

# Media Tips for Cheapskates

## Writing the Persuasive Letter to the Editor

by Kristin  
Merriman

**Y**ou're not even finished reading the morning paper and already you're seeing red. How could that front-page article be so biased? How could that reporter use old statistics, leave out the bicyclist's viewpoint, or misinterpret information?

You want action, revenge even. You want to pound something — how about pounding out a letter to the editor? After all, the letters page is the top-read section of most newspapers. Turn on your computer or typewriter (gently, please) and get out all your sputterings about the approximate IQ level and questionable parentage of the reporter, interviewee, etc. Feel better? Okay, now look at what you've written — toss half of it, maybe more, and instead rewrite the remainder into a persuasive letter to the editor that shuns the hysterical and leads readers down a short, logical path to the "truth."

Here are some tips to help your letter stand out from the rest of the rantings that fill an editor's in-box each morning:

First, what's the point? Forget the arm-waving, "this-person-doesn't-know-bicyclists-from-balloonists" response. Editors won't print potentially libelous letters because they hate lawyers more than their worst enemies. Editors also will think you need to switch to de-caf and a white jacket with the arms in the back. Appear calm, knowledgeable and reasonable — at least on paper.

Second, get to the point. Your letter should be short, between 250 and 500 words, so focus on the primary points of disagreement, preferably no more than two or three. Look on the bottom of the letters page since many run a recommended count in their "we-retain-the-right-to-edit-letters" blurb, then keep your main arguments high in the letter to avoid cut-from-the-bottom editing.

Third, keep to the point. Create an outline for your letter that makes the best use of your three to four paragraphs.

In the first paragraph, reference the article in question briefly but don't waste valuable space repeating everything already published. Be clear from the beginning where you stand on an issue or what viewpoint you're supplying. ["As a businessman who bikes to work regularly, I am disappointed Joe Reporter's article (Metro Section, page 2, February 2) failed to mention walking or bicycling in its summary of possible solutions to our city's commuting problems."]

Cite sources (reports, surveys, etc.) that support your stand and show you know the subject.

["Although 1990 Fairfax County census data show only 5 percent of the working population walks or bikes to work, that number could greatly increase if sidewalks, bike parking and other facilities were improved and promoted."] Keep in mind that readers may view you as a spokesperson for bicyclists or pedestrians so avoid transportation jargon, offensive language, or stereotyping. Be positive and solution-oriented, when possible. ["Promoting these modes of transportation would help reduce air pollution, diminish traffic congestion and reduce our society's expensive dependence on cars."]

Be concise, specific and straightforward. Use strong, action-oriented verbs, the real soul of persuasive writing. Avoid weak and vague subject-verb phrases such as "there are" and "this is."

Fourth, finish strong. Like your first paragraph, your last sentence leaves the reader with a final impression. Again, focus on your message, not the article or reporter. Refer readers to your group for more information, if appropriate. Leave them believing you aren't the kind of "radical" who lines her kitty litter box with car ads.

Fifth, make your point today — *now*. Timeliness is a key factor in an editor's decision to run a letter. Send the letter within 48 hours of the article's publication or forget it. Even better is to call the paper to ask if it accepts faxed letters and to obtain a specific name for the cover sheet; many papers accept such submissions and even prefer them to snail-mail. Although you may think E-mail is even more efficient, recent surveys found that surprisingly few editors have computers linked to the Internet or other online services. Faxing or hard-copy mail is still the way to go.

Call to confirm the letter arrived at the right desk but don't be a pest or ask for a decision on the spot. Make sure your name, phone number (work and home) and address are clearly readable at the bottom of the letter. Include your title and organization if appropriate and approved by the necessary people.

Finally, make a point of writing that letter to the editor. It doesn't take long, and letters are a great way to attract free media coverage, reach thousands of people in a mainstream fashion, demonstrate that you and your group are active, attract members, raise money, participate in public debate, influence the political arena, and promote world peace. Okay, maybe the latter is a stretch, but everyone's allowed to pound away a bit, right?

### Letter Laws

- Be rational
- Get to the point
- Keep it short
- Finish strong
- Write today

## Media Checklist

Here are some ways to reach out to the media and make them a part of your team:

- **Develop a Media List**  
Research thoroughly and create a media up-to-date list of the appropriate contact person for local and regional newspapers, television and radio outlets. (A sample media list is available in Appendix 4B.)
- **Meet with Reporters**  
Talk to reporters, send them your newsletter, find out their deadlines. Take every opportunity to meet and involve reporters so that you become a reliable source of information. Get out on your trail and invite reporters along for a tour. The better rapport that you have, the easier it is to pitch stories, organize news conferences and garner positive coverage. Remember that you want them to share your vision for your trail.
- **Schedule Editorial Board Meetings**  
Schedule an informal meeting with the Ed-boards of your local papers. These men and women decide what *is* and *is not* news. Focus your discussions on the *local angle*. Often overlooked, we want this group on our side.
- **Issue Press Releases**  
These one page (two at the most) documents should be short, concise and include the 5W's (Who, What, Where, When and Why). Each release must have the date, contact name and telephone number clearly visible. *The release must include sponsor recognition. (Examples of actual Millennium Trails press releases are in Appendix 4A; a sample Millennium Legacy Trail celebration press release can be found in Appendix 4B.)*
- **Create Talking Points**  
These concise, important and interesting statements can be effective in preparing for an interview. These sound bites are of particular value for TV news since those stories are short. Keeps everyone "on message." (*For Millennium Trails initiative talking points, please see section 1, page 3.*)
- **Begin a Letter Writing Campaign**  
Studies show that more people read the Letters-to-the-Editor page than any other section in the daily paper. Find some key supporters who would be willing to write concise letters in support of your trail. (*For effective letter writing tips, see Appendix 4D*)
- **Take Good Pictures**  
Keep in mind that local press is more likely to report on an event if they have easy access to photographs. Sometimes, a single photograph is enough to attract media attention and public interest. Save all your press clippings and use them to promote your work in the future!
- **Be Honest**  
If you do not know the answer, say so, but also commit to finding the correct answer. Be sure you get the questioner's name and telephone number so you can get back to them shortly with the answer.

## Working with the Media

### Introduction

A 1995 review of more than 3,000 newspaper articles related to rails to trails revealed that we would have been better off if two-thirds of them had never been published. Despite the overwhelming benefits of trails that we constantly preach, the majority of press coverage was negative. Bad press translates into a bolder and stronger opposition movement, hesitant local officials and a lack of good information on what benefits a proposed trail might bring to a community.

### Developing a Media Strategy

From the very start of a trail project, positive media coverage is essential. Good stories, however, don't happen by accident. A media strategy can identify a range of actions and opportunities that will significantly increase the likelihood of positive coverage and might include:

- researching your local media
- developing a rapport with reporters
- getting beyond the front page
- using every medium available
- posing positive press pictures

Good media can really help build momentum for your project and shouldn't be allowed to happen by chance. We have a great story to tell.

### Writing the Right Release

The basic tool of the media is still the news release or advisory. We'll briefly address the best way to write and use a news release and other tools of the trade.



# Giving the Knock-out Media Interview

by Kristin Merriman

**W**hether you are a bicycle coordinator, a statewide advocate, or a candidate for city council, the chances are good that someday you will be contacted to deliver a knock-out interview on TV or radio. The opportunity to deliver a crucial safety message, invite people to join your group, or promote Bike to Work Day is one you can't afford to miss because of a bad hair day.

The following simple techniques can help you look good on TV, be the person quoted in next day's newspaper and, most importantly, get your message across successfully.

**Have a single message.** This is the *number one* piece of advice I can give. Deliver your message at least three times if possible. Keep framing your answers to further that message. If you stammer or go blank in the middle of a sentence, start over; radio and print media will simply edit that out. Television probably will, too, but it's not assured.

**Know your stuff.** Make sure you have the latest facts and figures on bicycle use, ISTEA projects or other interview topics. Glance through your information an hour prior to the interview, so the language, phrasing and information is fresh in your mind.

**Practice, practice, practice.** Have family members or friends throw some practice questions at you so you can learn to respond coherently, concisely and quickly. This sounds silly, but it can be a huge help. The most obvious ones to practice? "What does your organization do?" "How can someone get involved in your organization?" "Is bicycling really a serious option for people?"

**Don't be afraid to provide a list of suggested questions to interviewers,** especially those in radio and TV. Reporters are often more than happy to have your help since you, not they, are the "experts." The trick here is to know what is "news" and to have a few local examples at hand. You greatly increase your chance of controlling the interview questions if a local angle is involved.

**Don't forget to plug your organization.** Be sure to refer to your group or agency by its full name, not an acronym. ("At the Bicycle Federation of America, we have an Action Kit that will help people learn what they can do to make their neighborhoods more bicycle-friendly.") Provide the reporter with the correct spelling of your name, title and organization. Know the address and phone number of your organization **BY HEART** and be prepared to give the exact amount a report, brochure or membership costs if a viewer or listener has to buy it.

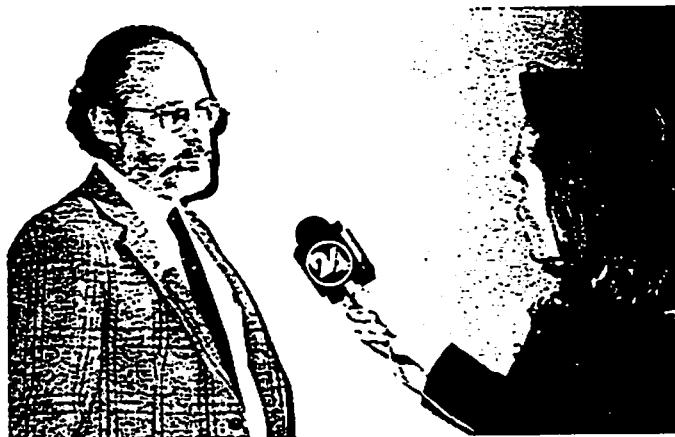
**Project a good image.** Image is everything on TV, and wearing an inappropriate shirt or makeup can quickly distract from your message.

**WOMEN:** Wear a colored suit or simple dress. Do not wear bright red the camera has a hard time focusing on it. Yellow also is not an attractive color for many people on TV; I'm told it breeds hostility. My personal favorites: navy,

silver or dark gray, cream. Black will wash you out unless you have strong features and black hair. Blouses and dresses that go all the way to the neck or near the neck are the most flattering. Avoid ruffles and lace — they are too sweetsy for a professional image on TV!

Keep clothes simple and professional. *Do not wear a short skirt* for obvious reasons. Match your nylons to your shoes, not your skirt. Keep jewelry fairly large. No dangle earrings or distracting hoops. Try not to wear anything sparkly. A nice pin on your blouse or suit lapel is always good. Do wear earrings, even if you have to buy clips. Pearls look especially good on TV.

**MEN:** A suit or sports jacket, nice pants and a simple tie look good. Navy and gray are good colors for men. About those ties — forget polka dots. A conservative tie with fairly wide stripes or a not-too-wild paisley or diamond-shaped design is best. Clothes should not be black, yellow or green (unless you want



Dave Bachman, Pennsylvania's state coordinator, looking good in the spotlight at a public meeting. This can happen at any public meeting or function — so try to be prepared.

Jim Blackburn, Bell Sports and the Bicycle Industry Organization, delivers an industry reaction to the launch of the National Bicycling and Walking Study, April 1994. In this instance, wearing bicycling "stuff" is OK. For a studio appearance, this wouldn't be appropriate.



your skin to look yellow).

Match socks to your shoes, not pants. Wear a clean shirt that is light gray or ivory but not a yellowy cream. Don't choose pure white, either — it's too bright.

**FOR WOMEN AND MEN:** Hairstyles should be neat, simple and preferably off the face. *Do not* spray your hair after you have put on makeup and powder — a sheen will show up on your skin. Consider how your hair looks from the side. Makeup for women *and* men should also be kept simple. Women will need to go with a deeper blush, a bit more mascara, a non-frosted lipstick and foundation all the way up to the eyes. Powder is an absolute must for both women and men. Believe me, you will regret it otherwise — studio lights are very hot, and you will be a bit nervous.

**Speak clearly.** Drop the “ums,” “ya knows” and “wells.” Don't talk too fast or for too long. Take a few seconds to think before you speak. Take a few deep breaths to relax a few moments before the camera is on.

**Keep eye contact with the interviewer or fellow guests.** A person is usually comfortable looking into the eyes of another person for three seconds; just move your eyes around his or her face — to earrings, forehead, any place above the nose. This helps keep your own head up and prevents shadows under the chin that add weight to your face. Strong eye contact also relays the message of confidence and knowledge.

## More Media Tips

**1. Appoint a media coordinator for your group.** This will help ensure you deliver a consistent message and develop a relationship with the local media. Having a single point of contact is helpful to the media. Make sure your coordinator is usually available during the day, evenings and weekends.

**2. Get trained.** At a minimum, ask a local news reporter (any media) to speak at one of your meetings. For real media hounds, media training workshops — try a local PR firm, University or your DOT public affairs office — will pay immediate dividends in your delivery and appearance.

**3. After reading this article,** watch the evening news with a critical eye. See who looks good and who doesn't. Switch between the network anchors and compare appearances — you should see a formula they each follow!

If you normally wear glasses, wear them. Just remember to push them up on your nose to avoid shadows under your eyes. If you find you are spending a lot of time on TV, consider non-reflective lenses. They eliminate the distracting glare of lights against glass and highlight your eyes — your most important means of expression.

**Watch your body language.** Don't be afraid to use hand and arm motions, just don't point a finger in the interviewer's face. Women should sit with legs crossed, preferably at the ankles. Sit on the bottom of your jacket to keep a clean line along your shoulders (this applies to men and women).

Look at whoever is speaking to you. Try not to yawn, look bored or show anger. Squinting eyes is the most obvious sign of the latter. Try to stay relaxed and nod slightly once in a while to demonstrate you are listening. Do not fuss with your hair or clothes, except when you first sit down and get adjusted.

Usually, the host or reporter will tell you if something is obviously amiss but feel free to ask them questions about how the cameras are set up, the frequency of breaks, etc.

**Give anecdotes if possible.** Everybody likes a story — they are excellent ways to make a point — but don't ramble.

**Smile!** You are providing a terrific service to people who really want to make a difference in their communities! 

*Kristin Merriman is editor of Fisheries, the monthly membership magazine of the American Fisheries Society. She has provided media training and services to the BFA and the staff and members of national associations in the Washington area. Merriman authored Using the Media to Achieve Your Goals in the Pro Bike/Pro Walk 94 Resource Book.*

# Using the Media to Promote Bicycling and Walking

By Kristin Merriman

**B**icycling and walking already are covered by the media. The metro sections of newspapers detail how a child cyclist was killed when she "darted into the street." The crime page lists blurbs about stolen bikes and assaulted pedestrians. Sports writers report on stages of the Tour de France, and the health section lauds bicycling and walking as a healthful exercise for dieters.

But where are all the stories about bicycles as transportation, the stories that go beyond your basic Bike to Work Day? They're articles waiting to happen, and you can ensure they do simply by knowing what reporters are looking for when they need to fill a newspaper hole with 700 words about *something*.

To bicyclists and pedestrians, news coverage can lead to many benefits:

- increased community support for walking and cycling;
- better understanding about their importance as transportation;
- more respect on the road; and even
- the ability to pressure public officials and policy-makers to take action on bicycle and pedestrian issues.

Working with the media is not nearly as intimidating as people think. Reporters and broadcasters are simply people doing their jobs — educating the public about current events and issues. Bicycle transport and pedestrian concerns encompass many of the elements that make activities and information "news-worthy:" timeliness, a local angle, a problem and a response.

Many millions of people already are walking and bicycling to work in the U.S. so the activity is current and ongoing. The involvement of local people provides the "community" angle for a story, and the problem of getting people from A to B in an efficient, environmentally sound and economically feasible manner in an increasingly urban environment remains a hot issue.

You are offering solutions, i.e. "the good news." With the knowledge that

bicycle and pedestrian commuting is indeed newsworthy, you are ready to make the next move: creating a media campaign. Don't sigh and start complaining about the expense and hassle; good media opportunities await even the cheapest of cheapskates.

## How to Begin

Make a complete list of local newspapers and magazines (dailies, weeklies and monthlies), as well as TV and radio stations. The aim is to make "contacts" — editorial page writers, local news broadcasters, journalists who regularly cover the transportation, environment, business or community beats. Your local library has two reference books that make this job easy: the latest issues of *Editor and Publisher Yearbook* and *Broadcasting Yearbook*. Both list, by state, all the media outlets and their addresses, phone numbers and often even the beat reporters' names.

Don't forget to add any publications distributed by state transportation agen-

cies and commissions; look in the blue government section of the phone book for these numbers. Also list any wire service correspondents (such as Associated Press or Reuters) from state or regional organizations. Double-check your list with the Yellow Pages.

Develop regular contact with journalists. If you are with a group or organization, appoint a member to act as a media liaison. Invite the media to your meetings or events. Reporters are more likely to call people they know and trust for information. Offer yourself as a "source" for facts or comments about bicycling and transport issues, but research your facts and message first. If you see a newspaper running a number of stories about urban air pollution, for example, call the reporter and discuss the role bicycles might play in alleviating this problem. The writer may be working on another story at the time or, impressed with your knowledge, decide to write one specifically about bicycling and walking.

## Writing the Right Press Release

To publicize the many story angles surrounding bicycle and pedestrian commuting, consider distributing a steady stream of press releases. The average newspaper receives more than 200 press releases per day so your goal is to communicate all the necessary information clearly and concisely. Keep your message short and straightforward. Rarely should a release be longer than one page. If you want to include background information, attach a "fact sheet," but key information should remain on the front page.

Type double-spaced, leaving wide margins. Include the date of release and the names and day/night phone numbers for at least two contacts. Write a brief, catchy headline that summarizes your release; center and underline it.

In the first — and most important — paragraph, cover what is happening, who is doing it, and if needed, when and where it is being held. Example: "An informal survey found that the five largest local companies could save more than \$200,000 a year if they reduced car

parking subsidies and provided better bicycling and mass transit opportunities, according to Iam Peddlin of the Hutchinson Highwheelers."

Gosh 200 grand? In these recessionary times of company cutbacks and downsizing, any potential big-number savings are bound to get some ink and airtime. Reel reporters in with your second and third paragraphs — the second being an explanation and expansion of the first (who was surveyed, a breakdown of the figures, etc.) and the third being a supporting quote by Iam Peddlin saying something like, "While these corporate figures sound high, they are a fraction of amount that could be saved by individuals currently commuting less than 5 miles each way by car."

Show the release is done by typing "end" or -30- or ### at the bottom. If part of an organization, include a one-sentence description of what you stand for so reporters know where you're coming from.

For more tips on working with the media and writing press releases, contact Andy Clarke at the Bicycle Federation of America.

**Know and respect deadlines.** Every type of publication or broadcast has a series of deadlines and depends on its reporters to relay information clearly, accurately and concisely within a limited timeframe. Call to find out the deadline schedule.

**Do your homework.** Good research and interesting quotes carry a lot of weight in the newsgathering process. Find the facts and "hook" necessary to snag a journalist's interest. How much could the five largest local companies save if they cut parking subsidies and encouraged cycling? Make a few calls to the companies for some preliminary figures, and let a business reporter know your results. Outline details such as why bicycle transport is well-established in Europe, or how much the average bicycle commuter spends a year compared to a motorist.

**Cite the problem and offer solutions.** Specific examples add depth, color and purpose to a story. Anecdotes also are helpful if they make a clear point. Taking the journalist to a safe, well-designed, pedestrian friendly intersection and then to a dangerous, ill-conceived one creates a foundation for comparison on which the reporter can build. Point out helpful details, such as how to recognize good and poor qualities in design, and describe what local citizens can do. Offer the names of other knowledgeable people the reporter can call.

**Establish a \$100 budget for the year.** For the cost of a dinner for four at a nice restaurant, you can get a year's worth of media, primarily in the newspaper and radio arenas. Count all the daily and weekly newspapers in your area, based on your list above. The average medium-size city has one to two major dailies and between six and 15 weeklies. For argument's sake, let's guesstimate the total at 10. Put the cost of stationery (white bond paper is fine), an envelope and Xeroxing one sheet at 15 cents total, then add 29 cents postage on each for a total of 44 cents. Thus, your total cost to mail a press release to 10 newspapers is \$4.40 — not bad, eh?

Now multiply that by four, the minimum number of mailings you should consider sending each year to establish continuity. Total cost is \$17.60. This is assuming the follow-up calls you make

## Coordinators and the Media

A 1990 survey revealed that 60 percent of bicycle program staff (71 of 118 replies) deal with the media as part of their work. Of the full-time bicycle coordinators surveyed, 35 of 39 deal regularly with the media — a higher response rate than another activity, including policy development, facility design and program administration.

The survey commentary said, "Not only are full-time bicycle program staff likely to generate "bicycle stories" for the media, but the media obviously has a much clearer point of contact for bicycle-related issues.

"The replies also suggest that bicycling is a popular topic for media attention at this time, and that bicycle professionals need specific training in dealing with the media."

Source: *Bicycle Program Specialist Survey*, Bicycle Federation of America, Sept. 1990. (\$5)

"to make sure the reporter received the release" are local.

Next, turn to radio, one of the most underrated methods for getting out your message. For transportation issues, your best radio formats are news, talk and stations with more than 10 hours of news per week. Call each station and ask whether their news staff does its own local coverage or reads rewritten wire service material. Also inquire about talk shows and public affairs and call-in programs — your chances are excellent for getting on them as a guest, as long as you're not in a hurry. Cost? Nothing but time, since the phone calls are usually local.

Cost for sending them press releases (which you should): an estimated \$26.40 [15 stations X \$1.76 (cost of 44 cent-release X 4 mailings) = \$26.40].

Producing 30-second public service announcements can be expensive for television but not for radio. Consider doing a mailing twice a year of "consumer tips" related to bicycling and walking. Two or three 10-second, 20-second and/or 30-second "spots" may be read by the radio personality as a service to their listeners. Be sure to include where folks can obtain more informa-

tion about bicycling and walking, and have a friend time you as you read a draft aloud. Cost for a cover letter (5 cents) asking them to run the spots, two pages of copy (10 cents), Xeroxing expenses (15 cents) and postage (29 cents) is 59 cents per package. Multiply that by 15 stations for \$8.85 total.

Your total if you do all of the above is \$52.85, leaving plenty of room for mailing costs to television stations, wire services, etc. Remember: the biggest cost of any media campaign is the value you place on your time, not the actual dollars spent. 

*A reporter and editor for more than 10 years, Kristin Merriman is director of media relations for the Izaak Walton League of America.*

## Bells and Whistles

Bicycling offers something quite unique and valuable to the media good pictures and great sounds.

- Always take a bicycle bell with you when doing a radio or TV interview.
- Publish or provide maps showing potential routes and important bicycle corridors. Newspapers love graphics.
- Provide statistics in graphics — charts, tables and diagrams.
- Take a politician for a ride — A bike ride, that is. The Arlington County Board (Arlington, Va.) is invited to join local cyclists on a bike ride each year. Politicians on bikes make for great pictures and easy publicity.

## More Tips

- Always send your newsletter to your media list.
- Keep a record of journalists who call or write relevant articles. Build your media list over time and keep it current.
- Issue a quarterly "tip sheet" reporting events passed and upcoming activities.