



AIA Best Practices: Getting good press to deliver your message

Contributed by Susan Liane Kennedy and excerpted from *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*, 13th edition

Summary

Getting good press is a great way to gain exposure for yourself, your firm, and the profession. Working effectively with the media involves remaining clear and focused about the message you want to communicate. Here are a few tips you can use to make *your* press good press.

Working with the news media

One of the best ways to market your firm inexpensively is to garner news coverage. Whenever an article about you or your firm appears in a newspaper or magazine, you establish yourself as an expert and gain exposure for yourself, your firm, and the architecture profession. In addition, you can use news clippings to augment your marketing materials.

The information you communicate to the news media must be focused and clear. Here are a few tips to make the media work for you:

Define your objectives. Have a clear idea of what you want news coverage to achieve. Do you want people to attend an event your firm is sponsoring? Do you want to increase awareness of your firm? Do you want to tell your side of the story in a controversial matter? Occasionally, you may be the object of media attention when you do not desire it. If so, determine what your preferred outcome of media contact would be and set that as your objective.

Secure client approval. It is possible that clients will have concerns about making information about their project public, or that they have public relations objectives of their own with which you should coordinate.

Target the media. Sending out press releases to every newspaper, magazine, trade journal, radio station, or television station is unnecessary and ineffective. Identify the key audiences you wish to reach and then determine which media reach those audiences. For example, if you wish to reach residential clients, consider “shelter publications” such as *Good Housekeeping*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *Architectural Digest*. For local markets, try the real estate or home sections of the local paper. To reach schools and school boards, consider magazines published by school and university associations. Never overlook the local business press.

Have a good story. The fact that you have completed a project that you think is a masterpiece is not necessarily interesting news. When pitching a story to the media, ask yourself, “Why would the audience be

interested in this?” Does your project use new technology? Does it address a particular community concern? Is the project owned by an important community leader or celebrity? The simple facts may not be enough; you need to explain why your story is newsworthy.

Do your homework. Study local, regional, and national publications or broadcasts. Analyze the kinds of stories they cover. Learn who has an interest in architecture and design; it may be a business writer. Call reporters and editors and ask what kinds of stories they are interested in featuring, what information from you would be useful, and how it should be presented. Offer yourself as a source on zoning, housing, and other issues within your realm of expertise.

Provide photographs, images, and graphics. High-quality images are the measure of many publications, and can make the difference in whether your story makes it to print or broadcast.

Avoid jargon. Use words that a nonarchitect audience understands. Jargon applies not only to technical language but to common words used in unusual ways; for example, “intelligent building”: What does that mean? Most people won’t know what you mean when you say “cantilever,” “fast track,” or “schematic design.” Those words are fine for design magazines but not for local papers.

Be prepared. Before making contact with the media, write down the points that you wish to make. Try to maintain control of the interview. A reporter may ask questions that are not consistent with your goals for the interview. Politely deflect the question by saying, “I don’t think that is the issue. The important point is...” You can maintain control only if you are prepared and know exactly what you wish to say. If a reporter contacts you for an interview, learn as much as you can about what the reporter wants to ask you and what his or her deadline is. Offer to call back within the deadline. This time allows you to reflect on what you want to say and to determine your key points.

Respect deadlines. All reporters work under tight deadlines. They need short answers and they need them fast. A television news story may be less than a minute long, and your quote no more than 10 seconds. Make your point quickly and clearly. Give reporters what they need (so they will use it) but in a way that benefits you.

Do not go off the record. Everything you say to a reporter can and will be used. Assume the reporter is taking notes from the moment you answer the phone. Choose your words carefully. Never say anything that you would not want to see on the front page of *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*.

Do not lie. Lying can severely damage your credibility—permanently. If you do not know the answer, say so. If you cannot comment on something, say so. Do not be defensive; simply be firm. Do not say “No comment.” There are other ways to indicate you will not answer the question: “It would not be appropriate for me to answer at this time,” or “Until I have more information, it would be inappropriate for me to respond to your question.”

Do not repeat a negative question or phrase. A reporter asks, “Isn’t it true that architects are responsible for most building collapses?” Do not answer by repeating the phrase, such as, “No, it is not true that architects are responsible for most building collapses.” Instead, address the issue by demonstrating that you know more about the issue than the reporter. For example, you might say, “Many factors are involved in a building collapse. That is why it is important to...,” followed by your key points.

Do not get angry. No matter what happens, do not lose your cool. When you lose control, reporters gain rating points. But more than that, viewers will remember that you got angry, not the important things you have to say.

Be patient. The media, particularly the print media, will use your material when it suits their purpose. This is especially true for information with a long “shelf life,” that can be published almost any time without losing its news value.

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