

The Importance of Good Media and Public Relations

By Blain Henshaw

Journalist, Government Communicator (Ret'd)

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Good afternoon.

Over the past few weeks, I have met a few of you where you actually work... at a couple of farms on the water, at your plants and grow-out operations and, in one case, at a hatchery.

The people I have met all have a great story to tell. It's a story about an industry that they work hard at and are proud to be a part of... it is, indeed, *Scotian Pride*.

But it's a story that more people need to know.

So my objective today is to provide you with some pointers that should help you to get that good story out there to *more* people.

In today's world of instant communications, it is essential to understand the importance of good relationships with the media and the public.

Equally important, is the necessity to develop and practice good relations with the public and the media.

There are a number of reasons for this:

First, whether your aquaculture operation is large or small, you need to build and earn *public trust and respect*.

Building public trust is like saving money for a rainy day; if you do it regularly, it's there when you need it. If you don't, you will surely get wet.

Second, it's important because it provides a foundation from which to address *public issues that may involve your industry*.

In aquaculture, there are concerns and issues from time to time about things such as environmental impact, or the health of farmed fish.

These can be tough to deal with; but if your relationship with the public and media is good, the odds of dealing with these issues effectively will certainly be in your favour.

(Example: pinewood nematode)

Third, it's important because it presents opportunities to provide clarity and understanding about what you do.

The public's first exposure to some organizations is often when a company or organization moves into an area and starts a project.

If people who live there don't know who you are and what you do, there is fear and mistrust. And then opposition.

On the other hand, if you have done some advance work through community relations and communications, the public are generally more receptive.

(Example... Exxon-Mobil rep, Graeme Connell came from Calgary in 1991 and laid groundwork for Sable offshore gas and pipeline project)

The fourth reason it's important is because it's good for your *corporate and personal image*.

A good corporate image is contagious. If you project a good positive image, people talk about it. They tell others.

If it's bad, they also talk about it and tell others, and usually at a fairly high volume and frequency --- and that's definitely not

what you want.

One of the best examples of a good public image I can think of is WestJet airlines.

Westjet has worked hard over the past 15 years to provide good service at affordable fares. In the process, it has earned public confidence and loyalty and developed an excellent corporate image.

They have done this simply by treating people well.... both the travelling public, and their employees.

It's part of their culture... a big part of their culture. And it was no accident... it was planned that way.

So when WestJet runs into a little business turbulence... as they have only occasionally... the public is very understanding and forgiving.

So whether you're the little airline that became a big airline... or just a small producer of an aquaculture product, it pays to develop public confidence and trust.

To summarize, there are at least four good reasons why it is important to practice good media and public relations:

- to build and earn public trust;
- to address public issues and concerns
- to provide clarity and understanding
- to enhance your corporate image.

So if all of this is so important, how do we do it?

It is not as difficult as it may at first seem. Really, it is all just good common sense.

The key ingredients are planning, preparation and research.

Someone once said: *“Failing to plan is like planning to fail.”*

A company that has no business plan soon runs into problems. And so it is with communications and public relations.

Over four decades as a journalist and communicator, I have witnessed a lot of public figures crash and burn on the public stage.

When they did, it was usually for one of two reasons and, occasionally, both:

- 1- they underestimated the importance of planning and were poorly prepared, if prepared at all, for the tough questions;
- 2 - they were not being honest.

On the other hand, those who succeed have obviously done their homework and can deal with the tough questions.

Most important, they are always honest.

When coaching people on how to deal with the media, I always advise clients to follow what I like to call *Blain's three B's*:

- Be prepared
- Be honest
- Be careful

Preparation is a key element of planning and it is a cornerstone of a successful communications and public relations plan.

It is not complicated -- it's simply a matter of making sure that you do your homework.

In the planning process, it is important to understand the difference between public relations and communications:

Public relations is an approach that encompasses corporate or personal involvement in a community, in a project or, in a cause. It includes advertising and promotion, as well as direct communication with the public and the media.

Communications are the means and methods you use to correspond with the public and the media. For example: news releases, news conferences, e-mail newsletters, blogs, Facebook and other internet tools, *personal contact*, and media interviews for broadcast, telecast and print.

Of these, perhaps the most important is **personal contact**. Personal contact puts it at the community level. And, in most cases, you are operating in small coastal communities, so it's *very important*.

Chris Whynot... Liverpool, Sherman D'Entremont... Pubnico

Impressed:

- how they respected the people they work with/manage in their operations;

-how well they are respected by people in the communities where they work and do business.

Communications and “public” or *community* relations are the responsibility of *everyone* in an organization.

You and your employees are the human face and the heart and soul of your company. The public and the media will form their opinion of you very quickly based on their first impressions of you or your staff. So do everything you can to make that first impression --- *personal contact* -- a good one.

An organization’s public relations and communications plan should be second only to its business plan.

The communications and PR plan is like a road map or a flight plan. It shows you where you’re going, how to get there and what to do if you get sidetracked along the way.

For small operations, it can be as simple as a one pager:

It should include a simple, high level “key message” about your operation.

For example, it might be:

“We produce top quality seafood and provide jobs for local people.”

It should clearly state some specific *communications* objectives.

For example, if your company’s public image needs some work, the plan should state as an objective:

“To improve our public image during the year 2011.”

Then it should some strategies for working toward that goal:

For example:

- *an open house for the public to see your operation first hand and sample your products (i.e. Peter Darnell’s mussel event in Mahone Bay area)*

- *Invitation to local media (community newspaper, community radio, local cable TV) to do feature story on your operation and what it means in the community. (Chris Whynot... locally built boat to tend trout farm site)*

- *Arrange visits to local schools to talk about seafood and aquaculture.*

Another important component of good communications planning is appropriate *research*.

This must be done before you venture out publicly, so that you have adequate background, facts and information.

Questions and Answers should be developed, tested and rehearsed before going public.

If you are a small operator, you may feel that you don't need or don't have time for a communications plan.

That, of course, is your decision.

But I would advise that you at least have a contingency plan on how to deal with incidents, accidents, emergencies or, God forbid, a workplace fatalities.

A contingency plan is like a fire extinguisher or a first aid kit...

It's something every operation should have but, hopefully would never have to use.

But if you use it only once, it is worth whatever amount of time or money you invested in it.

A contingency plan should indicate who will act as the spokesperson for your operation. (Only one person to speak).

In cases of personal injury or death, first obligation is to

inform police. *They* will inform family.

Only after police have informed family can you confirm any details with the media.

Examples of Plans/No plans:

Airlines ... plan for *when* there's a crash, not *if* there's a crash

Mining... Westray mine disaster, nearly 20 years ago.

(Example, in 1998 NS spray program, we had contingency plan to cover possibility of aircraft falling from sky. Friday of first week, one did. (ad lib details... radio blackout, determine status of pilot/crew family; determine extent, if any, of environmental damage; after fact finding, brief media)

Finally, it is very important to make *follow-up* part of your PR and communications plan. Contact media, provide updated reports on projects or situations and solicit media reaction to the way you've handled things.

Listen to their comments or suggestions with an open mind.

Summary:

Good preparation, planning and honesty are the keys to success in public and media relations. Work to develop an ongoing relationship with media and public... make it part of your corporate culture.

If you follow these few simple common sense principles that I have outlined, you will experience positive results.

- you will gain trust and respect with the public and media;
- they will have a better understanding of what you're all about;
- you will be better prepared to deal with issues that may arise;
- and you will enhance your corporate image.

Simply stated: *It's just good business.*

So do it with pride.

Thank you and good luck.