

Visibility: Getting and Keeping It

Part 2: "Things Worthy Reading"

By Richard G. Weingardt, P.E.

"If you would not be forgotten,
As soon as you are dead and rotten,
Either write things worthy reading,
Or do things worth the writing."
— Benjamin Franklin

Doing the items discussed in Part 1 of this series of articles (March 2007, STRUCTURE®) greatly increases the potential to get work published and gain recognition – and improve visibility both within and beyond the profession. But, what steps can be taken to make sure that the media, indeed, picks up on them? What types on submittals should be prepared?

News releases and stories for trade publications will always remain a major staple in an engineer's image-building arsenal. Being recognized – and written about – for honors and award-winning projects adds to a firm's and/or an individual's reputation.

Generally, well-written and well-presented media submissions should include high-quality professional photography and artwork when appropriate. Quality increases the chances for top billing or coverage in the media. To invest the time and resources to hone writing skills and come up with the best stories possible is well worth the effort, especially if obtaining media coverage goes beyond trade publications and venues.

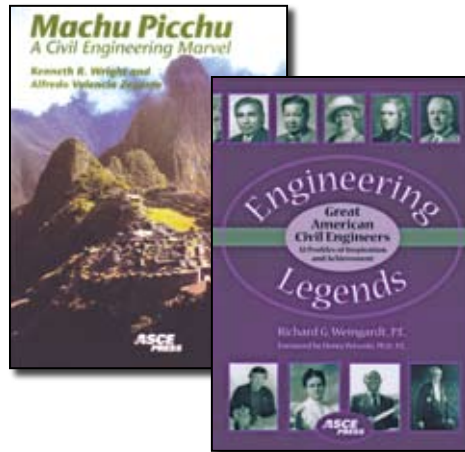
Just because a particular story, event or announcement may appeal to the trade media, it doesn't necessarily mean that it will interest the non-industry media. Writing "things worthy reading" that appeal to wider audiences is a whole different animal.

News Releases/OP-ED Pieces

Typically, engineers submit news releases to both trade and non-trade media outlets that deal with office changes, personnel appointments or honors, and awards for outstanding projects. Although, from time to time, they garner small notices on the back pages of mass-media newspapers and magazines, adequate coverage of such news is mostly found in trade publications.

To get significant coverage in mass-media publications or on television requires a lot of foresight and preparatory work – more than just mailing in a news release. The media get a lot of unsolicited "news", so yours has to be unique, timely and remarkable to have any chance of getting published. The business

editor of one of Denver's largest newspapers once told me that he gets several hundred press releases a day. Of these, 90 percent get trashed immediately, especially if they're two or more pages long. He has just a few seconds to review each piece of unsolicited material and unless he immediately sees something special in it, a "hook" or unique story angle, it's tossed!



Books about or by structural engineers directed toward a wide range of audiences greatly enhance the visibility of engineers within society. Courtesy of Richard Weingardt Consultants, Inc.

When writing a press release (for print) or media release (for all media), always be brief and pithy. Put quickly observable news hooks at the beginning of your submittals. Also, my firm often submits a professional, eye-catching 5x7 or 8x10 photograph with its releases. Even if the photos don't get used, they often catch the editor's attention, spurring him or her into using our story or giving it better than average exposure. Some engineering firms hire savvy public relations agents to "pitch" story angles and articles for them.

Even though the public benefits immensely from what engineers do, working daily in our buildings and driving on our roads and bridges, media representatives don't find engineers especially fascinating or newsworthy. They also have trouble actually understanding what we do. They better understand, for instance, what architects do, but how engineers fit into the building design process remains unclear and unexplained.

More and more engineers need to invest quality time explaining to the general-readership media why engineering is significant, how it works and how it benefits people. The need is to humanize

and demystify engineering, making it understandable, interesting and significant to the average man-on-the-street. Let people know, for instance, that maintaining and investing in the built environment improves everyone's standard of life – and that building a new highway or bridge allows them to get between their home and office more quickly and more economically, and makes it safer for their children to get to school.

Sometimes engineers need to come in through the back door with a human-interest element in getting their stories covered. The editor of a popular national magazine told me, "You have a good chance of getting something published about your project if, for example, it resulted in a den of nearly extinct foxes having to be moved. Then you can say how the great engineering saved the foxes." In other words, to garner coverage in the general media, an engineer's stories have to be primarily about people and the economy, and secondarily about engineering feats.

Get to Know Reporters on a First-Name Basis

Reporters, editors and newscasters can do a lot to spread the word about engineers and engineering. Get to know as many of them on a first-name basis as you can. Take them to lunch and treat them like you would a valuable ongoing client.

Once you've befriended serious reporters and newscasters, remember that few in the general media, even the good guys, will go out of their way to learn what engineers are doing. So we constantly have to take our message to them and be creative in telling our story – passionately and proudly, but not arrogantly.

Media decision-makers are always looking for a list of experts – quotable authorities with the ability to make pithy comments – when reporting or writing their stories. Make sure that you are on their lists. Most engineering societies do a good job with this, so check to be sure you are on their list of for-the-media experts. Two of my recent national TV appearances came about from an engineering association recommendation followed by the producers checking out my web site.

Basics for contacting the media

Find out each publication's format and what news it specializes in, plus schedules and deadlines. Media bosses are always concerned about circulation and presenting news that interests their readers, viewers or listeners. They also like to be given exclusive use of your news submittals or articles. Typically, editors have short deadlines, so submit material that requires little editing. And editors

hate I-focused, self-serving or fluff articles, so never send them.

All news releases should answer the five Ws – who, what, when, where and why. Before you submit long articles, send query letters.

Once your article has been published, get permission from the publisher to reprint it. Then do a mail-out of the reprinted article, whether it's one written about your firm or by a member of your firm. Use them as effective marketing and visibility tools. Send them to the same list of people that you send your own newsletters/magazines.

A Regular Column in a Mass-Media Publication

One of the most effective visibility-enhancement activities any engineer can do is write a regular column or series of articles in one of the newspapers or magazines that your neighbors read. What can you write about? The best bridges and building structures, or the top ten engineering wonders in your area, or infrastructure replacement costs for your city – topics that are all around us.

And remember, engineers don't always have to talk about engineering. If all they ever talk about is technology, engineering subjects will continue to come across as being too narrow – and not newsworthy. Make them relevant to a large audience.

I once wrote a monthly column in Colorado's largest business magazine on leadership. In the research phases, I would meet and interview the "movers and shakers" in the Rocky Mountain Region. In addition to getting me lots of favorable media exposure, this column allowed me to develop relationships with business leaders who had the potential to become clients of or references for my company. One of my firm's best commissions came right after I had interviewed the regional vice-president of a national developer. My firm was hired on the recommendation of this VP and became the structural engineers for the company's new regional headquarters building, even before its architect was brought on board.

Writing general interest pieces for non-engineering publications shows the public that engineers aren't just technocrats but also know something about big-picture issues. They have opinions that the community should know about.

Why Do It?

Why strive to be visible? Why do "things worth the writing" and write worthy things?

For starters, to attract quality clients, projects and employees, and to get recognized for your contributions, so you – and other engineers – can be proud of being members of such a noble profession. The spin-off? Doing so helps excite more bright young people into wanting to join our ranks.

Engineers know the contributions those in our profession make and the impact we have on the world. With greater visibility beyond the narrow confines of the engineering industry – and more people knowing what we do – we can better control our own destinies. More people will be willing to listen to our concerns. With effort, crucial trends can be reversed, such as engineers being regarded as technicians and engineering as a commodity that can be purchased solely by low bid.

Engineers have a lot on which to build, especially their technical expertise, ability to do something that adds value and pragmatic problem-solving skills. Let's continue to

maintain those strengths but, at the same time, broaden our outreach to the public and to the media. Let's take on leadership roles in our communities so that we aren't only talking to ourselves.

Let's do good work and not be shy in telling the world about it. ■

Richard G. Weingardt, P.E., is CEO of Richard Weingardt Consultants, Inc. in Denver, CO. He is the author of eight books. Weingardt was the 1995-96 national president of ACEC. He can be reached via e-mail at rweingardt@aol.com.

Enhance your Council Record by becoming a MODEL LAW STRUCTURAL ENGINEER



If you meet the following criteria, you may be eligible for the NCEES Model Law Structural Engineer (MLSE) designation:

- Graduated from an engineering program accredited by EAC/ABET.
- Passed a minimum of 18 semester (27 quarter) hours of structural analysis and design courses.
- Passed the 8-hour NCEES Fundamentals of Engineering exam.
- Passed 16 hours of structural examinations.
- Completed 4 years of acceptable structural engineering experience after confirmation of a bachelor's degree.
- No disciplinary action on record.

To learn more about how you can become part of this new program, go online to www.ncees.org or contact the Records Department at 1-800-250-3196, extension 237.



National Council of Examiners for Engineering and Surveying
PO Box 1686, Clemson, SC 29633