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Series: PROMOTING YOUR PRACTICE THROUGH LOCAL PUBLICITY

Part One: Identify your media targets

Getting your practice in the press is a powerful, no-cost way to build awareness. Unlike paid-for advertising, publicity is information considered newsworthy by your local newspaper or TV/radio station. Local media will pick up your story only if it gets the attention of the editor or news director who is looking for audience appeal without self-promotion. The first step: determine which media are most likely to use your type of news. *Who you contact will vary based on the type of story.*

1. Identify/prioritize media outlets in your service area.

List those you know and search for more at free media directories like www.mondotimes.com. Include pet-related publications and websites, local newspapers and radio/TV news, and business/chamber newsletters. Become familiar with their content and their circulation or broadcast area. The more local a media outlet's coverage area, the more likely it will be to cover a local story.

2. For each media outlet, identify specific contacts.

Start by considering the types of stories you will be placing:

- ❖ Pet care: health and wellbeing, seasonal tips, diet and nutrition
- ❖ Business news: practice growth, new location, new staff, accolades, awards
- ❖ Technology: new equipment, new diagnostics, lifesaving advances
- ❖ Human interest: happy ending, extraordinary pets

These types of stories will most likely be of interest to editors and reporters covering pets, health, families, features, business, news, technology and possibly other areas. Go to each outlet's website to obtain these names, email addresses and phone numbers. While media lists can be purchased from a variety of sources, this method works great for shorter local lists.

3. Build your database.

Assemble your contact information into a database format (such as Excel or Access) that can be easily updated and sorted by topic area.

4. Keep your database current.

Media staff change frequently. Check your list about every six months to make sure that information is still accurate. Plus, you will also want to add new ones.

Next: Part Two: What is news?

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Part Two: What is news?

Last month, we discussed targeting media most likely to cover your story. Once you have identified your targets, the next step is to develop a story *angle* that will get the media's interest.

News is information that is timely, unique, relevant and of local interest. Your story angle should meet these criteria and showcase an important feature of your practice. At the same time, avoid information that is self-serving and fails to pass the news test as publicity. You will most likely be told: "Buy an ad."

Recognize the difference between "hard" and "soft" news. Hard news pertains to an immediate occurrence or event. Soft news is a feature story that has a longer shelf life and is just as interesting today or in a few months. In identifying hard or soft news angles, consider what pet owners want to know about in your area. New staff appointments, awards and accolades or a new location are examples easy to place local news. Increase relevancy and news value by relating your story to timely circumstances and occurrences:

- ❖ National trends (pet obesity, spay/neuter legislation, popularity of pocket pets, multiple pet ownership)
- ❖ Unique incident at your practice (near-fatal bee sting, miracle surgery, huge litter)
- ❖ Seasonal/holidays (insects, weather/temperature, food, decorations, festivities)
- ❖ National event (National Pet Dental Health Month, Spay Day USA)
- ❖ Local/national news (pet cruelty, rescue efforts, food recalls)

With any of the above, you can generate publicity by:

- ❖ Creating your own event (photo contest, first aid fair, disaster simulation)
- ❖ Offering expert advice (how to avoid hyperthermia, help your pet cope on long car rides, choose a pet food)
- ❖ Making an announcement (new facilities, state-of-the-art procedures)
- ❖ Suggesting a story idea (a day in the life of an emergency vet, a rescue dog's recovery)

Once you come up with an angle, match it to the appropriate media on your target list. Do you use a news release, email or phone call? Next month: Packaging your story.

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Part Three: Packaging your story.

Last month, we talked about developing a story angle to get the attention of local media. Once you have your angle, you need to *package* it for the press.

Your goal is to interest the media in covering your story. In most cases, an editor (newspaper) or news director (broadcast) will assign a reporter who will use your information as a starting point possibly followed by an interview request. In some cases, usually with simple announcements, a newspaper may run a few sentences from what you provide without an interview.

In communicating with the media, avoid relying on promotional materials such as brochures, flyers or website pages to tell your story. Instead, use standard publicity formats to get media attention.

Optional formats	Purpose
New advisory	Used in advance of a news release to invite media to cover a news event or action. Limit to who, what, where and why in a page. Email standard.
News release	Standard format for events, announcements, achievements or other. Email standard. Limit to two pages.
Media kit	Greater detail for complex stories: news releases, fact sheets, bios, backgrounders. Email or distribute on site.
Story "pitch"	Place feature stories and interviews usually on an exclusive basis. Keep to several lines. Email standard.

In all cases, succinctly tell your story using journalistic inverted pyramid style. Put the most important information (who, what, when, where and why) in the first couple of paragraphs, followed by facts supporting your main idea. Include the name of the person issuing the information, email and phone in case the editor or reporter has questions or wants to set up an interview.

Do:

- Stick to one main idea
- Write simply for a quick read
- Be specific
- Plan ahead for media deadlines

Don't:

- Try to say put everything into one story
- Use professional jargon
- Be overly general
- Wait until the last minute