

PUBLIC RELATIONS

The American Legion Auxiliary has a public image based on integrity, action, and commitment to purpose. That image is a product of the organized efforts of the Public Relations Chairmen and individual members to spread the word about our organization and programs, as well as everyday contacts of Auxiliary members with the public in the name of the Auxiliary.

Though the words publicity and public relations are often used interchangeably, there is a difference. Public Relations is broad-based, and covers all spontaneous events, planned promotion and interviews, as well as public observation and response to Auxiliary activities. Publicity is just one facet of public relations, and includes planned events or programs that are promoted through the media. In such coverage, the Public Relations Chairman can exercise more control over the content of the message and the timing of the release.

A public relations program does offer one thing that advertising can never provide with assurance: credibility.

This pamphlet addresses the basics of good public relations for Unit Public Relations Chairmen.

GETTING STARTED

Before choosing a Public Relations Chairman or accepting this position yourself, consider carefully what skills are required.

A chairman should be available at special events and present at all meetings. She should be an outgoing person, unafraid to meet new people and able to present the Auxiliary story. She should have good writing skills and picture-taking ability. Access to a typewriter or computer is also helpful. The more professional contacts and acquaintances a chairman has in her community, the better.

As a Unit Public Relations Chairman, the first thing you will want to do is to research and become familiar with the promotional options and media outlets available in your community. List all potential resources.

Your list of print media should include daily or weekly newspapers, shoppers, Post/Unit publications, and other publications. Electronic media will include radio and television stations, cable companies, and local access channels. Local bulletin boards or kiosks, and public display areas are other useful promotional resources.

This information can be found at your local library. State, county, or city publications often provide the names and addresses of area print and electronic media. The Convention/Visitors Bureau and Chamber of Commerce offices may have information. If needed, the National American Legion Auxiliary Public Relations office can also provide a list of resources for your community.

When your list of local media is complete, identify the appropriate person or contact for each, call to introduce yourself, and schedule a meeting. At this meeting, you should briefly explain the programs of the American Legion Auxiliary, provide a brochure such as "This is the American Legion Auxiliary," and ask them for information about using their resource most effectively.

Keep a log for each one, listing the person to contact, required format, deadlines for news stories, and other pertinent information such as addresses and phone numbers.

One word of caution...treat all media fairly. Do not pay for an ad in the paper and expect the radio or television station to provide free time. Advertising dollars are the lifeblood of the media, and should be distributed evenly. If you have an interesting news story, distribute it to all media at the same time, so that one does not have an advantage over the others.

Recognize the contributions of the media. Send than you notes or certificates of appreciation when special coverage is provided and on an annual basis.

NEWSPAPERS

Each newspaper will have a set of guidelines for its own publication. These will vary from paper to paper, but usually include deadlines, type of news allowed,

and the size requirements, frequency, and content of photos. While some events may be newsworthy, others such as listings of chairmen, lunch committees and prize winners, may not be allowed. Many papers will not publish proclamations. Be sure you understand what is permitted and note this on your log. Remember the adage, old news is no news.

Some publications have restrictions or specifications on the use of color photos, the number of people in a photo, certain activities or subject matter for photos, or the use of photos not taken by staff photographers. Keep this information in your log.

Your copy should be typewritten if possible, and double-spaced. If typing is not possible, be sure any handwritten material is legible and spacious, for ease in editing. Keep your writing simple and direct. Stories and pictures should be current and newsworthy. Your name and phone number should also be provided, in case the editor needs more information.

Public opinion and letter columns can be used to good advantage to promote programs or special events, and to thank the public for their support after special events. These columns can also be used as an educational tool to promote proper Flag etiquette, celebration of patriotic holidays, or other issues of public interest.

Advertising is another possibility for newspapers or shoppers. Because advertising can be cost prohibitive, use it only for promoting special events. Keep your ads brief and specific, and consider clip art or large print to create eye-catching appeal.

POST/UNIT PUBLICATIONS

Post and Unit publications may offer more flexibility than other print media. The Post or Unit will set its own guidelines, and usually the only restrictions apply to space limitations, reproduction of pictures, and deadlines for copy. Since few restrictions apply, your Post or Unit newsletter provides a perfect opportunity to promote coming events, meetings, and activities. Purchasing comparable advertising space in a local newspaper would be very expensive. Use this space instead to stimulate interest, build up

excitement, and encourage the participation of your members. The material should be light and interesting, to encourage reading. These publications also give you the opportunity to use first names, nicknames, and other more personal references which are known to your membership but perhaps not by the general public.

In these publications, the reader is already a member, and thus has shown an interest in our programs. Keep that interest alive by getting her involved.

Recognizing members for past services or on special occasions can also help to make these local publications more readable, but this valuable space should be used primarily as an Auxiliary sales tool to promote the American Legion Auxiliary and upcoming programs.

Post/Unit publications are good public relations tools if sent to professional and business offices for use in waiting rooms. Remember to send your dentist, doctor, optometrist, attorney, and Veterans Service offices complimentary copies.

Other local publications may include church and school bulletins, Chamber of Commerce newsletters, or business magazines. The key is to use these resources for items of special interest to the publication and its readers, for example, to promote scholarships in school newsletters.

RADIO AND TELEVISION

Radio is the most commonly available electronic medium for getting your message to the public. Larger communities also may have access to local coverage on television. The station(s) in your community may have a calendar of daily events, local news broadcasts, public service announcements, or special broadcasts from activities "on location."

A calendar of events can be used for notices of regular meetings or for special events, such as fundraising projects, celebration of patriotic holidays, or Poppy Day. Some stations do not have a listing of events, but will make periodic announcements of your special activities on the day of the event.

Public Service Announcements (PSA) are short, prepared announcements of interest to the general public which are taped and played at the discretion of the radio or television station for a specified period of time, usually a week or a month. A Unit member may record the message, or station personnel may do so.

While announcements of meetings are not appropriate for news broadcasts, perhaps you have an event of community interest. Sponsoring a celebration of a patriotic holiday, donating flags to all school classrooms, honoring a local person for their service, or conducting a special project are some examples of newsworthy stories.

Some radio stations will do live broadcasts from the site of a community activity. The entire event may be broadcast if it is not long, such as essay contests where the entries are read for judging. Periodic coverage may be given from day long events, such as July 4th activities. In this format, interviews may be given with participants or chairpersons, and reminders of activities which are occurring are made by the announcer, interspersed with regular programming.

ACCESS CHANNELS

Cable television has opened new opportunities for public relations on access and cable channels on which cable companies cover government meetings, school communications and other news of interest to the community. Your municipal government offices can provide information on how to utilize your access channels. Some suggestions are:

1. Electronic bulletin boards are available for announcements of meetings and other events on a calendar of events which runs several times a day as filler for other programs. Submit written copy containing the facts and dates, with sufficient advance notice to allow for programming the computers.

2. Public Service Announcements provide more detailed information about a program or event in addition to the bulletin board which is taped ahead of time and runs at times determined by the access channel staff. A prepared script of the appropriate length is necessary, visual props are recommended to enhance

the quality of the production and your members have an opportunity to be involved. For example, your Poppy Chairman or Poppy Princess may hold a Poppy, a poster, or proclamation while telling about Poppy Day.

3. A talk show or other live production featuring an interview with the Department President or National President can cover a variety of topics or one special project of the American Legion Auxiliary. Educate the public about a community concern using a video, or interview a guest with expertise in that area who can tell how the American Legion Auxiliary and community can work to resolve the problem.

CABLE CHANNELS

Cable companies do have the ability to add announcements and PSAs to their regular channels, such as ESPN, CNN, and TNT. These announcements are made at the breaks between programs on the hour or half-hour. Contact your local cable company office directly for information on how to use this free space.

PUBLIC DISPLAYS

Be alert to available bulletin boards, kiosks, and other public display areas. Does your grocery store or laundromat have a bulletin board on which you can put notices of your rummage sales or other fundraisers?

Displays present a positive visual image of our organization. Poppy windows have been used for many years and local businesses may provide window space for other displays as well. Public libraries often showcase various community groups and projects in specially designed display cases. You can promote the founding of your Unit and membership, VA&R projects, Children & Youth projects, Christmas gift shop and scholarships in displays.

Posted announcements should be removed after a specified period of time. It is in your best interest and just plain good public relations to remove all outdated or old copy from any public displays.

PERSONAL CONTACT

Your personal relationship with the media reflects on the American Legion Auxiliary. Treating your media contacts with courtesy and mutual cooperation will win respect for the organization. You will not always get the coverage you think the Auxiliary deserves for a particular project, but keep a positive attitude. Be prepared for rejection. Be patient, and try again if you do not succeed at first. Remember, media persons have many demands on their time and attention, and their own priorities. Eventually some of your articles may get used.

Public relations is the responsibility of all members. Each person who acts in the name of the American Legion Auxiliary alters or creates a public image of the organization. The member on the street distributing poppies, the volunteer in local or VA Medical Centers, the scholarship chairman making contact with schools, all reflect positively or negatively on the organization. The manners and behavior of delegates attending conferences and conventions are observed, and a lasting impression may be left on those who have had contact with our members.

Good public relations will present the many positive accomplishments of our organization to the public, resulting in more active participation by our members and promote membership.

**For more information, contact your
Department Public Relations Chairman
or Public Relations Division
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GETTING STARTED IN UNIT PUBLIC RELATIONS

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