



Andrew Rea

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He is also an award-winning music festival founder (2000trees Festival) and university lecturer (BIMM Bristol) in event management and music industry management, having started life as a journalist on daily newspapers.

He has two cats, Aston and Villa, and a young daughter who pulls their tails.



\*Suggested Personal & Professional Development (PPD)



# The power of proactive PR

Harnessing the power of positive, proactive public relations can ensure favourable media coverage to create a positive impression of your practice. It can also shift public perception, inspire key people, achieve wider recognition, build your audience, and make a difference to your bottom line.

The veterinary profession has seen extraordinary changes in recent years and, arguably, none more so than in the rise of organised, marketing-savvy practice groups. It was not so many years ago that practices could not advertise themselves, but that has all changed and with it comes a rising tide of PR activities aimed at gaining favourable media coverage and a positive social media profile, as the profession faces up to life in the fast-paced 21st century.

The BSAVA recently produced a handy, 'How-to...', 28-page proactive PR guide\*, to explain what PR is, what difference it makes, and to equip members with some simple tools and techniques, insider insight and motivation to harness the power of public relations. It includes practical advice, top tips, real-life success stories, strategic support, press release templates and a host of story ideas, focused on delivering the following objectives to:

- equip BSAVA members with a clear and concise 'How to...' guide to follow from scratch
- share sound media relations practices – including real-life success stories (case studies) – to demonstrate measurable results
- build confidence and encourage participation to help practices and the industry achieve a strong, honest and reliable voice through positive media coverage nationwide.

## What is PR?

Public relations is often seen as a long-term strategy of reputation management to achieve balanced media coverage and maintain

a 'positive halo' of the profession. It is also a way to engage your audience in a more subtle and cost-effective way than 'paid-for' advertising.

By building strong working relationships with the media you can influence opinion, marginalise the unethical behaviour that dominates national headlines and help maintain a respectable image of the profession in the eyes of the public – your clients. This is especially true at a local level, because your practice is part of the community.

Writing in the 'How to...' guide, Ross Allan, veterinary surgeon and BSAVA public relations officer stated, 'I would encourage the whole profession to look at PR, the benefits are fantastic. It's great for our practice brand to be out there in the public eye, it's a good way of engaging with stakeholders and it's a more subtle and cost-effective form of maintaining contact with our current and potential customers than advertising.'

'It's also very difficult for our customers to get access to good, reliable, honest information about pet care, so I think vets should step up and talk a bit more about what they are doing.'

## What difference does it make?

Whether appearing in your newspaper, on radio, TV, a blog, a consumer website or social media, PR can be an excellent way to market your practice, build your personal profile and promote the services you offer. It also presents a positive image of the profession to your local community. And remember, your competitors are also thinking about PR activities too!

Here are five basic principles to get you started.

## Develop a clear media strategy

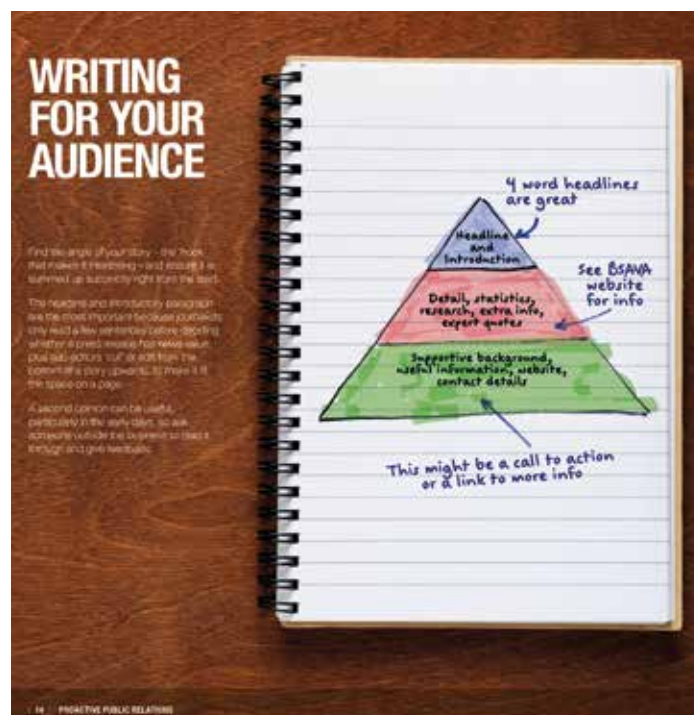
A 'big picture' PR strategy is an important first step towards success – it is better to be on the front foot with

**"A 'big picture' PR strategy is an important first step towards success..."**





**Figure 1.** Getting young people interested in veterinary science can make a great PR photo.



**Figure 2.** Writing a 'top down' press release.

a clear vision and plenty of positive news stories to tell. Outlining your objectives and designing a road map for reaching those goals will enable purposeful progression and measurement at the end of the process. More importantly, you can reflect and plan to improve results next time.

Outline your key objectives and prioritise the results in order of importance – for example, a better image of the practice, increasing footfall of exotic pet owners, boosting your personal profile, sharing 'human interest' pet care success stories, standing out from the crowd, balancing coverage against negative 'national' news headlines, or just being seen and heard as expert veterinary professionals as part of a wider marketing strategy to help the business.

Deciding who is the best person to look after your PR is important – someone who can reliably make a consistent contribution can be the most useful. Also consider whether your PR will include internal

communications for staff and stakeholders, social media and digital marketing.

### Exercise

Write a few sentences in glowing terms about your practice, your team and about yourself as a professional. This will give you a sense of your individual tone of voice and can be a useful starting point.

### Be creative and generate newsworthy stories

Journalists are always looking for a news 'hook' – the unusual, unexpected, quirky, interesting and innovative, or something with real human interest. A timely response to a topical issue or sound bite quotes are often strong enough 'hooks' for a story to be published.

Generating newsworthy ideas can be a fun team-building exercise, particularly if it is time shared with colleagues engaging in a creative process outside the daily veterinary

tasks. Consider what your clients would find interesting, helpful or reassuring – for example, real-life cases, a new twist on common pet problems, helpful top tips or innovative solutions.

### Exercise

Discuss unusual cases you've dealt with and consider how you might write a press release for the local media the next time your practice deals with a similar case. Find the 'angle' of your story – it needs to be recent (or a new development) and relevant to the audience. Position your practice as part of the community – you're local to them (**Figure 1**).

The BSAVA has a range of resources available to members, such as client information sheets on its website packed with useful information on a wide variety of topics – from the pros and cons of adopting a rescue dog to a questionnaire to assess

separation anxiety. These may spark an idea, support a press release with evidence and help.

### Impactful photography

As the saying goes, 'A picture is worth a thousand words'. An arresting image, fun photo or even whacky PR stunt are all valuable tools that tell a story just as well as words and can be enough to sway a publication to use your story.

It is worth spending time thinking how best to illustrate your press release too. So could your team use props to create a more exciting image or help to tell the story? Do any of your team have an interest in photography that you can nurture for PR purposes?

### Exercise

Look at what photographs your local media are using, for inspiration and clarity.

### Write a press release

Try writing a snappy headline in the style of your target

media. Find the angle of your story – the ‘hook’ that makes it interesting – and ensure it is summed up succinctly right from the start (**Figure 2**).

The headline and introductory paragraph are the most important because journalists only read a few sentences before deciding whether a press release has news value; plus sub-editors ‘cut’ or edit from the bottom of a story upwards, to make it fit the space on a page.

### Pitch a story

Sometimes ‘media relations’ is as simple as calling a journalist with a story. More strategically, it is about building longer term relationships to get into their contacts books as a trusted, useful source of information, advice and expert commentary.

Journalists want to hear your news and views – you are the experts. Make sure it is a story their readers want to hear, rather than purely a sales message for your practice. If you want an advert, you should buy advertising space!

Pitching a story by telephone builds interest before submitting the press release. It is important to have the press release completed, as a resource to draw on if the journalist asks questions and so you can send it straight away by e-mail.

Your pitch should give a brief overview of the strongest news ‘hook’ to encourage journalists to see this as relevant and interesting to their readers. There is competition for space and their time, so be brief yet persuasive and ‘sell in’ your news for consideration.

Always ask journalists to let you know if they are going to use your press release. They may not call you back to discuss it, but a follow-up call from you a few days later,

asking if they need any further information, is an effective memory jogger and can make a difference.

### More advanced work

There are occasions when the news agenda is beyond your control, and you may be asked to comment on more negative news in a reactive way – perhaps a national veterinary issue or a customer complaint to a local newspaper. This can be more complicated and it may be best to seek professional PR advice if your practice finds itself in the eye of a media storm owing to a difficult situation.

There are some basic rules if you are keen to handle media enquiries yourself.

### Talk to journalists

The media and news stories move fast and sometimes in directions that are hard to predict. Good journalists will always be thinking about getting a good story – to them a conversation is ‘on the record’. Always assume this is the case.

You may call to pitch a story and find yourself being asked a series of questions of wider public interest, to see if there are other stories worth writing about and to assess how useful you are as a contact for giving ‘newsworthy’ quotes. Some examples may be negative news, such as pet diets, vaccinations, animal cruelty or commercial charges.

In short, you are being asked for your expert commentary. Be aware of this fact, but don’t shy away from being helpful. Building good working relationships with journalists, by giving them something to work with, is a sure-fire way to attract more regular media coverage.

You want to be on their radar and they want a ‘vet says’ news hook, so be helpful – work out what you want that quote to be in advance. Good

**“Good journalists will always be thinking about getting a good story – to them a conversation is ‘on the record’ ”**

preparation is thinking through and writing down a series of stock answers to common ‘vet industry’ questions.

Working with the media can be a time-consuming exercise, often at short notice, but a foot in the door for regular ‘expert vet’ commentary on a range of topics can give you more freedom. For example, you could pitch to write a regular column to offer reliable advice and case studies – either on a topic of your choosing or in response to readers’ letters. In return for your time and expertise, you and your practice will gain regular exposure and become a trusted guide for readers.

### Preparation for interviews

Journalists can frame things in a negative light by asking ‘loaded’ questions or using hypothetical ‘worst case scenarios’ to lead you (and your comments) in a certain direction. Your job is to achieve balance to a story as the voice of reason – remember you are the expert, draw confidence from that.

Before talking to journalists, ensure you know about the publication, interview format, audience, and the interviewer if for radio/ TV. Decide on your goal for the interview and think about what you want to say.

Prepare three key messages – think of sound bites and headlines and work out how to bridge to key messages, with planned supporting facts, figures and case study examples.

### How to measure success

In business terms, the financial return-on-investment (ROI) is important. You can measure PR coverage using a crude

advertising value equivalent (AVE), which is based on how much an advert would cost to fill the same size as the PR cutting – usually multiplied four to six times, because on average we read a news article for four to six times longer than an advert.

You can also look for a spike in increased footfall to the practice and enquiries generated.

Community engagement is also significant following a positive article/interview – a good buzz among staff, feel-good factors for stakeholders, or nice client comments that can all lead to a happier working environment.

Having developed a clear media strategy to decide what success looks like at the start of this PR exercise, we can measure against those objectives and key performance indicators. The key is to build on your efforts and work out how to make a real difference to the practice by attracting ‘positive halo’ media coverage. ■

**\*A full version of the ‘How to...’ guide is available for BSAVA members to download from the website, [www.bsava.com](http://www.bsava.com)**