% vs 66%). Glaxay Poll. Australia. Pharma in Focus. 9 July 2007.**

This means that cleverly targeted stories stand a good chance of being picked up and carried in the news media.

## The media's pet hates

- "No comment"
- Lies
- Stalling
- Being told what to print
- Exclusives which aren't
- Failure to phone back when you say you will
- Nagging
- Aggression
- Press conferences (unless the issue is serious and big news)
- Blatant "plugging" of companies or products

## Who or what is the media?

The media world has changed rapidly, inexorably and radically. The media used to be print (newspapers, magazines, newsletters), radio and television. The extraordinary growth not only of the internet but also iPhones and other clever devices mean that websites and social networking sites, like Twitter, Facebook, Trade Me and Wikipedia can carry developing and often uncensored, unthinking comment or images.

Then of course media now ranges into the digital world of product and idea placement in movies, TV shows and interactive games, and iPhone/Android apps.

## Average journalist

To be fair, the average journalist is a person just like us – someone who goes about their job creating as little controversy as possible, and getting the job done. It is usually only the 'star' media who are aggressive – and most of us will never be interviewed by them.

The average journalist is, and has been for two decades at least, aged 23, and she has an arts degree. (Yes "she" – by far and away).

That journalist has hardly had time to get her head around complex issues of the economy, veterinary (or any science), the complexities of running a business or even a team of workers. She's unlikely to be expert in anything you might be wanting to talk about – or even know anything about it. She's very much a generalist who has a target number of stories to report or words to write.

Neither is a recent university or polytech graduate likely to be particularly street smart, confident or even experienced in interviewing. They may ask what you regard as "dumb" questions. But be patient and remember that neither they, nor your audience are experts, and they won't have had time to read up on your subject matter – that's what you're there for.

## What does a journalist want from us?

If a journalist is going to invest time in us she/he wants to be sure that investment is not wasted. They want a current, local story with a good angle (we'll talk about those later) from a cooperative source. They nearly always want someone (you?) to give a quote to authenticate and personalise their story.

The more controversial the story is the better for them. Why? Because drama and controversy, along with cute pictures of animals and children (the "awwww" factor) sell more papers and attract more viewers and listeners than pedestrian, boring, un-illustrated stories which are no longer current or which have no angle (that word again) to hook the punter!

Journalists love to know that your story is exclusive to them and that they have time to develop the story without seeing it in a competitor's paper, or on TV that night. They also love it when you phone up after a story has run as you planned, when you say "thanks – that was awesome".

## What makes news?

- Conflict
- Human drama (“SPCA stole my only friend” – Dom Post)
- Scandal
- Cute awwwww factor
- Relevant to the audience
- Unexpected, unpredictable or rare
- First/best/biggest/oldest

## What is news?

What we think is news and what the media thinks is news is often diametrically opposed.

- News is what the newspapers, radios, magazines, television stations, talkback shows, websites, bloggers and Twitter commentators publish, post or screen.
- News is what the chief reporter or editor thinks is news.
- News is morphing into what the individual thinks and says – as social networking expands.
- News is not necessarily what the chairman, the mayor, local MP, company manager, company owner, brand manager or your friend at coffee thinks it is.

Local news is hot news – especially if you can provide an example or commentary on a national news issue. That’s always worth a phone call to your local radio station and/or newspaper.

Also, think about the difficulties faced by newsrooms first thing in the morning when they are trying to dream up stories to fill their bulletins, pages or screens. Is there something happening in your area? Are you part of an event? Is there an out-of-town person coming to speak to a group? Is there a local hero that you could introduce to the media? Have you got an unusual case or animal you are working with? Is one of your clients particularly clever or interesting? Is there something interesting happening at the port in the biosecurity area? The ideas you can promote are really endless – if you want to think them up and take notice.

Think about pictures. Yes, it is true about kids and animals, not only is it dangerous to go on stage with them, but they sell newspapers like hot cakes. So does drama, blood, scandal, sobbing mothers etc – no-one has yet managed to underestimate the depths to which public taste and interest will sink.

So you become a useful resource for the media! They start to come to you for comment and ideas – that’s when you know you are seriously doing it right.



### How is a story assembled in the media?

You had a really good interview with the nice young journalist, but the story that was in the paper was quite different, and, you were quoted out of context. What went wrong?

The journalist who interviews you is only a small part of the overall news machine. She will submit her story to the chief reporter who might decide to accept it – and he/she then sends it onto the sub-editor, who makes up a headline, possibly without reading the full story, and arranges with the illustrations editor for a picture, that might, or might not, be relevant.

But, if the chief reporter decides that the story needs more attention, he/she might refer it to other journalists who might add interviews of their own, cut and paste items from the internet or add some more information from a media release. This story might take a whole different angle, and might only contain fragments of the original story.

It's not the fault of the journalist that interviewed you – it's just what happens.

So, they got it wrong and you are upset as it puts you in a poor light, is defamatory or is plain wrong. What can you do?

Well, first please understand that the media is not keen on 'the putting right' bit. But you do have rights. You can contact the editor quickly and put your case to them for a retraction or apology – or an article that puts it right. If this is dismissed, you can formally complain to the Press Council or to the Broadcasting Standards Authority.

But in the big picture, this won't do much good. The damage has been done, and any apology will be hardly visible, unless, of course, you have a serious defamation case on your hands or if you have lots of advertising clout.

This is the downside of engaging with the media. There is a very real risk of things going sour – and you must do everything you can to mitigate against it going wrong (have your facts assembled, make sure your messages are clear, draft a release, provide the illustrations, be careful what you say, don't say anything you can't substantiate, only approach relevant media ie. think of who the media's readership/viewers or listeners are.

### The last word – it's theirs

As much as you would like it, a journalist is highly unlikely to agree to read back their story about you before it is printed or run.

Neither are they likely to make much attempt to put things right if they make a mistake or misinterpret what you said. Retractions are not a good look, and unless the matter is serious, you are wasting your time chasing one.

Human nature means that inadvertent errors and misinterpretation can often occur. And, while most don't like to think it could happen to them, we can often "mis-speak" ourselves when we are a bit tense. If this does happen to you, it is best to chalk it up to experience and learn from it. Think about what you could have said differently or how you could have phrased it better. Don't waste time getting angry with the journalist or refusing to do media again in the future. Often it's something we've done/said in the first instance.

Furthermore, if there is an issue running and they are seeking comment from you and you prevaricate or hide, they are quite justified to say that no one from your organisation was available to comment. And, they can claim they made an honest attempt to give both sides of a story.

### Embargoes and “off the record”

The media can and will ignore “off the record” comments. It is quite legitimate to provide background briefing, particularly in a complex situation. But you are much better to get professional advice and support in such a situation in order to manage a confidential briefing.

Again, it is human nature, when are you actually on or off the record? Can you remember what you specifically did not want published? Will the journalist remember in a couple of months’ time? Best to stick with the information that you are happy to have in the public arena and leave the rest alone. A general rule is “don’t say anything you wouldn’t want to see in print”.

Embargoes are much the same. They are still used in the commercial and political worlds where senior journalists are given complex documents to read and analyse prior to them becoming public. This means that intelligent analysis is hopefully available when an announcement about a takeover, or budgetary moves are made.

We are very rarely in that sort of situation and therefore most media would argue that an embargo is only a loose convention, and anyway, if you have news that you don’t want to release until a particular time, the ease of email means you can control when the story is released in any case.

So – forget about embargoes and “off the record” unless you are really confident that you are doing the right thing.

### The media’s/the public’s right to know

Aggressive media, particularly at times of stress, disaster, accident sites and so on will often demand to do interviews (with the CEO, owner of the company, grieving parents, injured victims).

Unless there is an issue of public health and safety – you are not obliged to give an interview or even a quote. However, if you or your organisation is in the middle of some sort of crisis which does involve public health or the safety of the public, of course you (or at least your manager or superior) are obliged to state what has happened, and what you are doing to put things right. This could be in the case of an explosion, infectious disease outbreak, or even dishonesty.

Where families and people want to retain privacy, there is no need – except in the situation described above, to talk to the news media.



## When talking to the media remember:

- Target the media that reaches your audience
- Be careful, be factual and stick to what you know
- You're the expert and professional, so you know the subject
- Don't speculate or guess when answering questions
- Don't 'talk down' or lecture journalists – they can bite back, later...

## Preparing to talk to the media

### Setting your messages

Your messages must be unequivocal, succinct, and easy for a 12 year old to understand – so how do you do that? It is easier than you might imagine.

Use the magic PREP formula – many of the professionals do. It is an almost failsafe way of sorting out what you want to say.

P – Point (your key message)

R – Reason (for your assertion in the key message)

E – Example (shows why it is true/correct/valid)

P – Point (restate what you said to start with)

You can use this technique to draft a soundbite, a media release, you can link several together to make a speech or an article – but most of all it is a clever way to tell a story and anticipate the questions a journalist might ask.

The cat sat on the mat. It was a cold night. The mat is much cosier than the floor, so the cat sat on the mat.

### Approaching the media

OK – you're taking the plunge – you'd like to generate media interest in your clinic eg.

- A particular case you have recently dealt with in an interesting or innovative manner
- Stray animal is reunited with its owner
- Use of new technology
- The benefits of desexing and vaccination
- The concept of wellness
- The benefits of pet ownership
- How to choose the dog that best suits you
- The benefits of microchipping
- A day in the life of a veterinarian - what's it really like!
- Treating wild animals eg. birds, hedgehogs
- Pet nutrition
- The good deeds done by vets for stray animals and the SPCA.

You can see from the above that it can be more than just clinic promotion.

So, first off, decide who you want to communicate with ie. who do you want to reach through the news media? Some examples are:

- Pet owners
- Farmers

Work out what they read/watch or listen to. Use the media they are likely to be viewing. If you want to influence pet owners and farmers – your local

## Interview guidelines

Be...

- On time
- Personal (look the interviewer in the eye)
- Conversational
- Concise (stop when you've said your messages)
- Yourself!
- PREP (if needed)
- Bridge (if questions not going your way).

giveaway newspaper or provincial/city newspaper is perfect. If it's a rural story you have heaps of options with all the national and local farming newspapers, websites and, of course, the twice daily rural radio report on Radio New Zealand.

Sort out what you want to say – draft it up in the PREP formula (see section above) if you need to. Stick to the KIS principle (keep it simple) as the average reader/viewer/listener's reading age is still around 12 to 14 years, and most of them haven't had the university education you enjoyed.

Think about how you would illustrate the story (pictures of animals and children are always winners). Also think of quantifiers eg. as big as..., x percent, \$m and so on. That puts context around your story.

Read the next section on preparation for interviews too, it has some good advice.

Then, all you have to do is look up the media outlet's address (easy these days on the internet), phone them, ask to speak to the chief reporter and tell him/her your story – in the PREP formula (remember we are keeping it very simple). Suggest you might be happy to come in and talk, or better still, invite them out to the clinic or farm and show them what you mean. Tell them there is a photo opportunity, if applicable.

It's that simple. You're providing a service ie. you're giving that media outlet a way to make their job easier and keep those advertisements apart.

The initial benefit for you is that you have hopefully got your story across, and it has appeared in the outlet, in the manner you wanted.

Now is the time for the second step – apart from saying thanks (if the story was good) maybe you could follow up either right away with an extension to the story (ie. give it "legs") or you could leave it for a while and then do a follow up with a new story.

The long term benefit is that you become a local expert – a "go to" person for comments on areas of your expertise. This could be good for your employer or for your business.

### The interview

Most of the time an interview is simply a normal conversation about something that you are completely confident in – you are the expert and can tell the journalist all about whatever it is.

This section is added for those more serious occasions where there might be a crisis or where you want to mount a complex communications programme.

### Prepare for the interview

Decide what you want to say and stick with only two or three key messages at most. Try thinking about what questions you might be asked and visualise how you would like the story to read or sound. This gives you plenty of tips regarding what you might or might not say.

Ask the reporter what they already know about the issue (if appropriate), and ask what other information they have and what would they like to hear about. The answers to these questions can give you a very clear steer, and might save you a lot of angst as you can explain, elaborate or even draw a picture for them. Remember – they are not that experienced or knowledgeable and might seriously appreciate a helping hand. Your explanations might even save some embarrassment for them.

## Why communication fails

- Poor anticipation of issues
- Inadequate planning (PREP)
- Too slow to react
- Underestimating the size of the issue
- Losing control of the story (due to any of the above)

## In the interview

It's already been mentioned several times but you know more about the subject than the journalist so try not to be nervous. Treat it as you would any professional meeting situation.

If a journalist phones you, get them to identify themselves and their publication/station and their reason for calling. Check if they are recording the call. It's quite OK to say you'll call them back so you can prepare in more detail (you'll give them a better interview that way as well) but ensure you know what their deadline is and call them back before it.

Think through the situation and be prepared to turn down the interview if it's not your area of expertise, or if you have more to lose than to gain from participating, or if there are potential legal ramifications. Just because they've asked you to comment doesn't mean you have to.

### Do

Whether it is a broadcast interview for TV or radio, or you're speaking with a print journalist, speak slowly and clearly. This will help avoid misinterpretations and there's less chance they'll mis-hear you.

Always be respectful to the journalist, ultimately they are the conduit for you to get your message across. Getting frustrated, or into an argument with them will not help your cause. They are only doing their job at the end of the day.

Put things across in simple, easy-to-understand language.

### Don't

Don't speculate, stick to the facts and what you know to be true, as it could come back to haunt you if it goes against the assumptions you have made. So avoid answering questions that start with "what if...?"

Nothing is ever totally "off the record". Even if you have a strong relationship with the journalist, don't say anything you wouldn't want to see in print.

## Check for coverage

Ask the journalist when they are expecting the story to appear and keep a track of the publication/programme to see/hear the results. As mentioned earlier, learn from the experience. If it didn't appear exactly as you expected, think about why. Is there an opportunity for a follow-up to the story that will give you a second bite at the cherry? Has new information emerged that adds to the story?

## And remember... we're here to help

Representatives of the NZVA team, including some executive members from our Special Interest Branches, are fully trained in working with the media. If you have any questions or concerns we can help. Give us a call on 04 471 0494.



[www.nzva.org.nz](http://www.nzva.org.nz)