CHAPTER 31

PUBLICITY AND PUBLICITY RELATIONSHIPS

Let him who will preach to a congregation from a pulpit, but:
as for me, let me write to the multitudes through the columns of
the press.—An old saying paraphrased.

God bless the man who first invented publicity.—Prayer of the
hosts who seek publicity.

Everybody with a cause or an idea, good, bad, or indifferent,
or with some group or personal interest to promote, or with a
bit of vanity to feed, is seeking publicity. At least, that is what
the editor, looking up from his day's receipts of "free stuff," offered
without stint and without price, will tell you if you ask him about
publicity.

The chances are many times to one that the student of this
text who gains some skill in writing for the press will sooner or
later find himself prompted from within or without, to assist in
promoting some movement or enterprise by writing about it for
publication; it may be as a worker in a church building campaign,
a Red Cross drive, a public entertainment, a farm organization, a
woman's club, as a county agent or home demonstration agent,
as a vocational teacher, as a worker in some public welfare activity,
or in any one of scores of other connections.

But also, the field of publicity work, or public relations, has
become increasingly attractive for men with skill in journalistic
writing added to their other training. A good many such posi­
tions are found in the field of industry and business, and in state
and national organizations and institutions of many kinds.

As far as the actual preparation of publicity stories is concerned,
it should be done in the manner of the newspaper and magazine,
and all of the preceding chapters of this book deal with that sub­
ject. But to do the job successfully and without arousing the
sleeping lion of prejudice in the editor's sanctum is more than a
matter of writing skillfully in journalistic style; it is very largely
a matter of correct understanding and of good relationships—an understanding of newspaper principles and relationships that are sincere and frank.

A specific example: The authors of this text have had opportunity to observe the way in which county agents and home demonstration agents in particular have handled the publicity and public relations work in connection with their jobs, over a good part of the United States in recent years. Some are doing outstanding work, while others do only routine or hack work.

One of the best examples that has come to our attention recently is that of Mary M. Leaming, home demonstration agent in Camden County, New Jersey. The stories of her work, told in sprightly and interesting manner and filled with timely information, are good models. In the October, 1941, issue of Extension Service Review, published by the United States Department of Agriculture, Miss Leaming tells the story of what she had been doing, in an article entitled "The Newspaper Works for Me." This article, which is a better chapter than we could write, because it is actual experience, is as follows:

THE NEWSPAPER WORKS FOR ME

How do you make a dent in the thinking of the people with regard to nutrition when you are only one agent in a big urban county like Camden County, N. J.? This was the question that faced me two years ago. Only one pair of hands and a population of 200,000. Meetings were well attended; local leadership was good, and support of local organizations was excellent; but current conditions made it urgent that an increasingly large number of people be reached.

The answer was the newspaper. Camden City has a large metropolitan paper, the Camden Courier-Post, the combined morning and afternoon circulation of which amounts to 90,000 daily, with the bulk of that circulation in Camden County.

With the cooperation of the extension editors at the college, a plan was evolved and presented to the newspaper management with whom most cordial relationships had previously been developed.

Acceptance of the plan meant the home demonstration agent's responsibility for seven columns of food-page material weekly—to be sent regularly, on time, and in proper form for publication. It was determined that this copy should include: (1) A "Homemakers' Question Box" composed of actual questions forwarded by readers; (2) timely informational stories relative to local New Jersey farm products and their use; (3) informational stories with regard to current
food industry developments and their relation to the homemaker; (4) a weekly 3-inch box story offering a timely publication; (5) a weekly low-cost menu; and (6) a feature story on any subject the home demonstration agent deemed wise.

Response was immediate. There was no need to worry about reader reaction. It grew. One week's copy has brought in as high as 800 fan letters.

The feature story particularly drew much comment. In it each week are two characters: Mrs. White, the bride, inexperienced and typical in reaction; and her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Jones, an intelligent, experienced homemaker, who has made a study of nutritional problems from a practical standpoint.

One woman wrote: "I am a Mrs. White. How I wish I lived next door to Mrs. Jones!" Another: "The Mrs. Jones stories are such a painless way to get such a lot of useful information." Other communications frequently say: "Send me the recipes Mrs. Jones used for potatoes" or whatever the current subject discussed involved.

When the local Philadelphia food-for-defense campaign, inaugurated by SMA last March, came along, I merely had to write the copy from the angle of using surplus commodities. The feature story explained the objectives; the box offered recipes using surplus commodities. Readers' questions naturally turned to use of suggested products; local farmers selling surplus commodities to the Government were glad to see their products pushed in the informational stories.

Time went on. Through newspaper columns, official requests of the Secretary of Agriculture were discussed and interpreted for practical use under local conditions. No special following had to be built up—readers looked for the column regularly, as was proved by their requests.

Results? The extension office has rendered service to hundreds who would not have attended meetings—who could not leave small children, who worked during the day, or who could not afford the bus fare sometimes necessary to get to meetings, as well as to hundreds who would never have known of the existence of such a service but who are now class members or cooperators.

The copy as written has obviously appealed to the low-income group. The following letters are typical of many:

"I should appreciate a menu for ten people ranging in age from one to forty-two years, lunches carried by six on a budget of $12 to $13 weekly."

"In reading the Courier this evening, I find a question I have so often thought of asking—the working out of a food budget. My allowance is $20 a week, received every two weeks. I usually pay milk, bread, and other food bills this way. At the end of two weeks I find myself short and feel that this could be avoided if I could budget this $40. There are six of us in the family, three adults and three husky children. I pack one lunch daily and pay 60 cents weekly insurance, a bill of $2 weekly which will be settled soon, also telephone amounting to $3.50 monthly. There is no garden, and there are no special diets. Any help you could give me so that I may have nourishing meals for all will be greatly appreciated."

It is obvious, too, that the news copy is followed by the young homemaker and the prospective homemaker. The following excerpt is typical:
"Please send me 'Meals for Two' and any other material you would give to a bride. I do need assistance. Have you any budget helps, such as how to plan a budget and what percentage to allot for various items?"

Through the columns people have learned of the wide scope of services attainable through the Extension Service and its supporting agencies in the United States Department of Agriculture and the college. Service rendered means support for this office—prestige, good will, and increasing appropriations.

Newspapers and food-for-defense campaigns must work together if any appreciable percentage of the total population of urban areas are to know and appreciate farm and industrial food problems in relation to nutrition, general homemaking problems, and total defense.

**Paid matter and free matter:** It is essential to understand and keep in mind that publicity material may be of a kind for which newspaper space ought to be bought, or of a kind that may properly be offered for publication without charge. Many of the prejudices and difficulties that arise in publicity enterprises are due to failure to appreciate that point.

For commercial purposes or near commercial purposes, seeking some monetary or other selfish advantage, space for publicity ought to be bought and paid for. Business men in the United States buy very great amounts of newspaper and magazine space, normally nearly a billion dollars worth of it a year, thus providing periodical publishers with an advertising income which is 65 to 75 per cent or more of their gross operating income, and making possible the circulation of wonderful publications at a low price. But unfortunately for the name of publicity, some business and other selfish interests systematically seek to get free publication of matter that is designed to benefit them commercially or otherwise, directly or indirectly. They sometimes hire skilled, high-salaried writers to dress up such matter in the guise of news or information, or to set up and "pull off" unusual "stunts" which will get them free space. Sometimes they seek to get considerable free "publicity" on the basis of their having bought more or less space for advertising. To both the editor and the publisher, and especially the former, the practices seem quite unethical and are in much disfavor. These practices are at the bottom of the very pronounced prejudice against all publicity matter, good or bad.

For the news activities and the purely informative, educational, and unselfish promotion purposes of many public or semipublic
organizations and movements which have the objective of general social, moral, or economic betterment within the community, state, or nation, newspaper and magazine space is not bought, except to a very inconsequential extent. Such organizations include farm groups, churches and other religious societies, Red Cross societies, parent-teacher associations, welfare movements, philanthropic enterprises, schools, colleges and universities, and the host of other activities which seek no selfish or commercial ends. Editors and publishers recognize that there is news in the work of these organizations and movements, and also acknowledge that insofar as the common welfare and not private profit is to be increased thereby, they are under some measure of obligation to publish information and promotion material that comes from such sources. Editors and publishers welcome the cooperation of the publicity writers who offer them such material.

While in some instances it may not be easy to distinguish between paid matter and free matter in publicity work, yet in the main it is not difficult. The real test has been suggested in the preceding discussion—does the particular item or article seek commercial or personal gain or advantage, or does it seek to promote a truly public welfare purpose? Generally the editor and publisher look upon all announcements of money-making enterprises as advertising to be paid for, even when the proceeds are to be used for public or semipublic good. They say, and with reason, that if hall or auditorium rentals, orchestras and bands, printed posters, special talent, and the like are to be paid for, then promotion announcements should likewise be paid for.

It behooves the person charged with publicity work to be thoroughly discriminating; it behooves him especially to be thoroughly frank and "square" and not to seek by one scheme or another to disguise "paid matter" as news. His real usefulness ends where such practices begin.

Other aspects of the newspaper point of view: It is important to understand still other aspects of the newspaper point of view. The newspaper is both a private, commercial enterprise and a semipublic institution. It must make money for its owners through its publication of news, informational and entertainment features,
and the like, and it believes it must also serve a public purpose without any expectation of immediate cash return from that service. There will, of course, be differences of opinion among newspaper publishers and editors and others as to how far either purpose should govern policies, but it is not intended to enter into that discussion here. It is sufficient to say that newspapers and magazines generally recognize the two purposes above stated, one commercial, the other quasi-public.

For the fulfillment of its purposes, the newspaper publishes first of all news, information, and entertaining material which it secures and pays for wholly on its own initiative and through its own effort, with the thought only of serving its readers and not any special interests, semipublic or private. This material it weighs and rejects or uses strictly upon the basis of its being good newspaper “stuff,” of interest and value to its readers. This constitutes the great bulk of what it prints as reading matter (advertising not being under discussion here).

The newspaper also gives space, insofar as it can fairly do so, for the dissemination of news and information concerning the work and aims of general welfare enterprises of all kinds. This material is intended to promote, directly or indirectly, the special purposes of these enterprises, and it is furnished by them without any cost of initiative or money to the newspaper. It is commonly known in the editorial rooms as “free stuff” or publicity material. The editor accepts this material in a measure because he believes his publication should render public service, but again he must judge it for its interest and value to at least a considerable number of his readers. He may not hold, however, to such rigid standards in judging this material if it has important bearing on community welfare and development.

Whether one kind of material or another comes to the editor, he feels that he must deal with it more or less strictly on the basis of its news interest. That fact needs always to be borne in mind by those who seek newspaper cooperation for special purposes.

This further attitude of newspapers it is important to know: Because such a vast amount of “free stuff” is deposited upon the editor’s desk every day, many times more than enough to fill all
his reading columns, and most of it written purely for the promotion of private interests, he is to some extent prejudiced against all of it. The present-day editor judges it more severely than his predecessors, because the flood of it is greater today than it has been before. The man or woman who would "get by" with material written in the interest of deserving community enterprises must make sure that there are in it vital news and information, clearly of interest and value to the editor's readers.

That is the whole meat of the cocoanut for those who in one connection or another may have occasion to contribute material to periodicals for the development of interest in the semipublic work they are doing. Some subordinate suggestions are likely to be of value, however, to those who face publicity problems.

**Recognize the newspaper's contribution:** It would be difficult, if not impossible, to promote successfully the work of any semipublic organization or movement without the generous cooperation of the press, and that fact ought to be understood. Many county farm organizations and county agents have learned that lesson, sometimes in an expensive way.

"We could not satisfactorily carry on our work if we did not have the fine, generous cooperation of the county newspapers," said one successful county agricultural agent in discussing his press and publicity relationships. "They give us a quick, convenient means of reaching all who need to be reached with our information and educational matter, which we could not do without and which we could not duplicate. Without pay, except the reward that comes to them in the long run through building up a more successful agriculture and a better rural life, they give us columns and pages of space for our news and information material and even much other matter of doubtful classification. That represents a contribution of hundreds and thousands of dollars a year as space is valued. In their respective fields the dailies and the farm journals do the same."

When county agricultural agents, home demonstration agents, and other similar workers are employed, considerable weight is given to their ability to write for the local press and to maintain good relations with it.

**Hang your stories on news pegs:** The news is always the thing
with newspapers, and the successful writer of publicity material seeks to put news value into it. In newspaper parlance, he finds a "news peg" on which to hang every story.

If a county agricultural agent wants to emphasize the benefits to be derived by individual farmers and farm communities through the local extension service or county farm organization he doesn't boldly praise the organization or service, if he is a skillful writer. Instead, he seeks out some prominent farmer who knows these values and gets from him an interview on the subject, or he will find in his records facts and statistics showing what happened to farm production and profits through the activities of the bureau. That is putting his publicity on a news basis—finding "news pegs" on which to hang his story. If a home demonstration agent wishes to arouse a community to the importance of hot lunches for the boys and girls of the consolidated school, she will dig up the facts about what hot lunches did for a neighboring school and hang her promotion story on that. The experience of a farmer with sweet clover is far better material for creating enthusiasm for the crop through the newspapers than a page of preachment. A Red Cross campaign for funds will pile up more money if built on human interest stories of its work in the local field than if it is based on general information about it. The editor will welcome such stories because they contain an element of news, but he will accept the other kind with unfriendliness, if at all. It is news, not propaganda, that he wants.

There ought to be no dearth of "news pegs" for the county agent or the home demonstration agent who is alert; they travel far and wide through their territory; they make many contacts; they establish relationships which open up news sources that would probably be closed to others. This holds true for anyone trying to do publicity work. Papers want news first, last, and always.

**Prepare professional copy:** Not only make sure that there is news value in what you offer the editor, but that it is skillfully written, according to his standards, and that the copy is clean and neat. Even if there is good news value in a story submitted to him, the editor will usually not have it rewritten if it is unskillfully done.

Over each story should be written a brief title which suggests
what is in the story. That helps the editor who handles it to estimate its value to him. Put this in the upper left hand corner of the first page.

**Provide “follow-up” as well as “advance” news:** Almost invariably those who flood the editor’s desk with material in advance of a special event fail to give him a line about the affair after it is over. Of course, it may often be expected that the editor will send a staff member to cover the news, but even if he does, cooperation is much appreciated. This suggestion is especially important in dealing with publications which maintain only a small staff.

**Be an all-round cooperator:** While your chief interest in preparing material for the press may be to further the interests of the particular organization with which you are associated, you may well seek to cooperate with the editor in other ways. Especially, “tip him off” to other news than that which immediately concerns you, and if he asks you to do so, write it. That’s merely a fair exchange of cooperation.

**Play fair with competing publications:** If big news breaks within the field of your work, make certain that it is fairly distributed. Or, if one good story breaks for the morning papers, see that another breaks for the afternoon papers. If you have both dailies and weeklies, remember that weeklies don’t like to handle stale news or news that has already been printed by dailies. This means that sometimes some of the bigger stories should be held so that they will go in the dailies the same day that they go into the weeklies. Dailies usually hold a story until a release date if asked to do so.

**Get copy in early:** Newspapers are printed in a hurry, and when press time is near there is a big rush. An agricultural story that comes in late stands a fine chance of being crowded out by something of hot news value that comes in at the last minute. The weekly papers are always crowded for time on press day. A good time to send in news to a morning paper is shortly after noon of the day before its date of issue; and late in the afternoon is none too early to make sure of getting in material for the next
day's afternoon paper. Saturday morning is a good time for getting copy to the weekly that is printed the middle of the next week.

**Some helpful hints:** Sometimes news can be made by giving opinions on matters of moment. The views of a farm organization president on some question of the moment will be viewed as good news by an editor. Often some national or distant news has a local angle that can be turned into a local publicity news story. Plan ahead on publicity. For instance, if a meeting is to be held, get advance copies of speeches or reports and give them to the reporters in plenty of time.

Don't send out too much publicity. Know about how much papers can use. It is much better to send material only when there is something of real news value than to send it out every day or every week regardless of the quality of the news or material. Don't send out stories that are too long. Many times a news story of two or three paragraphs will get into print when a yarn padded out to a column will only find the wastebasket. Don't exaggerate, but tell facts accurately. Don't try to cover up part of a news story that may seem unpleasant. Give the newspapers all the facts, fairly told. Play up news, action, events, rather than organizations or names of officers, unless they are news.

**Interpret news:** If news is sent to farm papers, particularly, it is often advisable to send more than just the bare current news facts. Many times a short feature article, in which the background, history, or interpretation is added to the timely news element, will give an added value to publicity material. This is particularly true of news of agricultural organizations. A summary of progress of the state or county farm or other organization, an account of five years of progress in the cooperative, a story of the year's achievements in county club work or of project work in the vocational agriculture or home economics classes—these are examples.

**Make service the keynote:** Most organizations and movements asking for publicity are built on the idea of service. Publicity for these enterprises should likewise be carried out with this idea of service in mind, rather than that of securing free advertising or something for nothing. If the man who furnishes publicity ma-
terial to a newspaper or magazine keeps in mind that, in supplying news, he may render a service to that publication, he can win the respect and support of an editor much more readily. Likewise, if he keeps in mind that he owes a service both to members of his organization and to the general reading public to supply them with news of what his organization is doing, he is much more likely to send to the papers what he should. This idea of service, carried out by county agent, vocational teacher, manager of a cooperative, or publicity director of any farm, women’s, trade, or technical group, will lend dignity to his work and cause his material to be received with more respect than the usual run of free material that comes to an editor’s desk. Information service, rather than publicity work, would be a preferable term to apply.

Make use of this text: This text has been prepared with publicity work in mind as well as that of classroom teaching. If one has publicity work to do for daily and weekly papers, or for any type of periodical publication, the best instruction he can find is to peruse the chapters herein on news. If it is publicity that goes to a farm paper or magazine, the chapters on feature writing will furnish additional details as to how to go about it.