MEDIA PESTICIDE COVERAGE

by Kevin M. Cooney and Steven J. Day

Contemporary industry wisdom holds that aside from involvement in civic projects that may earn a mention of your firm in the community section of the local newspaper, arborists and their colleagues in the urban pesticide-use industry should keep their companies off the evening newscast and out of the daily papers.

While industry organizations talk up the development of "pro-active" media programs, industry professionals remain generally scornful and fearful of press coverage on environmental issues, particularly pesticides.

Why avoid the press? The Sierra Club doesn't, nor does the anti-chemical bureaucrat at City Hall, the Statehouse or in Washington. They believe in their anti-chemical message and are eager to talk with the press to get their message out. Why not arborists? The pesticide industry makes risk/benefit decisions every day on behalf of its customers. While the risks of communicating with the media are considerable, the benefits include improving your firm's reputation, balancing the information on chemical risk your customers receive through the media, and perhaps most importantly, helping to shape the debate on legislative issues which will affect your business in the future.

In short, you can actually benefit from pesticide controversies if you play your cards right. Once you understand how news reporters work, effective media communications is a relatively simple task and can even be fulfilling. A little education on how the media operate, with a little planning and effort will yield significant results in your community.

Although you cannot control what ultimately appears on the TV screen or the newspaper page, talking with the press will increase the odds that your side of the story—which is a story of progress, increased sensitivity to environmental considerations and safe, effective service—will be reported more accurately and prominently in the local media.

The basic rules of successful media relations involve being accessible to the press, providing clear, concise and definite answers to their questions and avoiding the temptation to criticize the messenger for reporting the often negative events surrounding pesticide issues.

Rule One: Be Accessible to the Press

A local TV station called a tree and lawn care company one day, and left a message requesting an interview with someone knowledgeable about pesticide safety practices for the homeowner. Upon returning the call, the manager of this firm learned that of several companies in the city contacted for an interview, all had either refused outright or did not return calls.

By the time this reporter finally reached someone who was willing to be interviewed for this basic, non-controversial story (always follow label directions, application techniques, safety attire, etc.) he was frustrated and openly suspicious of why so many pesticide users refused to discuss the safety aspects of their work publicly. Luckily for the local industry, this particular reporter did not share suspicion aloud with his TV audience.

Instead, the arborist who decided to spare some of his time was rewarded with an interview in front of his business where both the company name and general location could be seen by viewers. For a week after the newscast in which he was interviewed, this arborist's customers commented on how impressed they were doing business with an "authority".

The reporter didn't forget, either. When similar news stories surfaced the same arborist was contacted again for more information on the topics. The arborist's customers again mentioned their pleasure at knowing they were doing business with an "authority".

In the above example, this businessman reacted properly to the rare instance when a reporter contacted him at random. This happens infrequently, and the professional pesticide user who wants to influence the content and accuracy of media coverage of pesticide controversies had better not count on having the phone ring whenever a
story related to pesticides comes up. In addition
to their own newsgathering sources, reporters rely
on a network of individuals with a proven history
of actively supplying accurate, timely information
without waiting for the press to seek them out.

In other words, reporters won't keep your
phone number in their rolodex unless you put their
name in your phone files. Check the paper and TV
broadcasts to see who is responsible for covering
environmental issues in your community. Start
developing your relationship by following up on a
current local story that you can contribute to. If
the local paper is covering hazardous waste
disposal, for example, copy some of the informa-
tion on this topic from your files and send it to the
reporter, ASAP. Unless your information is strongly
biased, the average journalist will gladly accept
your offer of assistance.

A word of caution here—as long as the press
regards you as an “honest broker” of reliable in-
formation, they'll be happy to talk with you. But at
the first sign you're trying to manipulate their
coverage, or even worse, that you're hiding some
information pertinent to their work, the damage
will be far more extensive than just the reporter's
opinion of you as a single source. Reporters are
people too, and just as a few politicians’ clumsy
attempts to control information has resulted in the
press’ general distrust and scorn for elected of-
ficials, any attempts to limit or distort pertinent in-
formation—even that which reflects poorly on an
industry concern—will hurt the communication ef-
forts for the entire industry, at least in your area of
operation.

Once your local environmental reporter has
satisfied himself that you can be counted on to
provide accurate information consistently, he’ll seek you out before the story is published or
broadcast.

Rule Two: Provide Short, Definitive Answers
News reporters don’t have the time or expertise
to do more than develop a basic understanding of
many of the subjects they cover. They’re too busy
covering too many events to thoroughly analyze the
issues underlying, for example, the latest EPA
announcement that just came over the newswire.

Unless you live in one of the 10 largest cities in
America, chances are the reporters you will deal
with are recent college grads with little or no
academic background in technical reporting.

While pesticide issues are complex and
sometimes confusing (even to industry experts) it
is frequently overwhelming to the general press
reporter. Therefore, your communication efforts
will, at first, have to concentrate on basic informa-
tion on the topics of pesticide testing and registra-
tion, pesticides as a key element in IPM programs,
and exploring the “cancer-epidemic” myth pro-
moted by the environmental lobby.

The key word here is basic. Unless your
presentation on these matters is simple and brief,
the reporter’s eyes will glaze over. If you’re
quoted at all, chances are the quote will be out of
context, if not mangled altogether.

Reporters will make understanding a complex
technical issue easier for themselves and their au-
diences through personalizing the topic. By ask-
ing whether you would let your kids play in a yard
just sprayed with diazinon, for example, the
reporter answers the question uppermost in the
minds of his audience. Data from LD-50 studies
and mutagenicity reports may contain pertinent in-
formation, but it can’t compete with a one-
sentence quote that allays the fears of the unin-
formed person down the street.

Personalizing the issue of pesticide hazards in
news reports does result in a dramatic, but in-
complete examination of the subject. While the
press may rely on this interviewing technique too
often, it serves the immediate needs of the jour-
nalist and his audience.

Like it or not, anticipate personalized questions
whenever you discuss pesticide issues with the
press. Develop keen, short answers that you can
live with, even though they are a relatively poor
mechanism for getting your point across. Remember, on controversial topics reporters and
editors will opt for strong, concise statements to
illustrate both sides of an issue. Make your point in
a series of simple, clear, direct statements—or lit-
tle of the information you supply will be used.

Rule Three: Don’t Slay the Messenger for the
Message
When was the last time you were dissatisfied
with the coverage of the news event, whether it
was the Yellowstone forest fire or last week’s
presidential news conference? You are not alone. Competent reporters today have to be extremely thick-skinned to endure the criticism of their work. Much of the criticism is justified, but just as in business, identifying a problem without offering solutions merely wastes energy without fixing anything.

In your dealings with the press, resist the temptation to criticize their past mistakes. It can't be undone, the reporter's had it up to here with Monday-morning quarterbacks, and it can only damage your opportunity to develop a rapport with the media.

When you review the work of the reporters you will be talking to, keep an eye out for the “blind spots” in their coverage, those aspects of the pesticide story which, in your opinion, should be included in the issue you will discuss. When the interview begins, provide the information which you feel is missing from the news coverage, but without challenging the reporter's integrity or competence. Once you’ve dealt with a reporter on several occasions, you can draw an informed conclusion about his abilities and biases. In the meantime, the more often you talk to various media representatives, the more likely your views will become part of the debate in your community.

Effective media relations requires patience, a willingness to discuss their negative “facts” in the pesticide debate, and the ability to endure imperfect reporting graciously. Yes, talking to the press is somewhat risky. But unless you try to tell your side of the story, your customers, neighbors and political leaders won’t have all the facts they need to make rational decisions necessary to ensure safe, effective landscape management into the 21st century.

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Abstract


Interim transplanting is a management procedure used for the production of ball and burlap stock. Trees are transplanted by individual balling in the nursery as a method of root pruning three to five years prior to the time they are harvested for market. Interim transplanted trees also demonstrate post-marketing survival rates markedly superior to those of trees produced by conventional nursery practices. Mean branch length was 68 percent greater for interim transplant trees than conventionally grown trees. Analysis of the roots contained in the root balls indicates that there is a fourfold increase in fine roots in the interim transplant root ball over a tree of similar size grown by conventional methods and harvested with the same size root ball. These observations indicate that the interim transplant stock surpasses conventionally grown nursery trees in every characteristic measured.