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How to Talk to the News Media

Every year, the local media in your communities may come knocking for a story about fireworks. Here are some pointers that we hope will help make the interview a little easier, keep 'em coming back year-after-year and bring free publicity for your stores.

When you enter the world of the media, you can end up in treacherous territory if you don't know a few of the rules. The stakes can be high, but with success you can get some easy publicity, enhanced reputation and even improved sales.

Nothing can guarantee success with the media. However, if you put into practice some of these ideas, you'll definitely improve the odds and play the media's game to your advantage.

HOW TO HELP THE REPORTER

Most reporters are simply trying to do a positive seasonal story about fireworks, and it's not going to be a 60 Minutes "gotcha" style interview. (if you get one of those calls, please let us know so we can help you!) Anything you can do to make a reporter's story better and their job easier, helps you build an ongoing relationship and keeps them returning to you as a trusted resource on fireworks.

Even though reporters won't give you a list of questions in advance, they will give you a general idea of what the story topic is and are typically open to suggestions if you have a newsy (non-promotional) story angle.

When a reporter calls:

1. Find out what they want. If it is a phone interview for the newspaper, ask about the story topic and when their deadline is so that you can call them back after you've gathered your thoughts, done some research and written a few notes. Never jump into an interview with a journalist without taking some time to think about your responses.
2. For TV, you may only have a few hours or a day or two before the interview. Find out the topic and offer your location so that it can be a positive segment.
3. Immediacy is important for all news outlets. You will never get a call from a journalist for an interview that's scheduled a week in advance. These interviews that feel last minute to many of us and during our busiest time of the year, have to be answered promptly and politely if we want to build a relationship with the media.
4. For newspaper, invite them to send a photographer to your location so that they include a photo with the story.
5. You will not get an opportunity to review or edit the story before it is published in the paper or airs on TV.

INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

A TV reporter may videotape a conversation with you but use only a small part of it on the air. That “soundbite” (a 10 – 12 second piece edited from the longer interview) is considered your best, most concise part of your interview. It’s worth thinking about what this messaging might be!

Reporters don’t usually need a lot of in-depth details. Don’t worry about getting into complicated issues and information. Try to think about the 3 most important things you want to get across on any story angle.

TV stories require interesting video and will often determine whether or not a story gets covered by television journalists. In their view, the better the pictures, the better the story. Are you doing a demo night? Do you have a unique display or something interesting at your store or an employee story? If so, explain that to local TV illustrating what the visuals would be.

Anticipate the questions and answers! Once you’ve spoken with the reporter and know the story topic, it’s easy to guess at a few of the questions that might be asked: What are some safety tips you can offer consumers this year? Are fireworks safe? What are some of your best and safest fireworks? We recommend you write key positive messages, find supporting examples and practice your responses.

POSSIBLE STORY TOPICS

Know your facts – Talk about the laws in your area and be up-to-speed on sale dates.

Safety – Offer a list of top safety tips for users. Explain that fireworks have improved over the years and are manufactured differently/more safely today, but it is still important to remember a few key things when enjoying fireworks. Ideas include: use a hard/flat surface area, secure larger fireworks with cement blocks or other securing, know your surroundings and local laws, have a garden hose nearby, keep away from dry brush and grasses, light one at a time and dispose of correctly.

Specific fireworks – set up a display of your top selling/most popular, your best buy under \$25, or your longtime favorites.

PR FIRM ON HAND

We are happy for you to call our PR consultant, Megan Neher PR, if you have questions surrounding an upcoming interview or need assistance with messaging. We also will write and distribute general interview messaging for possible media interviews. These news interviews don’t happen by accident. We would encourage you to reach out to your local TV stations, newspapers and radio stations and offer to be an expert resource on all things fireworks. A simple email or phone call to the newsroom is the best way to start!