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News Releases to Tweets: Getting Your Story Straight and Composing Effective PR Writing

with Zan Dubin Scott, Scott Martelle and Paul West
Sponsored by Network for Good

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Rebecca Higman: Now I want to just give a brief introduction for each of our three speakers who we are so excited to have with us today. The first is Zan Dubin Scott and she developed her PR expertise largely as a staff writer for the Los Angeles Times. And then after her time as a journalist, she founded ZDS Communications, which is a national public relations marketing and writing firm that specializes in energy and the environment, education, the arts, and healthcare. So a lot of the client and content that she works with are right up your alley if you are listening to the call today.

Secondly, we are happy to welcome Paul West. Paul has offered on the ground communication services and support to progressive clients and causes throughout the US, Europe, and Africa since the 1990's.

His Ashland based communications consultancy represents clients ranging from biodynamic farms to evolutionary authors whose products and practices promote personal and planetary healing.

And finally, a big welcome to Scott Martelle. He is also a veteran journalist. His tenure includes 12 years as a staff writer for the Los Angeles Times. He has covered an array of stories from local governments, to president campaigns, author profiles, and book reviews. He has also taught journalism and narrative storytelling at UC Irvine and Chapman University.

So without further ado, I am really excited to turn the floor over to our first speaker, Zan, to get us started.

Zan Dubin Scott: OK Rebecca. Thank you so very much for having us on today. And I am thrilled to be in such great company, both of Paul and Scott, and also the non-profit organizations on the call. I am really honored to be here.

So to get right to it, effective PR writing for me, and I try to practice it everyday, starts with one question. "Do I have a pitch or a story that media will want to write about?" And excuse me as I go forward if I am sounding overly basic, but I can tell you that these are questions that I ask myself everyday.

So in a perfect world, of course, my every pitch would involve a bonafide huge real news announcement; new ground-breaking scientific research performed at MIT, the biggest grant ever awarded in the decades long history of the New York City Ballet, or Oprah returning to live theater and starring in your new play.

I could write any of these press releases in pencil with bad grammar and bad spelling and snail mail it to journalists and they would all pick it up. Lacking those angles, this is where I have to become an expert in what qualifies as news worth publishing to each reporter an outlet that I pitch, because I won't get into the New York Times or Good Morning America without major news of the three little examples I gave.

So sort of thinking about it, I realize I kind of become a match maker. I would like to give specific examples. One of my current clients is an unusual educational non-profit with two programs. One of them is called Camp Gonzales. And basically, the effort is to provide extra curricular classes designed to help incarcerated teens at a Los Angeles County detention camp experience education through these classes as something thrilling, and to choose it as a path to a successful life.

So the director the program I am promoting put on a summer day festival; basically a way for the guys at the camp to have a break. And it involves athletics, performances of the rap songs and poetry they are writing in these classes, etc.

So the problems, of course, being here in Los Angeles, I always think of LA Times first. It is the major media outlet in the city, of course, in Southern California. Well, I venture to say California. So clients of course love that.

But the counts against this particular pitch is that this kind of festival has been done before. It is not unprecedented. It wasn't involving a great number of people. We didn't have any celebrities. And all of these elements, of course, being sort of Journalism 101, what makes a story.

The one thing we did have was dogs. If you have seen the press release, they had a local rescue group doing a demonstration for the guys at the camp. So anyway, this is where I become a match maker. I have to ask myself, "What elements of the story that I do have are newsworthy to which media around town?"

Location is a no brainer I always try to go for immediately, because I don't have to have the big guns for the local paper, which in this case was called The Acorn, to pick up the story, which they did.

Then we go to specific population. Most of the kids at the camp are Latino, as is the director who put on the program, wherein lays the more interesting story, really. The director of the program himself spent four years incarcerated.

So now instead of a simple summer day festival that has been done before, I have a compelling story of someone who has been through the fire, helped themselves out of it, and is now turning around and helping others youths like him.

So The Acorn, as I said, ran the story. And then I pitched the largest Spanish language newspaper here in town called La Opinion, and they picked up and ran with the more compelling pitch.

Univision, which is the local Spanish Language television station here…In fact, it is not so local and is also large. They are producing an index piece focusing on the director and two of the boys that just came out of camp.

I hope I don't sound like I am blowing my own horn here. I do want to just demonstrate that these techniques that I use have been successful in hopes that you all can use them, too.

A few writing basics. And again, excuse me if it sounds overly basic, but for one thing I have found incredibly useful is to really just act like a reporter. In order to find out the more interesting story going on here, of course, I had to interview the director of the program and ask him all kinds of questions about his past and such so that I could promote his story of overcoming.

To stay with the idea of detail, I will move to the next press release for another client who put on a 2,000 mile bicycle ride of ocean plastic pollution. A lot of you may have heard about this. This is sort of environmental issue that is just breaking out. People call it The Garbage Patch. We call it The Plastic Soup.

Anyway, what I did send around was a very long release. But I wanted to talk about the detail and how writing with detail, of course, is the essence of good writing, but also critical to capturing a reporter's imagination and attention.

I had seen a PowerPoint of my clients, basically the PowerPoint that they were showing along this 2,000 mile bike ride which was to raise awareness of the problem. And the images were just gut wrenching.

And so in the release I described them, and I wrote, "A Dead Turtle Trapped in a Plastic Lawn Chair." "An Albatross Carcass bulging with Toothbrushes and Bottle caps." The birds picked this debris out of the ocean, which is how they end up inside their bodies.

And to quote the LA Times blog, which picked up my press release, they picked up my very words. "A Dead See Turtle Trapped in a Plastic Lawn chair," and, "An Albatross Carcass Bulging with Toothbrushes and Bottle caps." And again, I could have been very general in the writing here, just talking about damage done to sea life, but that is not what we want to do.

What we did have going for us in this case also is that this issue had just gone mainstream. At the time that these two young folks launched their bicycle ride, it wasn't mainstreamed yet.

This summer, since then, Scripps has come out and done a very similar exploration with two other organizations. But again, this is what I had going for me in terms of public relations: something that was much more unique.

So we got a ton of coverage, including The Christian Science Monitor, 10 minutes of live television news coverage on the event before the couple left, Treehugger, etc.

And just quickly, I will end up talking a little bit about tips on writing for Twitter and Facebook, etc. It is just really fascinating to me a couple decades after getting into journalism that I have found the best possible training ground for writing journalistically, and that of course goes for public relations. And that would be Twitter. And that is because it forces you to do two things: crystallize the essence of your story and grab the readers by the throat in 140 characters or less.

And I recently learned that less is preferable, if for no other reason that for someone to repost your Twitter post. They are going to have to add their own URL, so you want to subtract that number of characters from your original post.

So my advice would be, the first thing to do when you sit down to write a press release, or really to write anything, would be to try to Tweet it first, because once you get that essence, then it can be a matter of filling in the blanks, even though it may feel like sweating blood, as we say, to some of us who write.

So I will just finally end with, say, the two books that I recommend most highly about learning, again, any kind of effective writing would be the good old William Strunk, Jr and E.B. White, “The Elements of Style”, and a book that I actually heard about through Katya Anderson, the COO of Network for Good, “Made to Stick: Why some Ideas Survive and Others Die.” They are both just fantastic basic manuals. Thank you so much!

Rebecca: Excellent. Thanks so much Zan. So we can move on to our next speaker.

Scott Martelle: First off, something you all have to remember is that the event of the program that is the center of your universe is going to be irrelevant to most of the world. I mean your whole organization is focused on doing something, say, coming up in September, that most people don’t care about that, and you have to sort of resign yourself to that reality.

Your hurdle is to get those other people to find the relevance in it to their lives. And the way you do that is through some of the things that Zan just talked about. You break it out of the policy want kind of stuff and write your releases in real terms.

More broadly, when Zan and Rebecca were telling me about this thing, I got to thinking about what we should be talking about. And I have got a couple disconnected thoughts.

First of all, professionalism. A few years ago I was covering books and authors for the Los Angeles Times calendar section. For those of you out of towners, that is kind of the center of their entertainment universe.

The book club was a great gig. I remember coming in one morning and getting an email from a film studio about some upcoming premier of a documentary, and some young intern sends me the email pitch. I wasn't writing about movies. There was a whole different stable at the LA Times to write about movies.

So I emailed her back a pretty direct email about how this wasn't my area of expertise and that she really ought to research the people she added to her email list. She responded with an email, kind of nice and terse, and thanked me, and said she was an intern and apologized. Then she asked me who else at the Hollywood Reporter I suggest she send the email to.

So I emailed her back again and said, "Sorry. I don't work for the Hollywood Reporter. I work for the LA Times." Then I didn't hear back from her again. I suspected a mortification.

In a lot of ways that was a small moment. But the firm she worked for lost all credibility with me, and that is kind of the cautionary tale of this. In these tough economic times, there is a big inclination to use interns, volunteers, or whatever for key work.

Always be aware of what information is going out under your group's name, because it is your group's credibility that is on the line. And as everyone knows, credibility is a hard thing to regain once you have lost it.

Second, progress to social media. I am a proficient user of it, particularly Facebook and Linked In, and to a lesser extent, Twitter. I have got about 550 friends on my Facebook list and there are a whole bunch of them that I keep hidden. The reason I keep them hidden is so I don't get the news updates. And why is that? I mean they are my friends after all. It is because all they do is show for the places they work for. You get fellow reporters giving you links to the headlines of the stories they just wrote, people in the non-profit world giving you links to the programs that they are pushing at the moment.

There has been this rush lately to social media outlets for advertising purposes. But steady users of this stuff will resent that as a blatant infusion of advert intrusion of advertising and press releases.

If you go to use the social media, you have to use it with personality, otherwise you are going to get ignored or you are going to get hidden by people using Facebook. So what you need to do is have your executive director is someone in a higher echelon position do regular updates that have a little more personality to them. You know, where that person went to lunch, where she just came back from vacation; that kind of thing. What a beautiful day it is in Boulder, Colorado or how crappy it might be in Minneapolis. And then you sprinkle into that the stuff that really matters to you; the teasers about upcoming events, the fundraisers you have going on; that kind of stuff.

That way you keep people sort of interesting in hearing what is going on inside your organization. If you use it strictly as a broadcasting for press releases, you are going to get nowhere with it.

But the same things apply to blogs. The best blogs have personality. Blogs that do little more than publish the party lines at work don't get very wide readership. You need to create a personality for the blog space. Keep it in the hands of one or two people. Let them be the voice and the tone of your organization. Otherwise, it is just going to be ignored in the fountain of press releases. People will turn to it when they want to turn to it when they want to know what is in the press release, but they won't turn to it just for general information.

That is not to say you can't use these tools for broader purposes. The key to using all this stuff is to build a community of followers, the supporters and believers in the cause. And the best way to look at that is to try to view your organization as something like an independent bookstore.

In the best independent bookstores, you get personalities beyond the core mission of selling books. People want to go there because it is a place where like-minded people tend to congregate. And the ones that do best in getting their core business across are the ones that build a sense of community and build up a common purpose.

And I think I will just leave it at that. I know you guys have a lot of questions. We can sit here and blab at you for a long time and not get at the things you really want to know. So I will pass it on to Paul now.

Paul West: Hi everyone. My name is Paul and it is an honor to be here, and I look forward to taking questions later, so I will try to keep this as short as possible.

I am coming at this from a very different place because I have never worked as a professional journalist. But I have worked on the ground on a lot of gnarly PR opportunities around the world.

And I have really kind of specialized in getting big stories out of challenging areas, whether it is Sakhalin Island off the North Coast of Russia or indigenous people in Lau, a so-called democratic republic where they have no freedom of press, no freedom of speech, they are frightened to talk to the press, and you can't get a journalist in.

So I can go on and on about situations that are very difficult, and I think all of us feel that way, even if we are here in a country with easy access to all sorts of media ranging from blogs, to Twitter, to being able to pick up the phone, for many of us, and talk to someone at a major outlet like CNN or the New York Times.

We still have that challenge of getting our story out. And a couple things I would like to put out there as an opener is remember that no one wants to get framed and no one wants to be spun out.

I think a lot of times when we are doing non-profit PR work we hear these terms of like, "Well we have got to frame this or we have got to spin this." And I think those days are long gone, because those techniques, if they were ever techniques, have been so grossly overused that they left people feeling framed and dizzy.

What I have found that really works well is to make a very clear distinction between the frame and the focus. So when I am writing a release, one of the things that I do at the very top is I make sure that there is no spin in it at all. There is no opinion in it, there is no hyperbole, and there are adjectives. You open that release with what the facts are and you let the facts frame the issue.

And then, for a lot of people, they are like, "Well we have really framed this well." But it doesn't really deal with the second part of it, because simply having the right image in frame is no good if it is not in focus.

And where the focus comes in is where your experts or your authorities, and hopefully they are all available spokes people who can turn around and talk to the media after the release is issued. But those people really give it the focus. Those people really bring into clarity what is really going on here that just looking at the fact won't tell you, even if they are framed correctly.

So one of the ways that I always encourage people to structure the release is start with the first paragraph, follow good news writing principles on that, and keep all of the rhetoric out of the opening. Make sure you are top loading it with the details that will make your case later on.

And then as you get down, one of the things that I do is remember there is no such thing as a one page release anymore, because most of the time journalists are requesting that they get releases in an email. They don't want an attachment. They don't want to have to go download a PDF. They want to be able to get it, read it, and make a decision as to whether this is something that they advance to their editors of they are going to report on or not.

So you want to give them all of the information they need to make a good qualified decision as to whether or not this is a good fit and whether or not they should be covering it.

And one of the things I have found to is that largely due to the economy, and also just due to the shifting media landscape, we don't have reporters out, "beating the street" like we used to. Beating the street now consists of having really great connections and being able to work them from your desk.

And so one of the things that you want to do is help a reporter by getting them everything that they are going to need to report on the story. So I recommend having two or three additional sections at the end of what you would consider your normal news release.

One of those sections are supporting statements. Don't have those supporting statements have any limit on length, necessarily, because they are going to be way at the bottom, and if you have gotten them that far, then they are probably still interested in what some of the people that are involved in what you are promoting have to say.

But make sure those supporting statements are from people that will be available to talk to them and are from credible sources. So if you are working in a coalition and you have some scientist on board who can speak to a very particular aspect of something you are working on, whether they are social scientist, or whether they are biologists, or whatever they might be, whatever your case or cause is, let them make the case from their perspective. Let them help bring into focus the facts that you have put at the top of your release.

The second thing is beyond that. After you have some of those supporting statements in line, make sure that those supporting statements in what I call a modular style, so that each sentence knits together into a cohesive paragraph. But if anyone of those sentences was taken out of context and put in any other context, then you and the person who submitted that statement for inclusion in the release would be perfectly happy with it. So if they took the second sentence, the third sentence, the fourth sentence, they could all stand alone, and they come together to make a coherent case.

The next thing I recommend doing is having a section of what I call supporting factoids. This is the stuff that a reporter would have to go and do on their own. This is the stuff that can compress the time between when they get your release, how much time they have to report on it, whether they make deadline or are going to be able to help you break your story.

And those factoids are not necessarily facts that are germane to exactly what you are doing. In other words, they may not be about the particular case you are talking about. But they are the facts that create the larger ecosystem in which your situation exists.

So if you are working on issues, as I have done in the past with global warming, you need to help journalists understand what else is out there, what else they have to draw on, and make sure you cite those sources.

So if you have got new information from satellites reading the surface of the ocean temperature, if you have got new information on how many inner-city school kids are on food programs, these are the kind of factoids that you can include in there if you have got them sourced. You can't just throw facts out as facts unless you are going to take a journalist back to the source.

The final thing that I would do is make sure that email, that original release, has everything that a journalist would need to report. If you are pitching TV, make sure it has got links to videos so that television producers can eyeball them and say, "Yes, we want to ask these people for B roll." If this is a story that needs to carry a photo, make sure they have got links out to all the high-res photos that they would possibly need in order to be reporting on the story, white papers, any other supporting documents, etc. Include that at the bottom with just a list of links out, just a list of reporter resources that they can go to.

I am not going to touch too much on the social media at this point because I think that it has been talked about at this point enough. But I will give you a couple examples of how you can take a very small group with a very small budget and do some very low cost technology that can end up catapulting you into the big leagues in a big way.

Two examples come to mind, one of which I was privileged enough to work with Zan on. We were advocating to save a bunch of electric cars from the crusher. And one of owners of one of the vehicles said, "You know, I really want to keep my car." And I said, "Well what are you willing to do to keep your car?" He says, "Well I am willing to hide it, keep it, put it aside and not let them come get it." I said, "Well I think we might have to do that, but out in the open." And he said, "Well I am due to return this car to Sacramento." I said, "Well why don't we do a thing where you go and sit in front of a dealership and just hold vigil and not leave? And if you stay there a couple of days, I am fairly confident that if you just stay out there and hold vigil, we can keep doing news releases that you are in day one of the vigil, day two of the vigil, day three of the vigil."

All it cost him was driving to Sacramento, pitching a tent in the back of his pickup truck. And then all of a sudden, people started coming from all over. And the coalition of groups and the people who are into advocating for electric vehicles started showing support.

And then the next thing he knew, the local news was coming out to do the weather with him. And then the next thing we knew it was in the LA Times. And then it was in the New York Times, and then Associated Press was picking up on it. By day eight, the auto company was calling going, "Just drive away. Just leave and you can have your truck." And he said, "No. Everybody gets their car, not just me."

And so we held out and it was a really successful thing. We obviously haven't brought EV's back into mainstream production from that automaker, but we raised awareness about the issue. We drove the story into the mainstream newspapers in a way that is still serving us to this day.

Another example is a little group that I work with called Common Vision. Basically, every year for three months we go plant fruit tree orchards at inner-city schools and teach a day long program.

And we thought, “Wow. We are really doing this really great program.” It is very engaging, but we didn’t have a big budget to go and produce the kind of video that we needed to produce to entice television to come down.

So we got some friends together and we put together a video, and we did a lot of news outreach. And the next thing we know, we have got a request from a PBS show that said, “We would like to consider coming out and doing something. Do you have any video footage?”

Well we sent over our video footage and they said, “This is amazing. Can we just use this?” We said sure. So they used that video footage that we had taken. They cut it together into a short enough segment to be a show, and we ended up winning an Emmy award.

So it is totally possible to leapfrog through this hierarchy and end up right at the top if you really just do great grassroots work and focus on the quality of what you are giving out to the media. And really make sure that, again, you are loading it with facts at the top, that your focus is brought from experts who are credible sources, and that you are giving journalists links to everything that they would possibly need to report on your story. And really be of service to them. Really be there to connect them.

Nobody is there to play baseball and hit pitches in a traditional sense. Nobody wants to get framed and spun out in this traditional sense of old school PR. It is much more sophisticated now than it has ever been, which is to our advantage because it means that we have more room for nuance, more room to communicate, and more detail about issues that are incredibly complicated and would otherwise go unreported.

So with that, I will kind of leave it and hopefully take some good questions. Thank you all very much.

Rebecca: Excellent. Well thank you to all three of you for giving your introductions. I am really excited to dive into the Q&A portion of our presentation today.

Our first question is from Carol. Carol would like to know, “Can you give us an example or two of good social media blogs and pages? We often get requests for examples to share of who we base our outreach on.”

So whoever wants to jump in. If you have any good examples of good social media in action, maybe some folks who have brought their own personality through some of those tips that you mentioned.

Paul: I can give one up from Common Vision. When we go on tour every year, the tour is really exciting. If you get a chance to go on it, it is a life changing experience for the volunteers. You spend three months living on three buses; 25 people doing everything out of those buses. And it is very dynamic. It is a new school everyday.

And one of the things was in just sending out press releases…And we did radio, and TV and newspapers all along the way, but it really didn’t give the full experience of what was going on until we integrated social media, digital photography, and spot video as we were traveling along.

And then all of a sudden, over time, we found that people were kind of coming on tour with us, virtually. So that is one way that I have seen it very successfully used.

Scott: I haven’t seen that site, but it sounds like it has all the perfect ingredients. The key to that is that central personality behind it. If the site is very scattered, then you sort of lose people. People want to have a sense of reliability.

Most of the blogs I read are very topic specific. One that jumps out is “The Elegant Variation,” which is run by Mark Sarvas. His is strictly literary fiction, but he does a really good job of maintaining a consistent voice on that. So you go there and you kind of know what kind of outlook you are going to be getting on things.

Rebecca: Excellent. Zan I have a question for you. “During your portion of the presentation you mentioned one of your tips would be to act like a reporter. Can you follow up a little bit on that and maybe give some examples for those folks of us who unfortunately don’t have the same journalism background? What are some key tips for that?”

Zan: In that regard, I meant specifically to act like an interviewer. Sit down and pretend you are writing a profile of your client, which is what I do, because many press releases basically are profile pieces. And dig deep.

Interestingly, I am partnering at the moment with a larger public relations firm for one of my clients, and they excel at all kinds of things. They have tremendous reach, tremendous relationships with reporters; all kinds of resources. But I notice that they don’t’ drill down at times, and I tend to like to.

If I can find, again, a fascinating detail, something out of the ordinary, it does take more time and effort, but it is where the treasures are hidden. And I think that many of the things that both Paul and Scott said are also acting like a reporter; providing the facts, taking an objective stance, not over exaggerating anything. Those are all what I had in mind.

Scott: If I can just chime in. Even though it is in house or you are talking to your client, you have to be very skeptical of what you are hearing, because by the time this information gets out to the media and your executive is talking to the media, the journalist can be very skeptical. “How do you know what you know? Where did this fact come from?” You know, some of the stuff that we have talked about already.

So look at these moments as not only a good way for you to get information for your releases and for formulating your packages to send out, but also to prepare the executive and the program leaders for the kinds of questions they are going to face when the mainstream journalists get a hold of the information. You don't want any surprises and hemming and hawing at the last minute, like, "I don't know where that come from," or, "That is just sort of the way we do things." You need specific answers, and be ready for a wide range of specific questions.

Paul: I am wiggling my fingers big time at that, because when you are inside of an organization, you can easily fall prey to kind of getting caught up in what your message is, and then you get caught out when a journalist hits you with hard questions and you can't immediately back it up.

So you have to be the toughest interview that you are…You have to be like an in-house journalist and give the toughest interview that anyone in your organization will ever have. And if they pass you, they will be fine out in the real world. And if you are not playing that role, then you are essentially setting them up to get socked.

Zan: Yeah, I was thinking to that from the inside, sometimes we get so close to our own subject matter that while I am working on a new account, I love to talk about it to other people who know nothing about it, because they often come up with these questions that I haven't even considered yet, and that clearly need to be answered.

So trying to get an objective view, bringing in someone, even just informally who isn't familiar, can give you that objectivity.

Scott: Yeah. A lot of things that seem obvious to you, especially when you get involved in internal labeling, and shorthand's, and acronyms, just becomes a mass of confusion to people outside. So it really does help to have kind of that vetting. "What is the message we are getting out? What is the information we have and how do we defend it?"

Zan: That is another thing. I have always thought a synonym for journalist is translator, because every organization on this call probably has their own lingo, and inside we all know what we are talking about. But a good journalist has to translate that so that everyone can understand it and see the beauty, the uniqueness, in it.

Rebecca: Thank you all for your responses. Our next question is from Liza. Liza would like to know, "How do public relation styles make the change according to different types of senders," versus, her organization, which is Women Make Movies, "as a film distributor versus as a community group?"

You mentioned tailoring your outreach to the outlet or the types of media that you are reaching out to. But I guess she wants to take it more internally. So how does your own style when you are creating your communication have to change depending on who the sender is, not necessarily just who the recipient is?

Scott: I am not sure it does necessarily. What you are talking about is a process, so what you need to do is you need to distill what your message is, what it is you want out there and who you want to target.

And I could be wrong, but I think that is a fairly standard approach no matter the type of organization and no matter the target.

Zan: I am hope I am not repeating what I said before. But when I pitched my local Santa Monica newspapers, these are freely distributed, I very often write personal messages in the top of my email to the editors or the reporters. And they may be more personal by virtue of the fact that I know these people and I see them.

Whereas I take a more formal approach, say, to the Wall Street Journal. And I think it is kind of the same way. I may take a more folksy approach if I am writing from a community or non-profit standpoint, where I would take a more formal style, I would say, if my subject matter or my vehicle was more for profit, or more commercial in any way, or just…I hope I am making sense with that.

Scott: It is taking more of a business tone.

Zan: Yeah. It is a tone.

Scott: But again, the process stays the same, I think. So it is more a matter of matching your desires and how you get at them.

Paul: I think you will find when you are coming at it as a non-profit, you might have more latitude in who will actually end up covering your piece than when you come at it as a for profit. Because often times, when you are coming at it as a for profit in a very particular sector, there are journalists who are assigned to cover that sector because they have expertise in those arenas and it is really not going to get assigned out.

And in that case, one of the things that I would definitely encourage you to do is know who you are talking to ahead of time, where with a non-profit you might be scattering seed a little bit wider simply because the points of intersection are many with many, many social environmental issues.

When you are coming at it from a purely for profit industry with a very specific product or service, I strongly recommend, more so than normal, that you get to know the journalist, what they have written, and whether it is even appropriate for them. And you could put it in a context of their previous coverage.

Rebecca: Great. This is actually a great segueway to the next question, which comes from Jamie. And Jamie would like to know, “At organizations that don’t have someone dedicated to media, nor the resources to hire a media consultant, how do you determine which outlets are best to contact for stories? How do you determine which reporters to target?”

Paul: That is easy. Subscribe to Green Media Toolshed. If your budget is under $250,000 or $150,000 a year, I think it is less than $100 a year, and it will give you access to one of the world's top three media databases, which includes fairly extensive, what they call, pitching notes as well as contact information. They will even email your news releases out for you through their system. Or you can just use it kind of as a collective Rolodex that is maintained by the community of users. It is a great resource. It is called Green Media Tool shed and you can contact Nina over there. They have special rates just for small non-profits to make it affordable. That would be my recommendation.

Zan: Another technique I use is simply Google Alerts. Put in a few keywords, and whenever anybody writes about that subject matter, you want to be targeted, of course, so you don't have an overloaded inbox. But find out who is writing about it. And that is one great way. It takes some time, of course, but it is easy.

This speaks to the larger issue of becoming a matchmaker. This is also sort of a marketing question. "Where do I want my story to appear and for what reason?" Many of the clients that I work with want two things. They want customers or consumers of whatever product or service they are putting out there. But they also want to raise funds.

So we want our stories to appear in places likely to be read by potential donors. So then, for instance, with this one client who has the detention camp program, the camp is here in town. The organization is here in town. So while I might love to get them, or where I might think that a reporter who writes for the Chicago Tribune really would love this subject and would run with it, that is not likely to get us new clients, new funding. The LA County probation department is really the main funder here. And so we want to target them. We want them reading about this organization. So those are some other tips.

And frankly, one more time it boils down to hard work. I mean studying media. The classic faux pas is the one that Scott described, calling someone at the LA Times and saying, "Who else at the Hollywood Reporter should I talk to?"

So becoming a study of media is just the thing to do. One of my favorite websites is actually called LA Observed, and it is a media gossip, media information blog. Who got fired? Who got hired, etc? So there are websites like that that you can use as well.

Scott: If I can throw it just sort of an asterisk on that. You also, depending on the size of your community, have different options if you are working in a small city or smaller community. You can get sort of a personal contact at the paper.

After a deadline, usually early afternoon, call the paper and see if you can sit down for a cup of coffee with whoever the assigning editor is. Same thing with the local NPR station, local news radio station. It takes a little bit of a time investment. That gets sort of that personal connection going. And it makes it more likely that those people will pay attention to your press releases when they come in.

Zan: Scott did you actually do that with folks? Would people call you up and would you meet them?

Scott: Yeah, I would. They would want to know how to get in the paper. If they were tied to things I was covering, they wanted to know how to get increased coverage. It is a two way street. When you are a beat reporter, you want to know what these different organizations are doing anyway. They want to know how to get onto your radar screen and you want to know how to tunnel inside of them to find out what is going on. So that is just part of the routine.

Rebecca: Zan also alluded again to the anecdote that Scott shared about being professional when you are composing your PR writing and then talking to reporters about it.

We have a question from Kate for Scott that says, “He mentioned professionalism but also using social media like Facebook, Twitter, and blogs in a personal way, being sure to give it a personal touch. How do you make it personal without losing professionalism? It seems like that line might get blurry.”

Scott: Well it is kind of a gut instinct. If you are the leader of a small non-profit and you are doing the Facebook group, you don’t want to have your status update about the date you just had. But you can get personal in terms of, “Met someone from this other organization for lunch.” You can throw that kind of stuff up. So you can keep it professional, but also you kind of individualize.

Rebecca: Since we are still on the social media vein we will just continue with Denise’s question. Denise would like to know, “When using social media, do you have a recommendation of how often you should post or update? Is it different for each site? For instance, Facebook versus Twitter?”

Paul: I think it is driven by what you are posting. You will have imperatives in your own world. And there may be times where there is a lot of activity going on in something. It may be a day where, if you are the type of group that does direct actions, you might have a lot of activity in a one, two, or three day period and then nothing for a little while.

If you are a group that is working on a story that has got longer legs on a longer lead, it might be more of a daily rhythm. But I think that each story really finds its own rhythm, and you let it decide.

Zan: In all of my outreach, from the most traditional to Twitter, I have to be very sensitive about credibility, as Scott mentioned. For one thing, none of us like to be overly inundated. And eventually you will just get pitch fatigue.

I am always careful that doesn’t happen, that I come out to media only with, as Paul said, something that is truly newsworthy or that actually moves the ball down the court so that I don’t wear reporters out.

Scott: Yeah, and it is a little bit different about what Paul is saying, if you have got a lot of activities going on. As the Obama campaign showed, one of the great uses of Facebook is an organizing tool in which you build that community of followers. But like Zan was saying, you don't want to burn them out and you don't want to have them ignore what you are posting just because they are sick of hearing from you.

So you have to make sure that if you are posting a lot that it is very germane stuff. But also, you leaven it a little bit with a little bit of personality. Taking Paul's example, if you have got like six or seven organizing things going on, and you have got six different posts going up on Facebook, throw in a seventh post from the executive saying, "Wow. It is busy around here today. Sorry for the all the updates, but we have a lot of stuff going on. We hope you will follow up with us." Something like that so it feels like a personal connection rather than just a broadcast model press release.

Zan: There is also a wonderful tool which maybe everyone on the call knows about, but I discovered it recently, called Bit.ly, which is a link URL shortener, but it also shows you, on the same page, how many people have clicked on the link wherever you post it, be it Twitter or Facebook. It is one of many measurement tools, but this is free and so easy. And you can just see, "OK. I posted that cool video of this married couple dancing down the aisle, and that got me 12 clicks."

Actually, I have to tell you, because I have tweeted about this panel and it has received some of the most clicks of anything that I have tweeted about.

Paul: And one more not on a best practice use of social media, at least as I have experienced it. And I will give you a real world example. There was a marketing director with a large entertainment organization. She basically said to her higher up, "I am not going to do any traditional news releases. I am not going to put anything out. I am going to give it to six bloggers at midnight." And they said, "You do that and this doesn't work, you are fired."

And basically then, what she taught was you make news in social media sites. You don't parrot press releases. If you are going to put something in to Facebook or Twitter, or you are going to release something into that realm, actually look at somebody and go, "Is there something that we have got that can make news, that can actually begin to reverberate and resonate in such a way that it builds a center of gravity so that if and when, a day later or whenever, we are going to issue a news release giving the big picture, the 30,000 foot view of this issue, there is already a buzz that has been built about it?" And that is a very, very effective way to use it.

In the case that I heard about, she said that by five o'clock the next day…She released it in a couple of social media forums. By five o'clock the next day they were tracking hits in the hundreds of millions.

So stuff can spread very, very fast if you are really breaking news and if you are really giving people something that they haven't heard anywhere else, and you are the only source for it, and they are arguably already interested in the subject matter or the arena you are working in.

Scott: A couple of weeks ago, another former LA Times person and I are the co-founders of something called thejournalismshop.com. It is a co-op of laid off and bought out journalists who are doing freelance journalism report writing and that kind of stuff.

And when we launched it, we sent the first email to Kevin Roderick, the guy behind thelaobserve.com website that Zan talked about. And he threw that up at like 11 o'clock that night. And the next morning a big journalism kind of news gossip site, picked it up. And we hadn't even announced it formally yet. We had a soft launch on the site, tipped off Roderick, and he get it on his blog. The other blog picked it up.

So by the time we set up the press release, 24 hours later this has already pinged around the blogosphere. And also, that next morning all of us who are a part of it, like 2,000 of us, posted links on our Facebook pages. I have got like 550 friends. You get that and multiply it by 2,000 people, that is a lot of initial contacts. And I don't have the numbers at hand, but we got a lot of hits on the website those first couple of days.

None of it cost any money. None of it was traditional. It was just putting a bug in the ear of one blogger, as Paul said, and then sort of fanning the flames by doing Facebook stuff, and it got out there.

Zan: Scott just mentioned a wonderful tool. I call it like, "become a reporter's best friend." And all of that cascade started with tipping off Kevin Roderick. OK. Scott or whoever it was gave him a scoop, and reporters love that more than anything.

What I have done, of course, is create a stable of reporters who cover various topics. And I try whenever I can to send them news that may have absolutely nothing to do with my clients. But if I think it is going to help them, let's face it. I will kiss sup to them. And they love you for life.

Scott: Yeah, that is a good point. The care and feeding of your beat reporter is very important.

Rebecca: We have a question from Donna. I feel like this question will relate to a lot of the folks on the phone who are coming from causes that have privacy issues.

So Donna's question is, "Our non-profit serves low income seniors in a small city in Wisconsin. Our participants have terrific stories, but they don't really want publicity. Sometimes they are just reserved, but they are often ashamed that they are low income, that they needed our help in the first place, etc. And in a small city, even concealing identities is sometimes an issue. How do we handle this?"

Zan: Wow. I will take that one, because the Camp Gonzalez project I am working with, these are all minors. And so I actually had to petition the court here in LA to get permission to take media onto the camp, and then of course we could only use their first names.

So some media is very persnickety about this. They don’t want any anonymity. They don’t want first names. But I find that if you investigate, you will find flexibility in and around that, especially if you explain to the reporter why it has to be a certain way. And of course in a case like the LA County court, they don’t argue with that.

Another thing I try to do, again, is to get creative. “OK. Well maybe if I really cannot profile that senior, is there someone else at the center who has a wonderful story to tell?” The analogy here would be the director of this Camp Gonzalez program. He is not incarcerated. There are no identity issues to worry about with him. But he has a marvelous story and he can tell the story of his organization and all the boys that he has worked with.

Scott: This is to the point of what Zan was saying. It doesn’t have to be somebody in a high role. If none of the seniors in the questioner’s organization wants to talk to the media, maybe there is a volunteer there who is drawn into this organization because they have an elderly parent or something that needs the help.

So you need to know the people in your own organization. This sounds kind of callous, but you also need to figure out how you can use them to the advantage of your organization. The presumption is they are volunteering because they believe in the cause. And sometimes they are an easier sell to get them to sit down with reporters than people who may be embarrassed about receiving the benefits of the organization.

Zan: Right. This also speaks directly to thinking like a reporter. Investigating your own house, “Who could be of interest here?” You know, looking around, opening up the vision.

Rebecca: We have a comment and then a question from Toni. Toni just agreed with part of your presentation Zan, and she says, “We always run down all the questions we think reporters might ask, especially those we hope they don’t. So we are prepared for the worst and then can be presently surprised.” That was her comment.

And then she had a couple of questions. The first one just says, “How much of the story should be included in the press materials we send versus leaving it for the media folks to investigate themselves?”

Paul: It depends on the story. If you have got a story that you know there is going to be a lot of interest in, that you know is going to be a firecracker the minute you get out in public with it, you can give a little bit less because you are probably going to have a lot of interest and you are going to be able to feed out facts in a more systematic way over a time of your choosing.

If, however, you are dealing with very compressed deadlines, you have got to get a lot of information to journalists in time so that they can…You have got to deal with their reality. They are constantly…I call it OPD. You are constantly on Other People's Deadlines. And you have got to be deadline sensitive. And if they don't have time to report and you don't have time to wait for a story to break, then you want to give as much information as you can right up front.

But again, that is also something you have got to use some discernment with and have a good gut feeling on, and look at the larger dynamics in which you are releasing the information to the media.

Rebecca: And then we have another question here that says, "In the past, the idea of pitches was based around sending something short and sweet and then establishing a call with the reporter. Given the changes, rather than press releases, is it OK to send long detailed emails to reporters?"

Scott: As somebody who has received a lot of those, I would shy away from sending a long detailed email exclusively. Sometimes the best thing to do is to almost do like an executive summary. You just hit the highlights in the teaser part of the email and then say, "More details are down below."

Paul: Exactly.

Scott: That way you don't run the risk of swamping the recipient. If am on a deadline and I have got a whole bunch of stuff to read through, I tend not to read through the really dense looking stuff. You have got to be able to find the details quickly.

Paul: Exactly. And that is why it is good to just put all that additional stuff at the bottom, so that if they are interested and want to keep going, they have got what the need. If not, they have got everything right at the top. Everything they need is in the first couple of paragraphs

Scott: Yeah. The first couple of paragraphs is where they are going to make the call on whether they are interested or not, so you have to make that as strong and direct as you can.

Paul: And one final note, too, is that your headline and your subject line are crucial. We haven't touched on that. But that subject line will often determine whether they read the email or not.

Rebecca: Excellent. Do you have any quick tips for those subject lines and headlines?

Paul: Essence. Zan opened with it when she was talking about using Twitter, and it is a great exercise because a headline is a Tweet. We don't think of it that way, but that little subject line is very small and it has got to have the draw that an effective Tweet would have.

Scott: And read it out loud to yourself. If it sounds stupid to your own ears, it is going to sound stupid to the reader.

Zan: And following effective bloggers and social media experts is a way to learn how to do that. The Obama campaign has been outstanding, all politics aside.

Rebecca: We have a question from Shaun. This question is for Paul. She would like to know if you have an example of the facts creating the focus without using rhetoric.

Paul: Absolutely. Lots of them, because it is just how I have done my work for years. Let me just think of the best one I can use here. I was recently doing some work with an organization that was working to stop damn development in Southeast Asia. And most of the people there just don’t have access at all. They don’t have access to the Internet. They don’t have freedom of speech. And a lot of these facts are not known to the rest of the world. Even well heeled, well seasoned reporters don’t know everything all the time.

And when you are bringing stuff like this to the attention of the world, sometimes for the first time, these facts can, just by laying them out the right way as facts and not putting a lot of spin on them and not pushing an agenda right at the opening, these facts can help them enter this world that you are trying to communicate about.

If you just open a release where you are just saying, “This is bad. This is good.” You are making a lot of hyperbolic statements about how bad it is or how good it is, you lose them at the beginning. But if you can get them into your world by saying, “This is the operating environment that these people are living in. They don’t have access. They can’t speak. They don’t have freedom of speech. They can’t go to the media. There is no place to write an op-ed,” you begin to help a journalist understand, “Wait a minute. These people are not playing with one hand tied behind their back. These people are playing at such a disadvantage that I can really see why this story is important now and why it is important that I cover it.”

Rebecca: We had a comment come in from on of our listeners, Elizabeth. Thank you, Elizabeth. She just wanted to share another resource in addition to the one that you folks have already shared called Help a Reporter Out, HARO, as a way to link journalists who are looking for stories from folks who might be good sources. The website for that is helpareporter.com. So thank you Elizabeth for sending that in.

Like I said, it looks like we have hit our one hour mark. I would like to fist thank all of our panelists for being here today. We really appreciate you spending the time answering our questions as well as providing your prepared content.

Scott: Well thank you. It has been a lot of fun.

Paul: Thank you all.

Zan: Thank you.

Rebecca: Thanks so much. And for those of you who sent in questions that we haven't gotten a chance to answer, we will be having another public relations call in a couple of weeks on September 1. This was kind of our PR 101 about PR writing. And then in PR 202 we are going to expand on some of these ideas about actually doing outreach and understanding media pickup.

So for those of you who sent your questions in, we are going to keep those on file for the next time around, which again is on September 1st. Hopefully we can open up registration for that later this week.

So thank you again to our presenters. We really appreciate it. Thank you to everyone who called in. Thank you also to the Surdna Foundation for helping to sponsor today's call for us. That is it for today's Nonprofit 911. I hope we will talk to you all again soon. Thanks so much!