

# MEDIA PESTICIDE COVERAGE

by Kevin M. Cooney and Steven J. Day

Contemporary industry wisdom holds that aside from involvement in civic projects that may earn a mention of your firm in the community section of the local newspaper, arborists and their colleagues in the urban pesticide-use industry should keep their companies off the evening newscast and out of the daily papers.

While industry organizations talk up the development of "pro-active" media programs, industry professionals remain generally scornful and fearful of press coverage on environmental issues, particularly pesticides.

Why avoid the press? The Sierra Club doesn't, nor does the anti-chemical bureaucrat at City Hall, the Statehouse or in Washington. They believe in their anti-chemical message and are eager to talk with the press to get their message out. Why not arborists? The pesticide industry makes risk/benefit decisions every day on behalf of its customers. While the risks of communicating with the media are considerable, the benefits include *improving your firm's reputation, balancing the information on chemical risk your customers receive through the media, and perhaps most importantly, helping to shape the debate on legislative issues which will affect your business in the future.*

In short, you can actually benefit from pesticide controversies if you play your cards right. Once you understand how news reporters work, effective media communications is a relatively simple task and can even be fulfilling. A little education on how the media operate, with a little planning and effort will yield significant results in your community.

Although you cannot control what ultimately appears on the TV screen or the newspaper page, talking with the press will increase the odds that your side of the story—which is a story of progress, increased sensitivity to environmental considerations and safe, effective service—will be reported more accurately and prominently in the local media.

The basic rules of successful media relations involve being accessible to the press, providing clear, concise and definite answers to their ques-

tions and avoiding the temptation to criticize the messenger for reporting the often negative events surrounding pesticide issues.

## Rule One: Be Accessible to the Press

A local TV station called a tree and lawn care company one day, and left a message requesting an interview with someone knowledgeable about pesticide safety practices for the homeowner. Upon returning the call, the manager of this firm learned that of several companies in the city contacted for an interview, all had either refused outright or did not return calls.

By the time this reporter finally reached someone who was willing to be interviewed for this basic, non-controversial story (always follow label directions, application techniques, safety attire, etc.) he was frustrated and openly suspicious of why so many pesticide users refused to discuss the safety aspects of their work publicly. Luckily for the local industry, this particular reporter did not share suspicion aloud with his TV audience.

Instead, the arborist who decided to spare some of his time was rewarded with an interview in front of his business where both the company name and general location could be seen by viewers. For a week after the newscast in which he was interviewed, this arborist's customers commented on how impressed they were that his company was interviewed for such an important story as keeping people and pets safe from "poisons".

The reporter didn't forget, either. When similar news stories surfaced the same arborist was contacted again for more information on the topics. The arborist's customers again mentioned their pleasure at knowing they were doing business with an "authority".

In the above example, this businessman reacted properly to the rare instance when a reporter contacted him at random. This happens infrequently, and the professional pesticide user who wants to influence the content and accuracy of media coverage of pesticide controversies had better not count on having the phone ring whenever a

story related to pesticides comes up. In addition to their own newsgathering sources, reporters rely on a network of individuals with a proven history of actively supplying accurate, timely information without waiting for the press to seek them out.

In other words, reporters won't keep your phone number in their rolodex unless you put their name in your phone files. Check the paper and TV broadcasts to see who is responsible for covering environmental issues in your community. Start developing your relationship by following up on a current local story that you can contribute to. If the local paper is covering hazardous waste disposal, for example, copy some of the information on this topic from your files and send it to the reporter, ASAP. Unless your information is strongly biased, the average journalist will gladly accept your offer of assistance.

A word of caution here—as long as the press regards you as an “honest broker” of reliable information, they'll be happy to talk with you. But at the first sign you're trying to manipulate their coverage, or even worse, that you're hiding some information pertinent to their work, the damage will be far more extensive than just the reporter's opinion of you as a single source. Reporters are people too, and just as a few politicians' clumsy attempts to control information has resulted in the press' general distrust and scorn for elected officials, any attempts to limit or distort pertinent information—even that which reflects poorly on an industry concern—will hurt the communication efforts for the entire industry, at least in your area of operation.

Once your local environmental reporter has satisfied himself that you can be counted on to provide accurate information consistently, he'll seek you out before the story is published or broadcast.

### **Rule Two: Provide Short, Definitive Answers**

News reporters don't have the time or expertise to do more than develop a basic understanding of many of the subjects they cover. They're too busy covering too many events to thoroughly analyze the issues underlying, for example, the latest EPA announcement that just came over the newswire.

Unless you live in one of the 10 largest cities in America, chances are the reporters you will deal

with are recent college grads with little or no academic background in technical reporting.

While pesticide issues are complex and sometimes confusing (even to industry experts) it is frequently overwhelming to the general press reporter. Therefore, your communication efforts will, at first, have to concentrate on basic information on the topics of pesticide testing and registration, pesticides as a key element in IPM programs, and exploring the “cancer-epidemic” myth promoted by the environmental lobby.

The key word here is *basic*. Unless your presentation on these matters is simple and brief, the reporter's eyes will glaze over. If you're quoted at all, chances are the quote will be out of context, if not mangled altogether.

Reporters will make understanding a complex technical issue easier for themselves and their audiences through personalizing the topic. By asking whether you would let your kids play in a yard just sprayed with diazinon, for example, the reporter answers the question uppermost in the minds of his audience. Data from LD-50 studies and mutagenicity reports may contain pertinent information, but it can't compete with a one-sentence quote that allays the fears of the uninformed person down the street.

Personalizing the issue of pesticide hazards in news reports does result in a dramatic, but incomplete examination of the subject. While the press may rely on this interviewing technique too often, it serves the immediate needs of the journalist and his audience.

Like it or not, anticipate personalized questions whenever you discuss pesticide issues with the press. Develop keen, short answers that you can live with, even though they are a relatively poor mechanism for getting your point across. Remember, on controversial topics reporters and editors will opt for strong, concise statements to illustrate both sides of an issue. Make your point in a series of simple, clear, direct statements—or little of the information you supply will be used.

### **Rule Three: Don't Slay the Messenger for the Message**

When was the last time you were dissatisfied with the coverage of the news event, whether it was the Yellowstone forest fire or last week's

presidential news conference? You are not alone.

Competent reporters today have to be extremely thick-skinned to endure the criticism of their work. Much of the criticism is justified, but just as in business, identifying a problem without offering solutions merely wastes energy without fixing anything.

In your dealings with the press, resist the temptation to criticize their past mistakes. It can't be undone, the reporter's had it up to here with Monday-morning quarterbacks, and it can only damage your opportunity to develop a rapport with the media.

When you review the work of the reporters you will be talking to, keep an eye out for the "blind spots" in their coverage, those aspects of the pesticide story which, in your opinion, should be included in the issue you will discuss. When the interview begins, provide the information which you feel is missing from the news coverage, but without challenging the reporter's integrity or competence. Once you've dealt with a reporter on

several occasions, you can draw an informed conclusion about his abilities and biases. In the meantime, the more often you talk to various media representatives, the more likely your views will become part of the debate in your community.

Effective media relations requires patience, a willingness to discuss their negative "facts" in the pesticide debate, and the ability to endure imperfect reporting graciously. Yes, talking to the press is somewhat risky. But unless you try to tell your side of the story, your customers, neighbors and political leaders won't have all the facts they need to make rational decisions necessary to ensure safe, effective landscape management into the 21st century.

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## Abstract

SYDNOR, T.D., G. WATSON and A KELLY. 1988. **Interim-transplanted blue spruce show improved branch, root development.** *The Landscape Contractor* 29(7): 14-15.

Interim transplanting is a management procedure used for the production of ball and burlap stock. Trees are transplanted by individual balling in the nursery as a method of root pruning three to five years prior to the time they are harvested for market. Interim transplanted trees also demonstrate post-marketing survival rates markedly superior to those of trees produced by conventional nursery practices. Mean branch length was 68 percent greater for interim transplant trees than conventionally grown trees. Analysis of the roots contained in the root balls indicates that there is a fourfold increase in fine roots in the interim transplant root ball over a tree of similar size grown by conventional methods and harvested with the same size root ball. These observations indicate that the interim transplant stock surpasses conventionally grown nursery trees in every characteristic measured.