

What to Do When the Press Turns on You

by Ron Smith, Executive Editor, Southern Turf and Landscape Press

In last month's MALTA News you were told how to promote your business. This month we continue with the flip side of the publicity issue; that is, how to handle negative publicity.

Don't mess up.

Too often, especially in the past few years, the green industry has been lambasted as a plague on the environment, a hazard to dogs and children, an expensive waste of money, a wart on society's pudgy little nose.

We all know that such claims are unfounded and that the reverse is closer to the truth. The green industry improves the health and well-being of humans, animals and the environment.

We don't cause warts. Numerous studies show that to be the case.

So how do we fight negative news? Remember my advice last month about getting to know the news people in your area? If it's important to know them to improve chances of getting positive publicity, it's imperative to know them well when the manure hits the mower blades.

I remember hearing an old song, probably from the late forties or early fifties — I know it only through old movies and from my mother singing it to me when I was very, very little — I think Bing Crosby sang it. I'll quote the first few lines.

"You've got to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative and don't mess with Mr. In-between."

That's how publicity in the green industry must work. The first part is accentuating the positive.

If we do a good enough job of telling the good things about our industry all the time, we stand a much better chance of defusing potentially negative press

when it comes along. If we become recognized for our good work and take time to promote the advantages of well-maintained landscapes, golf courses, parks, etc., we've done a lot to plant the right seeds in the public's mind and will have an easier time convincing them that the negatives are not so bad as they are made out to be, or maybe not even true.

We also should have created, by now, an atmosphere of mutual trust and cooperation with local news outlets. And, hopefully, those contacts will ask us to respond to negative reports.

Then we have to have our facts in order.

We should always be armed with the advantages that turf and other landscape materials provide.

We should know how wildlife thrives on golf courses and how large, landscaped turf areas act as watersheds to replenish groundwater resources.

Reporters can get aggressive, pushy and downright arrogant. Try to stay in control of the interview and don't antagonize the reporter ...



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*It never pays to
anger someone
who buys ink by
the barrel.*

We need to understand and have the figures handy to back up the assertion that turf pesticides, used according to labels, pose no real threat to humans, animals or groundwater.

Yet we can never make rash statements such as: "I'd be willing to swim through a pond filled with malathion." Someone will demand that you do it.

Don't shoot from the hip.

Don't pop off and bluster about how safe anything is. Just the facts, ma'am, as Sgt. Friday used to say. **Also important:** Who is authorized to speak for your company? Do you want the technician you hired last Friday to answer a reporter's questions regarding the toxicity and safety

of Dursban, 2,4,-D or Roundup? Probably not.

Designate a news spokesperson, or several, or make certain everyone understands that no one talks to reporters but the owner or manager. Make certain all employees understand your press relations policy. And those who are authorized to speak should know how to deal with the press, how to answer hard questions or defer them if they don't know the answers. And make sure all other staff members understand, **unequivocally**, that if reporters ask them anything, they refer them to management, **politely**, but with no doubt that they will answer no questions about your business in particular, pesticides in general, or anything at all regarding the safety of landscapes.

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Failure to comply with that regulation should result in severe penalties. That policy, by the way, ought to be spelled out in your labor manual and it should be explained before employment. Every employee should know the procedure for handling reporters' questions. It's management's job to assure that is the case.

So, how do you deal with negative questions? I've always found the truth to be the most effective way to deal with difficult issues and I've often wondered why politicians' press people didn't understand that as well.

If something bad happens — a chemical spill, for example — provide the basic information. The truck wrecked, some chemical escaped the tank, we had a cleanup crew on hand within minutes and have removed the material and made certain that no residue remains. No one was injured; the public was not in jeopardy, because the pesticide is not easily volatilized, or whatever, and we got it out of the way immediately. We're looking into the cause and we'll let you know. Any more questions?

That's how I'd like to handle questions, but, in this litigious society, I'd take one more step first. Talk with your attorney if there is any potential for liability and damages. He may suggest delaying responses until you have a better understanding of what happened.

I don't answer legal questions. But as a journalist, I see red flags when folks refuse to answer simple questions and when folks say, "No comment," we assume immediately they are guilty as sin.

"No Comment" sets off warning bells and flashing lights. Any reporter worth the ink he uses for his by-line will assume that, since you don't want to talk about it, you must be guilty of some heinous crime.

Whenever possible and prudent, the best way to thwart his overactive imagination and get the Pulitzer look out of his eyes is to tell what happened. Don't wait for him or her to make headlines with a piece of fiction. Provide facts. But be aware of liabilities and consult an attorney before admitting guilt or responsibility. You don't

want to convict yourself in the press, especially if you're not guilty.

Don't get ambushed.

If a reporter asks for a comment on something you're not familiar with, or something that can't be answered in a two-paragraph summary or a 30-second sound bite, ask for time to get the material together. Then make a factual report, with as little personal observation as possible.

Remember, just because you explain something in 100 words doesn't mean that all 100 of those carefully chosen words will make their way into the final report. In fact, words 1-10 might be exactly as you spoke them, but then there's a gap up to about, say word number 56, and without the intervening 46 words, what you read is not exactly what you meant. Have you ever heard this:

Be careful with personal observations. Stick to the facts. Don't wax eloquent...

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I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard ain't what I meant.

Quotes get confused. They also get abused. Comments out of context can be made to prove just about anything a reporter wants. And some reporters will do that to fit the stories they want to write.

Be careful with personal observations. Stick to the facts. Don't wax eloquent on controversial topics.

Remember, too, the 10,000 times a lawn care operator applies a chemical correctly and safely is never news. The one time someone makes a mistake, however, becomes headline. Reporters can get aggressive, pushy and downright arrogant. Try to stay in control of the interview and don't antagonize the reporter. Be polite, respectful and as forthcoming as possible.

It never pays to anger someone who buys ink by the barrel.

But don't put up with poor journalism. If you feel you are being manipulated, misquoted, abused, or treated rudely, contact

the reporter's supervisor. It's your right to be treated with respect and it's your right to be quoted accurately. Most news outlets are interested in accuracy and should respond to complaints of poor journalism.

Don't let a badly written or poorly reported article pass unchallenged. Make management aware of the errors and offer to supply the correct information. Again, if you have developed a relationship with the editors beforehand, the process is much easier. 

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In a Nutshell

Do good work.

Promote your accomplishments.

Know your news outlets.

Be careful with company publicity policy.

Don't make mistakes.

And never antagonize a reporter ...

... especially me.

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