Science Societies

Science and positive media relations: First workshop held in San Antonio

January 27, 2020



Susan Finco, one of the presenters at the Media 101 workshop at the 2019 Annual Meeting in San Antonio, with workshop participants.

We've had many successes in creating accessible information for the public to learn about agronomic, crop, and soil sciences over the last seven years since I joined

ACSESS. But, one gap remains: working with media.

It's not that our weekly web stories and blogs are not picked up by media—they are. The average story gets free placements more than 50 times in various media. Blogs get about 25 pickups. That multiplier effect with our curated news is important.

Several times a month, though, I get calls from media. I get calls when there are floods, droughts, landslides, hurricanes, too much snow, too little snow…you get the picture. Sometimes it's from big media—*Science Magazine*, *New York Times*, NPR, *Huffington Post*. I can't always fill their needs with our member scientists accepting interviews, but I'd like to.

With that in mind, I developed a workshop held in San Antonio to train a core of members in media relations. It was my pleasure to work with a former colleague, Susan Finco, a former news journalist, then anchor, and now owner of her own public relations firm. In addition, she is on the executive committee of the board of the Green Bay Packers, making day-to-day decisions for Wisconsin's home team. Yes, she has Super Bowl rings.

On Sunday, 10 November, 25 members gathered in the convention center and learned how to:

- Understand the news story process across print, radio (podcast), and television (video) news;
- Be able to better prepare for interviews;
- Gain knowledge in interviewing techniques to help get your determined message across; and
- Use techniques for interviews that might not go as planned to build better bridges with media.

They also put themselves in front of a camera and practiced answering basic questions. Some preparation was allowed, but all received that “curveball” question. Just like learning chemistry, you cannot just learn these skills by reading or hearing a lecture. You must practice. And practice they did.

Everyone in attendance felt the workshop fit the objectives. In addition, some were surprised how complicated a journalist's job is and how many people are involved in getting a story to air. It's not always the journalist who creates headlines or even edits a story. So, the onus is on science communicators to create the best, most relatable message.

We'll be offering more communications and media training in regional workshops in 2020. Look for more information in *CSA News* magazine. In addition, catch up on some of the basics by reading the two-part series, “Making It Work When Working with the Media” (view Part I in the December issue at **https://doi.org/10.2134/csa2019.64.1217** and Part 2 in the January issue at **https://doi.org/10.1002/csan.20005**).

Participant Feedback

Here's a few comments from participants:

“I left this year's Media 101 workshop with a ? road map’ on how to navigate interviews with various media outlets, translate scientific

jargon into an understandable language, and field difficult questions. I look forward to next year's workshop.” ***–G. Mac Bean, Soil Health Institute***

“The Media 101 workshop was packed with information I can use to shine a positive light on my research activities. Susan and Susan [the presenters] emphasized the need to convey to both our colleagues and the broader public the value of our work to solve important problems. We need to think in terms of relatable and memorable sound bites to generate enthusiasm. The workshop also focused on preparation for interviews with reporters, which I have never considered before. Thoughtful preparation is likely to lead to a successful interview and a positive

impression by viewers.” ***–Shelley Jansky, University of Wisconsin–Madison, USDA***

*“The tips on preparing for an interview and understanding journalists’ techniques, approaches, and needs is very helpful. The content and discussion will help me better ensure I focus on the basic ‘bottom line’ points of an interview. The Media 101 training was the highlight among many of the meeting for me in San Antonio.” –****Calvin Trostle, Texas A&M***

And for those of you who are more statistics oriented—here are some numbers from our evaluations!

- 92% came away with a better understanding of the needs of journalists when creating a story and appreciated their efforts to set up an interview with an expert.
- 94% had a better understanding of what media is looking for from an “expert interview.”

- 98% indicated that the workshop gave them a better understanding of the news story process across print, radio, and television.

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