

Conservation News Releases and Print Media Editors

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Abstract: A survey of print editors in Florida indicated they want more than raw information from conservation agencies. Editors reported that photographs frequently are in short supply and feature stories from conservation agency writers are welcome contributions. They want more “how to” stories; they want more brief filler material; and above all else they want more material of significance to their specific communities.

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It seemed like a pretty good idea at the time—to trim expenses by using both sides of the paper on news releases. Paper is expensive and so is postage when you're mailing a couple of 4-page news releases to 1,000 or so publications, electronic media, writers and conservation clubs.

When the idea came up, it did not seem likely that editors would mind terribly if they received releases printed on both sides of the paper. After all, it seemed logical that editors would appreciate having fewer pieces of paper to wrangle with while racing deadlines. In fact, it seemed like such an obviously good idea, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's Office of Informational Services almost started doing it without a second thought.

It's a good thing we decided to ask editors how they felt about the idea, because nearly one-half of them said they are less likely to publish a news release that's printed on both sides of the paper. In fact, one editor said he automatically hurls any such news release into the trash can, regardless of subject matter or quality.

Methods

The survey provided an opportunity to get answers to a few other questions while we were at it, so the staff prepared a brief questionnaire and mailed it to roughly 250 newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and other print publications. A total of 102 responded.

The questions were:

1. How often do you publish news releases from the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission? (A) frequently; (B) seldom; (C) never.
2. Are you more likely to publish a news release that includes art such as photos, graphs or line drawings?
3. Do you prefer (A) photographs; (B) halftones or camera-ready photos which are ready for paste up; or (C) line art?
4. Are you less likely to publish news releases that are typed on both sides of the paper?
5. Are you interested in receiving more feature stories concerning wildlife, fishing, law enforcement or other topics from this agency?
Specifically: _____

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6. Are there other factors in our working relationship with you that should be brought to our attention? Specifically: _____
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The questionnaire, printed on a 3 × 5 card with return postage affixed, also contained a space for the editors to indicate the name of their publications. It would have been better if it also had contained a space for the editors to indicate whether their publications are daily newspapers or monthly magazines or whatever. In addition, it would have been helpful to know the publications' circulation figures.

We didn't pretend that we had distributed a scientific survey, but we did hope that it would generate a better understanding of what editors want from us, and how we can deliver it on a limited budget.

Results and Discussion

Respondents were broken down into 9 categories: daily newspapers, weekly newspapers, bi-weekly newspapers, tri-weekly newspapers, monthly publications, wire services, newspaper bureaus, other publications and unknown publications. The latter category represented 20 respondents which did not indicate their names or any other information that would enable us to identify them.

When possible, we noted each publication's circulation figures as reported in the Florida News Media Directory, published annually by Gail E. West of Mount Dora, Florida.

Answers to question No. 1 yielded no surprises since the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission routinely keeps track of which publications publish this agency's news releases. In each category, between 70% and 100% of the respondents indicated that they frequently publish news releases from this agency. Only one publication—a daily newspaper with a circulation of approximately 44,000—indicated that it never publishes releases from the Commission.

Question No. 2, on the other hand, did produce some unexpected responses. For instance, daily newspapers, despite the fact they have access to dozens of wire

service photos, indicated that they are more likely to publish a news release that contains photos, graphs or line drawings. Of 11 daily newspapers responding to the survey, 8 said inclusion of art with a news release improves the release's chances of being published.

However, the daily newspapers that responded in the affirmative represent a combined circulation of approximately 352,000 while the ones that responded in the negative represented a circulation of 366,000 (including the newspaper that indicated it never publishes any of this agency's news releases).

Among weekly newspapers, 24 publications with a combined circulation of 339,000 indicated they are more likely to publish a news release that includes art. Thirteen publications, with 77,000 combined circulation, indicated that including art does not make a difference.

Among bi-weeklies and tri-weeklies, 2 publications in both categories indicated that art improves chances of publication and 3 indicated that it does not. Similar response was reported by bureaus, which are branch offices of large newspapers set up to produce localized stories for localized editions of the publications.

One wire service—the Associated Press to be specific—indicated that art does improve the chances of getting a news release published.

Of the 3 monthly publications that responded to the survey, 2 reported that art makes no difference. One did not answer the question.

Among "other" publications, 12 said art makes a difference and 4 said it does not.

Six "unknown" publications said yes; 3 said no.

Prior to the survey, the Commission's Office of Informational Services had experimented with inclusion of photos, pre-screened photos (photos which already have been reproduced in the dot pattern used by print publications), and line art with news releases. By monitoring use of these devices by print media, we had concluded that black-and-white glossy photos were the most popular with editors.

The survey indicated that we were correct, but the margin was not what we expected in some categories.

Eight daily newspapers, with a total circulation of nearly 600,000, indicated a preference for glossy photos. One daily of unknown circulation favored pre-screened photos. One indicated it prefers line art, one wanted all three, and one with 250,000 readers indicated it is not interested in any type of art.

Bi-weeklies, monthlies and "other" publications preferred pre-screened photos while all remaining categories preferred glossy photos.

The breakdown of preferences suggests that small or low-profit publications prefer the pre-screened photos because they are less expensive to reproduce. Other publications seem to prefer glossy photos which lend themselves to reproduction in whatever size or shape suits the editor's need for that edition.

The 16 publications that indicated a preference for line art may suggest that publications without sufficient resources to employ staff artists in their news departments may favor this device.

Concerning question No. 4, only two of 12 daily newspaper editors indicated they are less likely to publish a news release that is typed on both sides of the page.

Weekly newspapers, on the other hand, responded more negatively to the practice. Although 27 weekly editors said it doesn't matter if news releases are two-sided, 12 editors admitted they are less likely to publish such releases.

In other categories, one out of five editors of bi-weeklies, tri-weeklies, and bureaus said they are more likely to publish a one-sided news release. Six out of 17 "other" publications and two out of nine "unknown" publications indicated a preference for releases typed on one side only.

Wire services and monthly publications indicated no preference.

Although a majority of editors indicated that it doesn't matter to them if a news release is typed on both sides, the ones who indicated they are less likely to publish a two-sided news release account for roughly 750,000 of the readers we attempt to reach with our publicity materials.

Question No. 5 proved to be one of the most revealing in the survey. Of the 102 responses, only two replied that they are not interested in receiving more feature stories. One small daily newspaper and one weekly were the only respondents that said they could not use more feature stories.

Furthermore, among the media that said they could use more feature stories were the Associated Press, United Press International and Florida's five largest daily newspapers.

However, some editors indicated that they regard news releases and feature stories as material to be re-written by their staff writers, rather than stories to be published as is. No matter; the important thing is that the information reaches the public, regardless of who takes the credit for it, and responses indicated that any conservation agency that doesn't put some effort into producing feature stories as well as hard news releases is missing an excellent opportunity to reach people.

Overall, editors said they would be most receptive to feature stories concerning: how to hunt or fish; fishing hot spots; wildlife officers; wildlife in general; hunting and fishing equipment; endangered species; and above all else, localized material. Nearly every publication favors local news, and editors are more receptive to information of importance to their communities as opposed to statewide general interest stories.

The final question—"Are there other factors in our working relationship with you that should be brought to our attention?"—was an obvious but fruitful attempt to cover anything we had missed in the survey.

Most editors expressed satisfaction with the Commission's public information efforts, but many of them did seize the opportunity to complain that some news releases are received too late to use; callers are sometimes transferred to several offices before they can get an answer to a simple question; there is not enough follow-up on matters of extreme public interest or local importance; and editors need more outdoor briefs (one or two paragraph stories).

Admittedly, this survey was limited to print media in Florida and a couple of

adjacent states, and therefore responses may be somewhat tainted by local conditions and attitudes. Yet the information we learned from it may carry a high degree of validity in other states as well.

Editors recognize a large demand for information concerning wildlife and conservation, but they also recognize that the public requires more than raw data. To reach the public, conservation writers have to get past editors, and more than ever, that task requires professional presentation.

From us, editors want well-written stories, they want pictures, and they want somebody to be near the phone in case they have any questions.