

# Guess Who's In the News

by Julie Wassom

*The power of positive publicity is undeniable. It is one of the most cost-effective ways you can market your center. The mere publication or broadcast of a positive story about your center can save you significant time and dollars in communicating your image to prospects, customers, and opinion influencers. And, if you use your good publicity wisely, it can make it easier for you to generate more inquiries and referrals.*

Publicity is different from advertising. Although advertising and publicity can complement one another, they are not the same disciplines. Advertising is defined as the action of calling something to the attention of the public through paid announcements. In contrast, publicity is a form of public relations. It is information with news value, issued through the media as a means of gaining public attention, understanding, and support from a select audience of readers or viewers ("Making Your Good Publicity Work Marketing Magic," *Child*

*Care Information Exchange*, January 1988).

Why is generating publicity such a good enrollment building tool for a director who has minimal time and less money to spend on marketing? Because publicity is essentially a free delivery of your message through the media. And with only a little focused effort on your part, that message will be delivered through the words of a newspaper or magazine reporter, radio or television assignment editor, or talk show host. That gives your mes-

sage what is called "third party endorsement."

Third party endorsement can make your message more believable in the opinion of readers or viewers (your prospects, customers, and other referral sources) because it was written or produced by someone other than you. For instance, the reader thinks, "If Learning Land Child Care says in a newspaper ad that their program develops positive social skills, they want us to believe it. If *The Daily Sentinel* reporter prints that the program at Learning Land Child Care develops positive social skills, it is almost like a referral, so it must be true."

Although positive publicity is good any time, it can be especially advantageous to you when the publicity breaks near the time when you are also running an advertising campaign. The spaced repetition of



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your message leads to retention in the minds of your target audiences.

Say busy Mrs. Working Mother lives in Seattle and commutes one half hour to work. On the way to work one day, she is listening to the radio and hears a talk show host interviewing the director of the new employer sponsored Abundant Life Learning Center downtown. The talk show host asks the director how Abundant Life delivers on their tagline, "Care You Can Count On."

Later that week, this mom reads an article in the newspaper about the Around the World Festival being held by the network of Abundant Life Learning Centers. While waiting for a dental appointment, she picks up *Inc.* magazine, and spots Abundant Life in the list of the 500 Fastest Growing Companies.

The next week, she receives her copy of the Women's Chamber of Commerce newsletter, and there is a column featuring the president of Abundant Life, and how she and her people have developed their centers around the philosophy of "Care You Can Count On." That weekend, she sees an ad for a nearby Abundant Life Learning Center, and she recognizes the tagline.

The next week, this mom's nanny quits unexpectedly. At work, one of her co-workers says, "Do you know of any good, reliable child care? My child just isn't happy where she is, and, frankly, neither am I." What child care company will be the first one that comes to this mom's mind? Abundant Life Learning Centers, of course!

The advertisement that mom saw was significantly enhanced by the publicity that preceded it. And by the time she saw the ad and had a child care need, she had begun to

believe the third party endorsement of the publicity message.

So how can you get some good publicity for your center? Not by waiting for a reporter or producer to call you. It takes some proactive effort on your part. You must develop a working relationship with targeted media, create newsworthy stories, and employ the tools for media communications.

### Developing a Working Relationship with the Media

The first step is to develop and maintain a press list of those editors, reporters, and producers who would be interested in a story on child care. The specific person will depend on the "angle" of the story. To begin with, include the following on your list:

- **Business Editor** — for stories on the business of child care, centers in partnerships with local companies, and stories on the industry
- **Social Editor** — for stories on child care foundation events or philanthropic activities
- **Features Editor** — for profiles on center events, staff, unusual children, or unique centers
- **Calendar/Events Editor** — for event information
- **Family/Living/Children's Section Editor** — for child development stories, parenting issues, activities for children and families
- **Corporate Newsletter Editor** — for life balance stories of interest to employees with children, parenting issues

The media is generally receptive to receiving information on child care

because of the uniqueness of the topic, the visual appeal (called photo opportunities) of children, and the broad interest in the child care industry.

### Tips and Tactics on Media Relations

One of the best lists of media relations tips I have seen comes from an article written by Tracy Tilson of Tilson & Associates, a public relations firm in Boca Raton, Florida. Many of the following tips are from Tilson:

- Start to pay attention in your local media to the reporters who are covering certain topics. Call each media outlet to verify correct names, titles, addresses, telephone and fax numbers. Ask about deadlines, and request editorial guidelines if they have them. These guidelines will tell you how that media source prefers to receive information.

Explore all the media opportunities in your area, including weekly and daily newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. And, if large companies are near your center, don't forget corporate newsletters.

- As a rule of thumb, most magazines work on anywhere from a three to six month lead time, so take that into consideration as you are "pitching" a story. If it's an event that happens in February, you need to contact magazines as early as September or October.

- Newspapers, especially dailies, have a shorter lead time. They can be faxed or sent a press release as an item becomes newsworthy.

- For events and calendar listings, newspapers, radio, and television bulletin boards usually want the information about two weeks before the event. Check with the editor.

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- Organize your media list alphabetically by publication or program. Keep it in a special file or on a database. This will allow you to readily retrieve the information for future contact.

- Periodically check your media list for accuracy. Editors and reporters often change jobs, and you need to be sure you are targeting the right person.

- Time your calls to the media when the journalists are most relaxed and receptive. Call print editors and reporters when the publications hit the streets. I have found late afternoon to be a good time. However, avoid calling electronic media contacts as their programs near air time.

- Be prepared to tell the reporter the key information right away. Plan to talk in “headlines” that will spark interest in your idea or story. Assume you have only 30 seconds to get a “tell me more” from the reporter. You first want to get the reporter interested, not to have him take the whole story over the phone right then and there.

- Be available and responsive when a reporter calls you for further information. If a reporter knows she can depend upon you as the helpful child care expert, you will be more likely to see your name in print often.

- Remember to thank the journalist directly responsible for the positive publicity you receive. In the high pressure, deadline-driven world of the media, a quick call or letter of appreciation will be most welcome; and the reporter will be more likely to remember you next time.

- Contact your media list as often as you have worthwhile news. However, do not send releases or call

your media contacts if you have nothing of newsworthy value to say. Realize how important these editors, reporters, and producers are to you. Treat your media relationships with the same respect as you would a potential enrollment.

If you’ve done your homework and maintained an accurate, comprehensive, and easy to use media list, you’re on your way to increasing your chances of securing good publicity.

### Creating Newsworthy Stories

You will generate much more good publicity about your center and company if you make sure your information or the story about which you call a reporter meets three criteria for newsworthiness:

- Unique
- Timely
- Of interest to a broad segment of their readers, viewers, or listeners

Many of the events and happenings that may seem ordinary to you are actually unique and interesting to people who have little or no child care knowledge or experience. Every week or so, ask yourself, “Are we doing anything that is an opportunity to create positive publicity?” If so, grasp the opportunity, and call the media!

Make sure your news is timely. You have a much better chance of having an event or story covered if you notify the media *before* it occurs. After the lights are turned out, your event quickly becomes old news.

When you contact the media, think of them as your prospect. Help the media see the news in your event or information by thinking in the

prospect’s perspective — that is, like a reporter. Their main concern is filling the newspaper or airwaves with stories readers, viewers, and listeners will want to know about. Tell the reporter why your idea will be of interest to the publication’s or station’s audience.

Let’s say your center is having a Halloween Festival. The center will be decorated, including a huge spider web complete with paper spider, over the vaulted entryway. The children will be dressed in costume. A local pumpkin farm has donated a truckload of pumpkins which will be on display in front of the center on a flatbed truck that belongs to one of your parents. Center families and guests are invited. The first 50 families to attend get a free pumpkin. The ticket for each person attending the event is a can or box of food, or a piece of clothing, to be deposited in a large “Trix and Treats Box,” and later delivered to a shelter for homeless families.

When you call the appropriate reporter from your local newspaper, you could introduce yourself, ask if he has a moment, and then say, “Mr. Reporter, I am calling to let you know about a unique Halloween event coming up at our child care center, where our children and their families will be helping other less fortunate children. It will have lots of visual appeal, and is an event that will enhance the image of our community. Would you like more information?”

If he says “yes,” offer to send him a press release and set up a time to recontact him.

Ideas for stories include:

- Philanthropic events, such as a hopathon for the Muscular Dystrophy Foundation (invite the press to hop as part of their story)

- NAEYC accreditation
- Growth of employer sponsored child care
- Open house at your center
- Child care programs that meet the needs of the changing workplace
- Tips on what to look for in choosing quality child care
- Parenting topics, such as summer safety tips for parents
- Any event of special interest that you are hosting that offers a photo opportunity, such as a multicultural festival, a transportation day, a fashion show, Mud Day
- Announcement of new director or staff or program
- First center in your geographic location
- Trips or visits to local nursing homes or other places of interest, such as an alpaca ranch
- Announcement of a partnership with a public or private company
- Unusual center — size, layout, combination of programs
- Significant events, such as name change or 25th anniversary of center
- Parent or Teacher Appreciation Week festivities
- Addition of major program, such as a computer lab

## Tools for Media Communications

### The Press Release

The most common way to provide detailed information to media contacts is with a press release. It is

called the “workhorse” of public relations, and is the most frequent way of communicating with the press.

Type your press release on 8-1/2” x 11” white paper. Double space and use only one side of the paper.

List the most important points about your event or information at the beginning of the release, and list other points in descending order. Think who, what, where, when, and why. Since reporters have license to edit what you give them for space, clarity, and story angle, this inverted pyramid style helps them to quickly recognize what is less important and can be deleted.

Make your release factual and newsworthy. It should not sound like advertising. More often than not, the press will reject any release that sounds like advertising. Adding a relevant quote from someone of authority can make your press release stronger. If you are hosting an event at your center, a quote from you or your district manager covering some aspect of the event would be appropriate.

Keep your release to one or two pages. If the release extends beyond one page, center —*more*— at the bottom of the page. Designate the end of the release in one of the following ways: —*end*—, —30—, or ###.

You can attract the reporter’s attention to your release by submitting a 5” x 7” or 8” x 10” photo along with it. The photo can be black and white or color, depending upon the publication. The more professional the photo looks, the better. Type a one or two sentence explanation of the picture on white paper, and attach it to the bottom of the photo. If the reporter prints your story, the photo will enhance it. If your story

doesn’t make the press, your photo and outline (the line of explanation) still might.

The appearance and contents of your press release is often the first impression of your center, company, and credibility. Make sure there are no typos, misspelled words, or grammatical errors in your release. Double check all facts and figures. You never get a second chance to make a first impression.

### Press Kit

A press kit is the package of materials you send to the media along with your press release.

The contents of your press kit should include:

- Press release
- Fact sheet (a brief piece that can be viewed quickly by the media to answer the questions who, what, when, where, why)
- Background information on your center — a brochure is fine
- Brief biography on the center director or featured personnel
- Photos
- Reprints of interesting stories recently published on your center or company or the child care industry (make sure these articles were not published by media that compete with the press to whom you’re sending the kit)

Put all this information in a folder. A press kit folder does not need to be expensive, but it must look professional. Some centers use the same pocket folders for press kits as they do for enrollment packets. Or you can purchase linen or glossy pocket folders in a variety of subtle colors at your local office supply

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store. Affix a label with the name and logo of your center or company on it to the front of the folder for an extra identifying factor.

Load most of the materials in the right-hand pocket of the folder, with the press release on top. Attach a business card on the interior pocket of the folder.

Paper clip a brief cover letter to the front exterior of the folder. This letter should start with a question or sentence that will help the reporter remember your call or “hook” her on the angle of your story. Indicate that you will be calling the reporter within a few days to follow up. Make sure both the cover letter and the envelop label are addressed to the editor or reporter by name.

When you make your follow-up call to the reporter, offer to provide any additional information he might need. Be brief and respectful of his time. For an event that you have invited the press to attend, you will have more of them show up if you place a reminder call the day before the event.

Getting positive press for your center is a way to make marketing easier, less expensive, and fun. And, by creating news stories and developing a working relationship with targeted media, you will be informing, educating, and, ultimately, creating new prospects and referrals for enrollment in your center.

## Reference

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