AMVETS
2009
Communications Manual

COMMUNICATIONS MANUAL

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Introduction

News reporting is the practice of sticking your nose into somebody else's business. Public relations is the practice of sticking your business under someone else's nose.

—Gene Fuson, KCBS-TV director of research

This manual has been put together to help you through the maze that is public relations. The job of representing your post or department, and AMVETS in general, to the media and the American public is a complex issue. It entails various styles of writing, demands timely submission of materials and calls for an imaginative mind. The position, however, is not without its rewards. Take some time, then, to review this manual . . . and good luck!

Telling Our Story

Nonprofit organizations—especially those operating on limited budgets—often find themselves trying to generate publicity on a shoestring. Visibility and publicity are key components in maintaining our stature as a successful and well-respected organization. As such, we want to—

- make sure people know about us (we want them to know what we're doing on the local and national levels, what we stand for and how we feel about issues);
- increase local membership (the more veterans hear about what we're doing in each city or town, the more they'll want to join AMVETS); and
- build a stronger organization (strength means more members; it also means that more people are aware of the fact that we're a pro-active organization).

As a communications officer, you are an indispensable link between AMVETS and the news media. You have information about stories of local interest; stories that affect the daily lives of those in the community. Newspaper editors and reporters like to hear from groups such as ours. They realize the value to the community, but they don't always have the resources to send a reporter to all post events. That's why you are important.

You become an extra reporter working to get the story to them in an accurate and timely way. Read your local paper to see which reporters or editors deal with issues that affect veterans, or which ones handle community events. Knowing who to talk to at a newspaper is important in placing a story. Your success in this area also depends on how the information is presented. It's important to maintain a continuous relationship with the media, so that they will come to regard you as a trusted resource and an expert in your field.

So try to think like an editor and evaluate the worth of your story. Don't be afraid to think that something is not newsworthy. By submitting only newsworthy items, even infrequently, you will be build a reputation as someone who knows what is news and what is not. Above all, never exert pressure to have a story used or try to extract a promise that it will be used. If it's a good story, they'll use it.

Getting Started

Once you have been selected as the communications officer, do the following:

• *Formalize the Position*. Make sure your name is forwarded on to National Headquarters so that contact can be made with you on formulating or advancing stories about AMVETS in your locale. This needs to be done as soon as possible after post and department elections, but not later than 14 days after they've been held.

• *Visit the Media*. Call ahead and make an appointment to see the program director at each station or the city editors at the newspapers. Tell them who you are and what you do. Have copies on hand of the AMVETS history and information about your post or department. Perhaps it's a list of your officers with their addresses and phone numbers or a "fact sheet" about the history of the post/department and some of its current activities. These make good "door openers" for you. Explain that you often have news items and ask where they can be sent or who to call with information. Ask the editors/program directors about their specific needs and requirements. Information on story length, deadlines and photograph formats is important to have. Packaging your information to meet their specific requirements makes story placement easier and will enhance a good working relationship with the media.

• *Make a Media List*. After you've made your contacts, make a "media list" and forward a copy to the national communications director. Later, when post/department-related stories are published, send clippings to National. These are valuable tools for keeping our lists current and for knowing what various posts are doing.

• *Structure a Communications Program*. Structure your post or department communications program after considering—

- your post/department's long- and short-range goals and objectives;
- what people/groups need to know about each objective for it to be achieved;
- how you are now communicating with each identified group or public;
- what else can be done to reach these groups;
- how to gauge when each objective is reached; and
- your budget.

What Is News?

There are many definitions on what constitutes news. Perhaps the most accurate is "news is what the media says it is." That being the case, work with editors and program directors to determine what story ideas are best suited to their medium. Story ideas you might want to suggest to editors include the following:

Election of Post/Department Officers
Committee Appointments
Social or Charitable Events
Induction of New Members
Civic Programs
Special Meetings
Auxiliary Events

There are also events of possible media interest outside the post or department. Some of these are—

- announcing AMVETS' policy on local issues (drug and alcohol awareness programs, police strength, highway safety);
- presenting AMVETS' national policies. It is a good practice to provide the media with copies of statements by the national commander or national resolutions.

How To Do It

Preparing News Releases

You've acquainted yourself with the local news representatives. Now it's time to release a story. Try to understand the mission and character of the newspaper where you want stories and opinions to appear. In dealing with these "gatekeepers," keep in mind that their time is valuable, so it is important to be prepared. Newspeople respond positively to professionalism, persistence and good ideas. They are always in the market for "good-news" stories.

- News stories should be written crisply; avoid being redundant. All stories will require the following information:
- What (What event happened to make it a news story?)
- Where (Where did the event occur?)
- When (When did the event happen [date and time]?)
- Who (Who was involved in the event [full names, current addresses and titles]?)
- Why (What was the reason for the event?)
- How (How did the event take place [details]?)
- *Guidelines on Preparation*. Your release of information may be written or phoned in, depending on the requirements of your outlet, but a written release is generally preferred. Here are some guidelines on preparation—
- In the top-right corner of the release, type your name (if you are the contact person), address and telephone number.
- In the top-left corner, indicate when you want the information published or broadcast—for example, FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE or FOR RELEASE ON TUESDAY, MARCH 11.
- Directly below the release date, insert a headline. In a few words, give the subject of the story: AMVETS ELECTS NEW POST COMMANDER (in all caps); then continue to the text of the story.
- The basic facts should be contained in the first few paragraphs.
- In typing your stories, always double-space them for ease of editing and use only one side of the paper.
- Spell out all abbreviations the first time they appear in the story; the exception is the acronym *AMVETS*.

It is advantageous to have on file at each newspaper a photograph of the post/department commander (wearing his or her AMVETS hat). Finally, send copies of the release to chamber of commerce publications and service club newsletters as well as to other community outlets.

Submitting Photographs

When planning for future events, keep in mind to contact the media in plenty of time. They maintain calendars and "day books," so it's important to be on the list of events in advance. A three-day notice is generally reasonable so that they can schedule time for you. Give the photographer the name of a contact who will be assisting him in identifying the people in the photos. Be sure to give the photographer ample room in which to work.

The photographer may request additional information about the location. He may need to know what the lighting conditions are (florescent or incandescent) or whether the location, for example, is inside our outside a building and how accessible it is. Never expect the photographer to furnish copies of the photographs for your use. Most newspapers generally have the means by which copies can be purchased.

- *Guidelines for Submission*. Frequently, the newspaper does not have a photographer available for your event. You can be of service to your post or department by arranging for an AMVETS member to take photos of the events for the newspaper. When submitting photos to the newspaper, keep in mind these guidelines—
- Photos generally need to be 8-by-10-inch black and white glossies. Color photos are also acceptable. Some newspapers will use only slides for color photos, so it is important to get the specifics from your editors.
- Do not submit Polaroid photographs.
- Submit only quality photographs. Pictures that are out of focus or poorly exposed should never be sent to the newsroom.
- Always attach a complete caption to the bottom of each photo. Type the complete names, address and titles in order from left to right. Use a full sheet of paper and affix the caption with masking tape to the back of the photo.
- Never give the same photo to competing newspapers.
- News photos for television should be of the non-glossy or matte-finish variety and in a horizontal format, wider than they are high.

***Do*s and *Don't*s**

- DO type your story.
- DO use standard 8 1/2-by-11-inch white paper.
- DO double-space all releases.
- DO use only one side of the paper.
- DO indicate when the information is to be published or broadcast, i.e. FOR
- IMMEDIATE RELEASE or release on a certain date.
- Do give your release a reference number.
- DO give a contact source for additional information—either your name, address and phone number or that of the commander.
- DO give your release a headline.
- Do mark your release with the place and date of issue.

- DO provide complete information about the event, putting as much of that information as possible in the first paragraph.
- DO know the deadlines of your local newspapers.
- Do maintain a current media contact list.
- DO NOT ask the editor to send you clippings of the story.
- DO NOT pressure the editor to use your story.
- DO NOT try to say too much in the release.
- DO NOT bury the facts; put them up front in the story.
- DO NOT get discouraged. Space is valuable and sometimes your story might not get placed. Persistence is important.

Other Tools

If you are responsible for your post's (or your department's) communications, keep in mind other tools available to you that are inexpensive and useful.The number of tools available is limited only by your budget and imagination. Successful communications can be accomplished with little money. Never underestimate the power of dedicated and informed staff members and volunteers.

Letters to the Editor

"Letters to the Editor" is one of the best-read features of any newspaper. Use this forum to state a position on an important issue. Letters can also be used to express post/department reaction to local news events (even those that may not have recently appeared in the paper). Or they can be used to correct mistakes in previous stories. Newspapers are statements of historical record, so getting the facts right is important. Statements should be kept short and be signed in the name of the post or department commander only.

Special Events

Sponsor or participate in an event. Your involvement can include sponsorship, with responsibilities that range from setting up a booth to providing a working staff for the event. Sometimes it's possible to persuade a local newspaper or broadcast outlet to cosponsor the event with you, thus giving you ready access to publicity for the event. Popular activities include golf tournaments, road races, school science fairs or activities for the elderly.

Speakers Bureau

Establish a speakers bureau. AMVETS members are a diverse and interesting group. Offer the community the expertise available in your group. Notices in the local media or chamber of commerce publications would be useful in publicizing your bureau.

National's News Releases

National news releases are released in Washington for national distribution over the wire services and through the correspondents of the larger newspapers. This way, national AMVETS news goes out uniformly to the entire country at one time. Materials released sometimes involve policy statements, upcoming events such as the national convention and announcements of winners of AMVETS awards.

Releases are frequently in response to developments demanding immediate action and over which National has no control. Though their arrival may be late, releases are mailed/faxed to departments to keep them and their members up-to-date on continuing news developments and policy. Every effort should be made to disseminate this information down to post level.

AMERICAN VETERAN

AMERICAN VETERAN is a good outlet for feature material of interest to AMVETS everywhere. Here are some guidelines on the submission of materials.

- Typewritten and double-spaced, using only one side of a page.
- Full name, address and phone number of the contact source, together with post/department and date.
- Quality photographs in black and white or in color. Out of focus or poorly exposed photographs will not be considered. Do not write on the back of the photographs. Complete captions must be taped to the photograph. Indicate if the photo is to be returned to sender.
- Submit suggestions or instructions on a separate sheet of paper.

Remember our deadlines: March 17 for the spring issue, June 17 for the summer issue, September 16 for the fall issue and December 16 for the winter issue

Publications Awards

Publications Award

Award: National Awards Program Plaque

Awarded To: Posts and departments with the best publications

• *Eligibility*. All AMVETS publications having produced at least one issue from September 1 of the previous year to July 1 of the current year are eligible to participate as long as one copy of that particular issue was received at National Headquarters.

• *Categories*

- Newspapers
- Class A Newsletters: computer-generated multi-page
- Class B Newsletters: noncomputer-generated multi-page
- Class C Newsletters: single page

• *Competition*. Depending on what the entry is, it will be judged against like submissions, i.e., magazines will compete against magazines, newspapers against

newspapers, and so forth. No distinction will be made between the size of unit (post or department) making the submission. Consequently, it is likely that within any given category, there will be posts competing against departments.

- *Criteria*
- Overall design
- Innovation (in format and content)
- Creativity (in format and content)
- Items of interest to the organization
- News of VA and other veterans facilities
- Human interest
- Coverage of veterans/community service programs
- Events or developments of interest to or affecting veterans

- *Judging*. Publications will be judged by an independent panel of three professionals who are not affiliated with AMVETS at the post, department or national levels. A minimum of two entrants is required for competition in any given category. In situations where there are not two entries, the judges shall declare that no award be given, even for a single submission. From time to time, it may be necessary to give special awards if, in the opinion of the judges, they are merited. Similarly, awards for runner-up in each category are at the discretion of the panel. Winners will be announced at the national convention.