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–Another "Boat Responsibly!" Reminder from the United States Coast Guard –

Media Tips

Local Groups Can Help Get the Word Out About Boating Safety

Promoting safe boating can be a tough sell when there's frost in the air and the fireside beckons. But when summer starts to sizzle reporters are hot on the trail of colorful stories about baseball, barbecues, and boating. Take advantage of the warm weather to advance your public education campaign.

If you're on your game, you already know your target audience and you've updated your list of media contacts – local, regional, and national. Be sure reporters know that you're available, what your role is in promoting safe boating, what kind of information you can provide, and how to contact you.

Media interviews shouldn't be unnerving. With planning, and a little insight on the news business, they can be wonderful opportunities to raise awareness of safety issues and, equally important, to build lasting relationships with members of the media.

Landing the Story

Understand that reporters are usually up against a deadline; so if you're not at your desk when a one calls, return the call as soon as possible. Get the reporter's name and the organization he or she is working for, the topic, and the kind of information needed. If you'd like time to organize your thoughts, and the reporter has some flexibility, offer to call back at an agreed upon time and be sure to follow through. If you're fielding a call out of the blue, even a 20 minute delay gives you an opportunity to think of ways to work your core message into the reporter's assigned story, whatever the story angle.

A more pro-active approach is to develop a newsworthy story that you can "pitch" to reporters and editors. Watch for national or regional events related to boating and use them to segue into your safety topic. Stress the timeliness of summer weather and on the water activities, then give it a local angle. The idea is to persuade local newspapers, radio and television that there is a community story they don't want to miss.

If you're staging an event or launching a safety program, invite members of town councils or local business people to take part. Then, when you pitch your story, be specific about who is involved.

Carefully craft your agenda, but keep it simple. A scattergun approach only obscures the message you're trying to get across to the public.

You should already have on hand two or three main points about boating safety, each supported by credible data and interesting true-life examples. From there, try to anticipate any questions that might come up during the interview, and prepare thoughtful responses. The more you can anticipate a reporter's story needs, the more likely they are to view you as an important resource for any future coverage.

Also, understand that at news organizations a story on boating safety may be set aside suddenly in favor of breaking news. If that happens and your interview is cancelled or publication of a completed article is delayed, be gracious and understanding. Opportunities will come up again later.

Keep it Simple

Once you've got a reporter interested, how do you make sure the story conveys the message you're looking for?

Whether an interview is for print or broadcast, reporters are looking for short, snappy quotes. This is the age of the sound bite, so speak in complete sentences and keep your comments brief. Keep returning to your 2-3 talking points. Many people make the mistake of talking too much, getting lost in minor details, or letting the reporter lead them off track. Keep your talking points in front of you -- or in your head -- and repeat them as necessary.

A television interview requires special preparation, since how you look on camera can add to, or distract from, your message. For television, keep your appearance as simple and straightforward as your comments. Avoid flashy or jangling jewelry. Stick to solid colors -- clothing with stripes, paisley's, or distinct plaids can appear to "dance" or create a rainbow effect on screen. Look in a mirror before you go on camera to make sure every hair is in place.

Ask in advance if the interview will be live, or taped and edited. In edited interviews, pause briefly before answering each question. This gives the reporter a clean break for cutting a sound bite. Also, with edited interviews, you can stop and start over if you don't like how you worded your response.

If the interview is live, be sure you have your information down pat and feel comfortable thinking on your feet.

During the TV interview, be sure to look at the reporter and not the camera, unless this is a satellite interview and the reporter is at another location. Don't look around the room or at members of the film crew. You want to speak conversationally, but with conviction. Project confidence (you are the expert!) and retain your composure. Most of all, you want to be colorful. Reporters love vivid stories and anecdotes, so draw a word picture to illustrate your points.

Attend to details

After the interview, ask the reporter to please identify you with your organization. Give him your business card, or write out for him the correct spelling of your name, your title, and your boating safety group.

Don't assume the reporter understood your talking points or possesses a broad knowledge of boating. Ask the reporter to tell you what he or she thinks is the main story angle and correct any misperceptions.

Similarly, if you feel after the interview that you misspoke or erred on an important point, let the reporter know as quickly as possible. You can also call and add any important information that you may have overlooked during the interview.

Reporters are happy to tell you when a story will appear in print or a TV/radio segment will air -- if they know. After it comes out, check it thoroughly for accuracy and notify the reporter immediately of any serious errors. Often the media outlet will print or air a correction, which can prevent the error from turning up again in future stories.

If it's a great story – and this is what you're all aiming for – be sure to give the reporter positive feedback. Reporters don't often get a call or note complimenting their work. Getting one from you can help turn a passing encounter into the beginning of a lasting professional relationship.

The U.S. Coast Guard reminds all boaters, "Boat Responsibly!" For more information, visit www.USCGboating.org.