

Public Relations Officer

The community will not know of the special and outstanding activities sponsored by AMVETS without being told; therefore, it is the job of the public relations officer (PRO) to spread the word. There are many avenues of publicity available; those found most useful are outlined in the AMVETS PUBLIC RELATIONS MANUAL. The PRO should take advantage of opportunities to enhance the prestige of the post.

PRESSROOM - Communications Manual

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Introduction

There's an old adage in public relations that goes something like this: If nobody knows you've done it, have you? Visibility and publicity are certainly key components in any drive to build a successful organization. AMVETS is no exception. We have an important story to tell. But if that story isn't heard, it affects everything we do, from increasing membership to lobbying Capitol Hill.

Whatever you do in your job as a public relations officer—whether it's writing a news release, editing a newsletter, or dealing with a reporter—always aim to improve the organization's identity and enhance its image.

The job itself entails various styles of writing, demands timely submission of materials and requires an imaginative mind. Newspaper or radio experience is desirable but not necessary. That's why we prepared this manual.

The procedures described on the following pages will guide you through the public relations maze. They apply, for the most part, to both post and department PR efforts. Other materials are available and so are the resources of the Communications Department at National Headquarters. So don't hesitate to give us a call if you have any questions. We're in business to serve you. Good luck!

You Are The Link

As the PRO, you are an indispensable link between AMVETS and the news media in your locale. You have information about stories of local interest—stories that affect the daily lives of those in the community.

Newspaper editors like to hear from groups such as ours. They realize the value to the community but don't always have a reporter available to send to post events. That's where you come in.

You become, as it were, that extra reporter working to get your story to the newspaper in an accurate and timely manner. Read your local paper to see which reporters or editors deal with issues that affect veterans, or which ones handle community events. Knowing who to talk to at a newspaper (and at a radio or television station) is important in placing a story or getting coverage of an event.

Your success in this area also depends on how the information is presented. It's important to maintain a continuous relationship with the media so that they come to regard you as a trusted resource.

Once you have been selected as the PRO, the members of your post should be informed so that they know to report all news items to you. When considering these items, think like an editor and evaluate their worth. Don't be afraid to think that something is not newsworthy.

By submitting only newsworthy items, even infrequently, you will build a reputation as someone who knows what makes news and what doesn't. Above all, never try to exert pressure to have a story used. If it's a good story, the paper will publish it. The same holds true with radio and television coverage. If your event or activity is newsworthy, the station usually will send someone to cover it.

But first things first. Just as it is important for post members to know who the PRO is, so too should the local media. Start off by visiting the daily and weekly newspapers in your area, as well as the radio and TV stations. Call ahead and make an appointment to see the program director at each station and the city editors at the papers.

Try to understand the mission and character of the newspaper where you want stories and opinions to appear. In your dealings with these "gatekeepers," keep in mind that their time is valuable, so it is important to be prepared. News people respond positively to professionalism, persistence and good ideas.

When you make your first call, have something in hand such as a fact sheet about the post or a list of current activities. Explain that you often have news items and ask where they can be sent or who to call with the information.

See if the city editor or the program director will introduce you to the people with whom you'll actually be working.

You should also inquire about any specific needs or requirements such as deadlines, photograph formats and story lengths. The paper, for example, may have a policy against taking stories over the phone. Packaging your information to meet these requirements not only makes story placement easier but also enhances media relationships.

After you've made your contacts, work up a "media list." Later, when post-related stories are published, send clippings of them to the national public relations director. If space permits, we can further publicize these stories in AMERICAN VETERAN.

Structure your post PR program after considering:

- your post's long- and short-range goals and objectives;
- what people or groups need to know about each objective for it to be achieved;
- how you are now communicating with each group;
- what else can be done to reach them;
- how to gauge when each objective is reached; and
- your budget.

What Makes News?

There are many definitions of what constitutes news. Perhaps the most accurate is news is what the media says it is. That being the case, work with editors to determine what story ideas are best suited to their particular medium. Here are some ideas you might suggest:

- election of post officers
- committee appointments
- social or charitable events
- induction of new members
- special meetings
- auxiliary events
- civic programs
- involvement with local issues
- AMVETS' national policy

Copies of all statements issued by the national commander are distributed to department level and should be available on request. It is a good practice to provide the media with copies of these statements as background information. You can also quote from these statements or have the post commander announce to the media that he supports the policy of the national commander.

“Letters to the Editor” is one of the most popular features of any newspaper. Use this forum to state a position on an important issue. Or to correct mistakes in previous stories. A newspaper constitutes a historical record, so getting the facts straight is important. Letters can also be used to express post reaction to local news events (even those that may not have recently appeared in the paper). Statements should be kept short and be signed in the name of the post commander only.

Other things to keep in mind when you release stories or statements:

- check first with the post commander;
- comment only on nonpolitical issues;
- explain the post’s position without preaching;
- consider the community good;
- speak out only when necessary.

Preparing Releases

You’ve acquainted yourself with the local media representatives. Now it’s time to release a story. They are always looking for “good-news” stories. News stories should be written crisply and, where possible, answer the following questions:

- *What?* – The event that happened
- *Where?* – Where it happened
- *When?* – The date and time of day
- *Who?* – Who is involved, with full name, current address, rank or title
- *Why?* – The reasons behind the event
- *How?* – The details of the event

Your release of information may be written or phoned in, depending on the requirements of your outlet, but a written release is generally preferred. Here are some guidelines on preparation:

- Type your release on standard 8-1/2-by-11-inch white paper, double-spaced on one side only.
- In the top-right corner of the release, list yourself (or your commander) as the contact as well as the address and the phone number where you or he can be reached by the media should they have questions.
- In the top-left corner, indicate the date on which you want the information published or broadcast as, for example, *For Immediate Release* or *For Release on Tuesday, March 12*.
- Directly below this line, and centered on the page, type the story’s headline in all caps: AMVETS ELECTS NEW POST COMMANDER.
- Begin your release with a “dateline,” which identifies where the story originates and when. Example: MIDDLEFIELD, OHIO, Aug. 16—AMVETS POST 32 Commander James R. Smith announced today that his organization will hold its 10th annual volunteer awards ceremony next Tuesday (August 20) at 11 a.m. in the post home at 1372 South Rayburn Road.
- In the first few paragraphs, incorporate as many of the basic facts, i.e., who, what, where, etc., as possible.
- Spell out all abbreviations the first time they appear. At the end of the release, identify what AMVETS stands for. Example: AMVETS (American Veterans) is the nation’s fourth largest congressionally chartered veteran’s service organization.
- If a story runs more than one page, type more at the bottom of each page, except the last, which is designated with a 30.
- Never ask an editor to send you clippings of the story after it appears in the paper.

- For radio and television stories, make the sentences short. Leave out all obscure words and expressions. Spell everything out and when a name is hard to pronounce, include a phonetic spelling.
- Send your release to all news media at the same time.
- Never send a newspaper clipping to a station and ask it to do a news story.
- Finally, don't get discouraged if your release isn't picked up. Space in a newspaper is at a premium and sometimes other news will take precedence. The same is true of time for the electronic media.

As far as the news releases from National go, these are distributed over a public relations wire service to the country's largest media with offices in Washington. Information released involves policy statements from the national commander, upcoming events such as the national convention and announcements of awards.

Copies of these releases are faxed to departments in the interest of keeping each department up-to-date on news developments and policy. Departments are encouraged to share this information with their posts.

Special Events

There are always special events you can take advantage of to garner publicity for your post or department. For instance, in addition to sending out a story on the election of a new officer, you might phone the newspapers and radio and TV stations to see if they would want to interview him. Other events to consider include:

- conducting a mass swearing-in of new members;
- inviting a community group to an open meeting, where a special program has been arranged;
- holding public ceremonies to present honors and awards;
- arranging for your commander to address civic groups;
- sponsoring an event such as a charity golf tournament.

You also may want to establish a "speakers bureau" and offer the local community the expertise that's available in your post. Notices in local media or chamber of commerce publications can help publicize your bureau.

Holding a news conference (where the media is called together to hear an important announcement or statement) demands as much thought as putting together a special event. Some of the best ideas for securing media coverage appeared in a tip sheet put out by the United Way of Kent County, Mich.:

- Give media members plenty of advance notice—a three-day notice is generally sufficient.
- Send news releases to news directors as well as public service directors.
- Schedule your conference or event between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m.—times when most media staff are available.
- Phone assignment editors the day prior to the conference/event with a "friendly reminder."
- Phone radio and television stations the morning of the event to verify that you are on their schedules.
- Hold news conferences on site or at a location that's relevant.
- Be conscious of visuals during news conferences; arrange to have your logo in the background.
- Thank the media periodically for a job well done.

One more thing about news conferences. If there is any doubt about whether the information you want to disseminate is newsworthy enough, don't hold a full-blown news conference. It may be better instead to have a spokesman "available" to talk on the subject or even to send out a news release.

When planning photo coverage for a future event, give the paper all the pertinent facts about the event, including the time the picture is to be taken. A ceremony might start at 7 p.m., for example, but the newsworthy event might not occur until 9. Be sure to also give the name of the person the photographer can contact.

The photographer may request additional information on, for example, the kind of lighting that's available (fluorescent or incandescent), or the location (inside or out).

When the photographer arrives, be ready to assist him in identifying the people in the photos. Be sure to give the photographer ample room to work and cooperate with him in staging photos as quickly as possible. Most photographers have tight schedules to keep. Never expect the photographer to furnish copies of his pictures for your use. Generally speaking, most newspapers can make copies available for purchase.

Frequently, the newspaper will not have a photographer available for your event. In such cases, you can take pictures of the event yourself or arrange for a post member to take them. When you get ready to submit the photos to the newspaper, keep in mind these guidelines:

- Never send poorly exposed or out-of-focus photos.
- Submit 8-by-10-inch black-and-white glossies or color photos, never Polaroid photos. (Some papers will use only slides for color photos. Find out what their requirements are.)
- Always attach a caption to the bottom of each photo. Type the complete names and titles of those appearing in the picture from left to right, and identify what is occurring. Example: *AMVETS Post 32 Commander James R. Smith (left) presents a certificate of appreciation to Walter M. Jones for his volunteer work with hospitalized veterans.* Use a full sheet of paper for the caption and affix it to the back of the photograph with masking tape.
- Never give the same photo to competing newspapers.
- News photos for television should be of the matte-finish (non-glossy) variety in a horizontal format. Again, each photograph should carry a complete caption.

If you are also submitting a news release about the event, follow the steps outlined on pages 4-5.

AMERICAN VETERAN is a good outlet for material of interest to AMVETS members everywhere. The same rules for sending stories and photos to the news media apply to materials submitted to the magazine.

Remember our deadlines of November 15 for the winter issue, February 15 for the spring issue, May 15 for the summer issue and August 15 for the fall issue. We reserve the right to edit or condense all articles. Submission of an article does not guarantee its publication. Each piece is evaluated against the editorial requirements of the magazine and a determination is made as to its suitability for publication.

The Big Campaign

Promotion is a fine art. Those who are successful at it generally got that way by paying attention to 10 essential areas. Taken together, these areas form the basic framework on which to build a solid campaign. The “product” being promoted can be anything from a politician running for office to an organization touting the benefits of membership. In every instance, the considerations are the same. You need a clear-cut objective, thorough research, the cooperation of other groups and thought leaders, knowledge of the publics involved, timing, pacing, a slogan, visibility devices and, perhaps most important of all, evaluation. Let’s look at these areas.

- *Objective.* This is the starting point for any campaign; it must be specific, simply stated and agreed to by all concerned. The statement can be as simple as We want to increase the size of our post by 42 members before the end of the quarter. Once everyone is in agreement with the objective, write it down and give everyone a copy.
- *Research.* After deciding on your objective, you need to do a little bit of research. Take the goal of recruiting new members. Obviously, not every veteran in your city or town will be interested in becoming a member of AMVETS. But there are those who will. Who are they? Where do you find them? What do they do? These are all questions to be answered before embarking on anything else. And that’s where research comes in. A survey—one that profiles a typical AMVET member—can give you something to go on when you start making your appeals. Questionnaires sent to existing members and those involved in recruitment is one method.
- *Publics.* A common assumption is that people fall into one all-encompassing category called the general public. Not so, at least when you examine what the general public really is. For one thing it isn’t just one public but many. In fact, a person can be a member of several publics—all at the same time. A veteran, for example, can be a father, a husband, even a student. What you have to do is zero in on aspects of

AMVETS that are likely to appeal to him.

- *Opinion Molders.* Say you're going after married veterans in the 40–49 age group. The question here is who do those in this particular category listen to or look up to. Then you enlist these people in your campaign.
- *Cooperation.* Help is wherever you can find it. And in a promotion campaign, it pays to solicit cooperation from a number of sources. Places to start might be your service foundation and auxiliary, the commanders of military bases, even local chapters of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP).
- *Visibility Devices.* These are the tools of the campaign—what you use to put it “on the map.” They range from radio and television public service announcements to newspaper advertising and news releases. Other means to establish visibility are speeches by your officers, state tours by the department or national commander and local activities in the community, i.e., antique auctions, bowling tournaments, etc. Plan on using as many of these things as possible, but stagger them for maximum impact.
- *Timing.* Any promotion must have a definite beginning and a definite end (see *Objective*).
- *Pacing.* To maintain visibility, the campaign must “ebb and flow.” Draw up a planning calendar to reflect when certain promotion activities are to take place. You may, for example, want to send out your radio spots to coincide with the National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans in February. Again, the idea is not to expend all of your resources in any one month but rather to make effective use of them throughout the campaign.
- *Slogan.* Every campaign must have one, and it must be something that captures the essence of what the campaign is all about. The slogan should be short and something that people can easily remember.
- *Evaluation.* This is the most important—and difficult—element of the campaign. You want to know whether you reached anyone “out there.” Did you change attitudes about veterans? Did you improve the identity of AMVETS and what it does? Did you gain any new members? Whatever the objective of your campaign is, you should always try to determine how close you came to achieving it.

Conventions & Meetings

When your department or post begins its planning for any sizable function, particularly one where the media is likely to attend, there are some PR types of things worth considering. To begin with, if your meeting includes a meal, and you've invited media to it, you should reserve a table for them and have it marked as such. It's also a good idea to have members of your post or department seated there to serve as hosts and to “hold” the table for those press you anticipate attending.

Where meal tickets are involved, it pays to have a supply on hand for reporters who will be eating as well as for unexpected arrivals. If you're working out of a hotel, let people know in advance what room to go to or who to see for their tickets. Failure to do this can prove embarrassing, especially where you have people seated at a table with no tickets when the waiter or waitress comes around to collect them before the meal is served. Press kits are standard fare for important conferences and meetings and should be included in your overall planning. The kit itself need not be elaborate but should, instead, be as functional as possible.

Inexpensive two-pocket portfolios, which can be obtained from an office supply store, are your best bet. The pockets can hold any number of items related to the event and to your post or department: news releases, AMVETS fact sheet, photographs (5-by-7-inch black and whites) and biographies of your “newsmakers,” a copy of the meeting program, even the latest issue of your newsletter.

Finally, to the front of the portfolio affix a plain white address label on which is typed the words Press Kit, the name of your organization, the function and the date. You also should consider setting up a pressroom to serve as both a resource center for the media and a work area. Such an area is an asset to any convention or similar-size meeting. Such an area can take the form of an actual room, or it can be conveniently located in a hotel lobby. In either instance, the pressroom should serve as a place where reporters and film crews covering your meeting can get the information they need and act on it.

Regardless of what you opt for, the important thing is to have the pressroom “staffed” at all times. If you are not able to be on hand, have someone there who's familiar enough with the meeting agenda to answer questions.

Space requirements will vary with the size of the meeting. So it's a good idea to see the area or room beforehand. Check that a phone is nearby, that there are electrical outlets, and that you can get sufficient tables and chairs from the hotel.

Be prepared to bring at least one computer (or typewriter) from your office, together with some basic office supplies. Include name tags (with plastic holders) and a "sign-in" book to help you keep track of what reporters are in attendance.

Among the handouts to have available are press kits, press releases generated at the meeting, copies of speeches, and any materials related to local projects or programs.

Arrange these items neatly on covered tables that are easily accessible. So that people recognize this as your press operation for the meeting, display a sign to that effect (on an easel if possible) in the immediate area or outside the room. It also pays to have a chalk board close by to post messages and record story assignments. In the rush of things, it is all too easy to forget what interviews have been scheduled and when.

If the meeting budget allows you to serve hot coffee in the morning and a selection of soft drinks in the afternoon, they're amenities well worth the expense. But the most organized, best equipped pressroom in the world is no substitute for responsiveness. Helping that reporter to get his or her story is what it's all about.

The Commander's Visit

Official visits of the AMVETS national commander to departments and posts should be coordinated to run smoothly. Sometimes, though, even "the best laid plans" can come unraveled, but the key is still one of adherence to the schedule—with flexibility.

When the commander arrives in a city or visits a post, arrangements should be made to have photographs taken of the arrival. This gives him as well as the welcoming delegation an opportunity to appear in pictures that have meaning.

Meetings with local government officials should be set up well in advance. In large metropolitan areas, photographic coverage sometimes will be provided by the city's public affairs department. In smaller towns, the AMVETS state department or local post, whoever is playing host, should have either someone from staff or a commercial photographer take the pictures at these sessions.

Advance news releases are faxed from the PR Department at National Headquarters to all media in locales scheduled for visits. The releases contain information on the places to be visited, the dates and times for each visit, and the commander's purpose in visiting. As far as appearances on local talk shows go, advance planning again is the key. Contact people you know at the radio and television stations to get the commander "on the air," but do it prior to his visit. In such cases, the commander should be briefed on the types of questions he may be asked or the areas planned for discussion. Remember: the best surprise is no surprise.

That's particularly true when it comes to attire. Department officials should always alert the commander's office in advance of his visit on what kind of attire he will be required to bring with him to wear to different functions.

Looking Good In Print

Most AMVET posts and departments produce printed materials, ranging from magazines and newsletters to brochures and booklets, all dispensing information with varying degrees of effectiveness. You might argue that the name of the game is to get "the word" out, and that there is no time to fool around with graphics. A newsletter is a newsletter. Yes, a newsletter is a newsletter. But why are some better looking than others? Or why do people pick up one publication to read and not another. Obviously, content has a lot to do with it. But so does packaging. What follows are some ways you can "package," or dress up, your publications so that they stand a

better chance of being read—and do a better job of selling AMVETS.

You don't have to be a graphics expert to do this. Very often, the whole process of layout and design is nothing more than being aware of what's available and how to use it. Knowing what constitutes good and bad visual communication can help you recognize the difference in your own publications—and do something about it.

Let's begin with size. Here we'll concentrate on the type of publication a post might pass out in a shopping center or mail to a prospective member. The most practical sizes are 4-by-9-inches and 5-1/2-by-8-1/2-inches. The 4 by 9 will fit into the standard "Number 10" business envelope, while the 5-1/2-by-8-1/2 can go in a 6-by-9 envelope. This is an important consideration, particularly if you're going to be mailing out large quantities of the piece. In addition to keeping your postage costs down, these standard sizes can also save you money on paper because less waste is involved in trimming the publication to size.

Nothing in publications work generates more discussion than the use, or misuse, of "white space." Invariably, editors feel there's too much of it; the graphics types, not enough. Whatever the outcome in a publication, one thing should always remain constant—the margins of the pages.

For the standard 8-1/2-by-11-inch periodical, a good rule of thumb is to allow a 1/2-inch margin on the inside, near the fold; 5/8 inches at the top of the page; 3/4 inches on the outside; and 1 inch at the bottom. For smaller pieces, such as the 4-by-9-inch piece discussed earlier, simply reduce each of these measurements by 1/8-inch.

On the matter of typewritten publications, if you don't have access to a word processor, use correction tape rather than correction fluid. It does a much cleaner job. And when you prepare your copy, type it "flush left and ragged right"—similar to the way you write a letter.

The copy should be single-spaced within paragraphs and double-spaced between paragraphs. Where space is at a premium, you can always indent the paragraphs (except the first one), eliminating the need to double-space between them. For vertical listings, set off each item in the listing with a "bullet" instead of a number unless you're showing a sequence of steps such as in a "how-to" article. You can make bullets on a typewriter by typing a lower case "o" and filling it in with a felt-tip pen.

Finally, in "typeset" or computer-generated publications the best sizes for readability are 9- or 10-point type.

After size comes color. Are your publications all printed on white paper? In black ink? If the answer to both questions is Yes, you might consider putting some color in your pieces. You can do it with different colored papers and inks. In fact, printers and paper manufacturers are more than willing to give you paper samples. You can even see ahead of time how various inks will look when the job is ready to print. A word of caution: don't overuse color. A spot of it in a headline or a line rule is far more effective as an attention-getting device than page after page of color used indiscriminately just because the budget allows for it.

News reporting is the practice of sticking your nose into somebody else's business. Public relations is the practice of sticking your business under someone else's nose.