

PUBLIK

AGENCY

Beef + Lamb New Zealand Field Day

Media snapshot

Every journalist is in the business of being read, viewed and shared. This only happens if they publish material that is relevant, informative and attention-grabbing.

Media also play an important role in generating public debate and they have a responsibility to properly inform the public. However, their viewpoint may not always appear balanced, as they are trying to also achieve stories that are attention grabbing.

This handout provides some ideas about how you can individually and collectively, as a group with a shared interest, influence their views.

Most journalists are generalists with a surface knowledge of many topics. You will know more about what you do and the farming sector than they will, so it is best not to assume any knowledge.

Interview pointers

- Respectfully ask if they know much about the farming industry/the topic and who they have spoken to about it in the past before you start, so you know where they are coming from, what knowledge they have and what bias they may have formed.
- Go back to the beginning and provide background, if it appears necessary.
- Explain any technical/industry specific terminology (although try not to use jargon or abbreviated industry terminology – spell it out).

It may be their first time on this type of story so don't infer that they are stupid if they don't know something.

The current commercial world of media means journalists are under-resourced and often young and lowly paid. They usually cover more than one 'round' (specialist area such as courts, police, farming, education or health), so they are busy and work on tight deadlines.

Journalists know they're not always highly regarded, but they are passionate about what they do – story telling/making people in power accountable.

Keep in mind

- Nothing is ever off the record – even when you are just giving background information. Make sure you are happy with everything you say; it has the potential of being published. If you are unsure, ask yourself how would your farming peers, suppliers, customers, neighbours, friends and/or family feel when they read your comments?

- Take into consideration what publication the journalist is writing for, for example the newspaper and section within the paper, so that you have the reader in mind when you answer the questions. What would interest the reader?
- Relax and always be positive about farming and the sector (which in turn means don't be negative about competitors or suppliers).
- Never say "no comment" – you can always turn a negative question into a positive comment, or reiterate a topic area you do want to comment on. For example, "Unfortunately, I am unable to disclose XYZ, however, what I can say is ABC."
- If you are unhappy with the way you have answered a question then you can repeat the answer or correct it. For example, "Actually I think the best way to explain it is ... or what I really mean is ..."
- If you are approached by a journalist, always find out what they are looking for, and say you're busy at the moment, but will call back shortly. Ask what their deadline is – you don't want to miss the opportunity altogether. Use the time to really think about what you want to get across and what would be of interest to their particular readership or audience.

Media tricks

- Watch for 'pauses.' A journalist trick is to say very little, in the hope that you ramble and say something 'juicy'. When you have finished answering the question, either stop, or go on to say one of your prepared key messages.
- Be wary when a journalist asks at the end "Is there anything else you wish to add?", at this point it's easy to say 'too much'. This is a good time to repeat your key messages.
- The journalist may announce "that's great, I have what I need, the interview is over", but as already mentioned above, an interview is never really over, so continue to watch what you say – even if you're having a beer with them!

Small steps towards more balanced reporting

Shout about the news you have

Contact journalists with news. They like stories that present something new, preferably including the results of research, data or statistics. You could carry out, or commission, research relevant to local farming or run simple surveys to gather information and get some media coverage on the back of it.

Likewise, announcements that are linked to anniversaries or other milestones are popular with local publications. Just remember the type of news also needs to be tailored to the specific publication or programme you want to target.

To generate some interest, you could individually or collectively hold an open day for interested journalists or invite them to see a farming operation in action. This could be an opportunity for them to see first-hand the changes in farming practices over the years, for example enhancements made to better care for the environment, technology advancements or another topical area of farming operations.

Comment on other people's stories

Barely a week or two will go by without a story appearing that you could comment on. You can send in a letter to the editor of a publication or contact journalists directly if you can add something to the story - a fresh insight or angle. Get to know what key journalists are writing about so you can identify what appeals to them.

Also don't be afraid to contact a journalist with more information after a story has run – it might be too late for the current story but it may provide balance to a later story. You could also add that you're happy to be contacted for comment. A quick word to the wise, don't comment unless you know about it though - do you know that it's true, and don't be drawn into making a comment when you shouldn't.

Become an expert

It's not all about news. You can also make yourself an expert (there's every chance that you're already very knowledgeable in the industry) and provide in-depth analysis and comment on a topic or relevant subjects. Journalists are always seeking potential interviewees and experts to help them fill airtime and provide fresh content. Research your key media to identify possible opportunities and approach them with ideas. Radio shows with regular phone-ins are ideal, as they are constantly looking for topics to cover.

Read the publications that are relevant to farming or the wider sector, this might be the Farmers Weekly, Rural News Group, NZ Agribusiness or a well-read blog. Note down journalists who have an interest in the industry, or the sort of story that you want to publicise.

Online editions will normally have a bio or summary that illustrates the journalist's main interests and list some of the previous articles they have written.

The power of an apology

Kiwi's love an apology, and they can go a long way towards helping people move on but don't apologise every time you are criticised, only apologise when you know exactly what you are apologising for. It always pays to be mindful that by apologising you may also be opening yourself up to legal liability.

Don't pick fights with the media because you will almost never win. If you do need to defend yourself, do so stoutly and with pride.

The importance of key influencers

The testimony of those outside the industry will carry the most kudos – third party influencers are key to shifting public opinion. This could be a university researcher, for example who has undertaken studies around nitrates in water or the sources of methane, and can validate discussion on these topics, speaking in support of farmers. Having the numbers to validate a point of view is also valuable.

Identifying these people ahead of time, is always a good idea. There could be people locally who have sympathy for the way farming has been portrayed in the media and are happy to speak up. This might be a researcher from the Cawthron Institute, NIWA or Plant & Food Research.

Get support

If you find yourself facing a media issue and not sure how to best respond, Beef + Lamb New Zealand is happy to provide media advice. The contact number is (04) 473 9150 - ask to speak to the media team.

Sometimes reassurance that you are doing all you can or responding in a manner that others support is all that's needed to give you some 'peace of mind'.

Contact

For communications advice, support or a public relations plan tailored to your specific needs please contact Publik Agency on 03 5456122 or leanne@publik.nz.