Tips for Effective Press Coverage for Journals

Panelists:
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American Association for the Advancement of Science
Washington, DC

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Science
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Reporter:
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Vancouver, British Columbia

Two speakers experienced in science and the media provided a useful overview of processes that journal editors should understand if they are to reach the "press". Two points seemed relevant to large and small journals alike:

1. Target the media in the researcher's hometown. Contact the reporter(s) with a clear, high-impact press briefing. A really hot story may deserve a news conference and targeting national or international media.

2. A column or press release highlighting the hot papers in the forthcoming issue may work, but it must be concise and it must be regular. Once you start, reporters will begin to expect material. Let them down and you are lost.

Ginger Pinholster explained the workings of EurekAlert!, a service of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). *Science* posts its press package to EurekAlert! (*www.eurekalert.org*) each Monday, and its embargo lifts each Thursday at 2:00 PM Eastern time. The site also makes available hundreds of other embargoed news releases. It seems to be an excellent model through which journals with long-term and expert resources can develop and maintain a mutually useful relationship with the media. Pinholster indicated that AAAS would give some thought to whether EurekAlert! might be able to offer some sort of special services for very small journals. She raised the idea that small journals could team up to form a kind of consortium to subscribe to a single EurekAlert! home page.

The lesson for journal editors is to know your reporters and their interests.

Ann Gibbons explained that much of her success comes from her expertise as a reporter on a particular issue (in her case, human evolution). After years on a beat, she is known and trusted by scientists, and her editors know that she can spot a good story and trust her news judgment. The lesson for journal editors is to know your reporters and their interests. Gibbons noted that *Science* has a good press package and that *Nature* seems to do a particularly effective job. The reporter gets a direct e-mail that includes three short paragraphs and names, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses of experts who can comment.

Understand the journalist's need to honor embargoes. Breaking an embargo can lead to short- or long-term exclusion from news sources. If an editor or author provides advance copy, the conditions must be absolutely explicit. A good and expert science reporter (remember that many are not trained in science) will do some form of peer review because he or she wants to get the story right. Many tensions in science reporting arise from the scientist's precautions to avoid overstatement and the journalist's need for a compelling story with a tight message.

If a reporter calls about one of your papers, listen and, if you need time to think about how to respond, guarantee to call back, ideally in 5 minutes. When you return the call, be sure to have a concise three-point message and the names and contacts of two or three experts for follow-up. Make sure that reporters know where the research meetings are, particularly if your journal is likely to publish papers in that field. Remember that journalists need scoops, so steering an interested reporter to the author of a forthcoming hot paper is a way to develop and strengthen ties to the press.