

Media Relations as Public Relations

Positive Coverage of Structural Engineering

By Ronald F. "Rawm" Nelson, S.E.

Structural engineers, as we all know, are experts in the field we practice in; but when it comes down to the field of public relations – well, that is another story. This article will help the practicing structural expert be a practicing media expert when that rare time arises. First, let us ask:

Why do structural engineers need to be involved in media relations?

The media's influence on peoples' opinion is immense. The understanding and support of structural engineers and the perception of their projects depends to a large extent on what the public and policy/decision makers hear on the radio, see on television or read in printed media.

Structural engineers need to take the lead in creating positive media coverage that continually enhances the image of structural engineers and their goals for safe and economic structures. This effort starts by understanding that media relations are really public relations.

Good relationships depend on cooperation, openness, honesty, and a willingness to admit problems and correct them. These are some of the many important qualities in relationships with friends, family and business associates. They are equally important in media relations.

Structural engineering is an extremely important profession. Structural engineering affects the lives of every person in our society.

Structural engineering involves the stability and safety of places where people live, learn, work, play, shop,

pray, etc. Journalists from all media are anxious to interview responsible experts who cooperate and are honest.

These Guidelines provide an outline for a successful media relations program. They will show how to develop and nurture relationships with reporters, and give persuasive interviews that tell the message the way it should be told. Tools for providing newsworthy messages are given.

Enhancing the image of structural engineers is our own responsibility. Good relations with members of the media are a means to that end and essential to success.



Your mission, should you choose to accept it...

How do you successfully share your message with reporters? The Structural Engineers Association of California's (SEAOC) Media Relations Committee has created a *Media Relations Guidelines* document. The document was written specifically for an organization, but the strategies and techniques apply universally.

SEAOC has shared this document with the Public relations Committee of the Structural Engineering Institute's (SEI) Business and Professional Activities Division, the National Council of Structural Engineers' Association's (NCSEA) Advocacy Committee, and several individual structural firms. Just like many of the things structural engineers do for a living need specialized training, so too does media relations. The end goal is to enhance the image of structural engineers. (PDF copies are available by request at kevink@4arc.com.)

What is media relations?

There are proactive and reactive media relationships.

- **Proactive:**
 - New technology
 - Public policy
 - Awards/honors
 - Seminars with dynamic speakers/topics
- **Reactive:**
 - Reporter inquiries
 - Clarifying issues for the public crisis

Media relations are most effective through local and regional outlets (city, county, section of a state, etc.). Relationships with local reporters are easier to develop and maintain. Good local relationships will lead to larger regional or national coverage when required.

A media interview is your chance to deliver the correct message, and to project a positive impression of structural engineering and engineers.

The five most recognized media are:

- Newspapers
- Television
- Radio
- Wire Services
- Magazines

Understanding the media = better spokesperson

Most structural engineers are not comfortable talking with the media. There is spokesperson training available, and the *Guidelines* document provides many excellent suggestions for preparing yourself to be interviewed by the media.

Written media messages such as News Releases, Letters to the Editor, Opinion Editorials, Public Service Announcements and Seeded Stories are all vital tools. But the live interview is where you can make the best impressions.

You need to recognize the different needs of the print, radio and broadcast reporters. They are professionals, just like you. They have deadlines. They have egos. They are experts in conducting interviews. They are NOT experts in your field.

TV Reporters

- Deadline driven
- Visuals
- Need simple story (less than 120 seconds)
- The audience are not experts in structural engineering. Imagine you are talking to a ten year old
- Reporters are "general assignment"
- Typical prep-time for TV reporter = 45 minutes



continued on next page

In a TV interview:

- Look at the reporter, not the camera
- Keep answers under 10 seconds
- You can stop and rephrase your answer (except for live TV)
- May be asked for “cutaway” shots
- Remember, the interview is not over until the reporter leaves

Interview scenarios:

- Live/taped
- Edited/unedited
- In-studio
- On-location
- Telephone
- Remote or satellite
- Listener/viewer call-in
- Solo vs. multi-guest
- Ambush
- Press conference

Look your best:

- Dress professionally
- Keep a suit coat handy
- Avoid white shirts and loud patterns
- Watch body language
- Glance in a mirror
- Scout around for a good site

Radio Reporters

- Sound bite driven
- Interview heavy
- Rapid-fire discussions
- Many stories crammed into one news segment

In a radio interview:

- Avoid cell phones and speaker phones
- Short, sweet and to-the-point answers
- No time for small talk
- State key messages at top of interview
- Have notes and talking points in front of you

Print reporters

- Generally more experienced
- Have more consistent “beats”
- Think in detail
- Looking for secondary leads
- If not prepared, ask for idea of what they’re calling for and call back in 15 minutes

In a newspaper interview:

- Over the phone or in the office
- Usually longer than TV interview
- More details
- Have on-hand statistics, recent articles or backup on issue

- Ask if you can provide further resources for story
 - o Consumers/clients
 - o Other industry professionals

Techniques and Tactics: Mastering the Media Interview

Message points:

- Prepare a few very carefully prepared, concise, and memorable thoughts
- Message points are the thoughts you want your audience to remember – above all else

In the interview, focus on your key messages. An interview is not a confessional or a simple Q & A session. You don’t have to tell everything you know. Don’t dilute your messages by having too many. Target your messages to the audience. **Your**

interview is your chance to tell your story.

If the subject is negative, the story will run with or without you. If you talk, you can correct misinformation, promote a positive image and add balance.

If you can’t talk, give a reason. Never say “No Comment.” Try, “That’s a privacy issue”, “We’re still investigating”, “We cannot discuss personnel issues” or “Until a decision is made, I cannot speculate.” Repeat as often as necessary.

If you can talk, don’t fly blind! Prepare and practice. Develop a few main talking points. Anticipate questions and your responses (one main point you intend to make and/or worst case scenario and response).

Bridging

Bridging gets you where you want to go. Incorporate your key message into every answer:

“Let’s look at that another way...”

“The real issue here is...”

“That speaks to a bigger point...”

You can always bridge.

During the Interview

- Everything you say is “on the record”
 - No joking
 - Don’t repeat a negative or concede a false premise
 - Repeat main points as often as necessary
- Remember your audience
- Don’t over answer a question
- Simplify – avoid jargon and technical terms

You can ask the reporter:

- When the story will run
- Their phone number or e-mail for any follow-up
- Who else they are interviewing
- Focus of the story

Don’t ask the reporter:

- If you can see their story before it runs
- If they are going to “slam you”
- If they can make you “sound smart”
- If they can read back quotes

OOPS! If there’s an error...

- Contact the reporter first and be pleasant
- If major error, ask for correction
- Letter to the editor

REMEMBER...

- You *can* impact the tone of a story
- Speak in simple terms
- Humanize your story
- Be engaging and likeable
- Be aware of deadlines
- Stick to your main points
- You are in control of the interview

Structural engineers may never become media relations “experts”, but a better understanding of and active participation in the process will help the media and the public have a better understanding of structural engineering. Media relations and public relations are not what structural engineers were trained to do but these relations are important elements in successful ventures. Media relations and public relations should be considered as an “extension to marketing” for a firm, an organization or a profession. If properly done, we can enhance the image of structural engineering. ■

Ronald F. “Raw” Nelson, S.E. is a registered Civil/Structural engineer in the states of California, Arizona, Colorado, Hawaii and Nevada. Mr. Nelson has over thirty years of extensive experience in structural design, analysis and evaluation of single and multi-family residential, office, and industrial buildings, public, and institutional facilities, shopping centers, parking garages, and many other various types of low-rise and multi-story structures of masonry, concrete, steel and timber construction, including retrofit for seismic or code compliance criteria.

