

# Media Relations: 10 Tips from Two Pros



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The utility media relations function can help turn stakeholders into advocates, producing a wide range of benefits: lessened frictions, lowered costs, enhanced customer relations, increased customer satisfaction and improved brand equity. But when utility spokespersons have a tin ear or a heavy hand, they can create problems internally and externally: for executives, for customer service representatives, for legislative and regulatory affairs managers and for departments seeking to build infrastructure.



Jeff Lane

We reached out to two veteran utility media relations professionals — **Jeffrey Lane at Salt River Project (SRP, one of my former employers)** and **Randi Berris at DTE Energy** — for their thoughts on the art and science of utility media relations.

Both have decades of experience: Jeff came to SRP and Arizona from the print side, mostly in Southern California, while Randi has experience at the Associated Press in Detroit as well as at a TV station and radio stations in New Hampshire.



Randi Berris

Both believe their experience as members of the news media has made them more effective utility media relations practitioners. Experience as a reporter, editor, producer or on-air talent gives you a better sense of what's "news" and what's not. Below is a distillation of their ideas for achieving utility media relations excellence.



### TIP 1: DON'T LIE TO THE MEDIA

Ever. Not even a little. That might sound either really obvious or completely counterintuitive. Obvious to those who have a strong personal commitment to telling the truth, wherever it leads, and counterintuitive to those who spend too much time watching nightly political opinion programming on cable TV.

***“Some people seem to think that media relations practitioners engage in ‘spin’ and shade the truth,” Randi said. “You should always answer questions truthfully and, sure, wherever possible, try to position your company favorably. But don’t lie. Ever. If you get caught in a lie, you’re done.”***



## TIP 2: UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF THOSE HEADLINES

Since readers and viewers skim the news, focusing mainly on the headlines, understand the importance of those headlines that accompany stories about your utility. Your experience as a reporter and editor should enable you to predict the headlines, and you should share your predictions with management.

***“Understanding what the headline is going to be, good or bad, and being able to explain that to your leadership, is a big reason why so many companies hire reporters and editors in their Media Relations department,” Randi said. “No one reads the news stories anymore; if the headline is against you, that’s all the reader needs to know.”***



## TIP 3: KNOW YOUR MARKETS AND USE YOUR NEWS JUDGMENT

“Phoenix now is the nation’s fifth-largest city,” commented Jeff. “We don’t call Phoenix-area reporters and try to get them to cover events where we deliver an oversize check to a charitable organization. Outside metropolitan Phoenix, in remote areas of northern or eastern Arizona, where we have power plants, that might merit some coverage. But not in Phoenix.”

***“If you don’t understand your markets,” Jeff continues, “you’ll damage your credibility. As former reporters and editors, we all were on the receiving end of pitch calls for ‘news’ that wasn’t really a newsy story.” Randi agreed. “Reporters in Detroit would laugh at me if I called them to cover an event where we delivered one of those big checks to a charitable organization. In a remote area, that could work. But not in Detroit.”***



## TIP 4: EDUCATE YOUR LEADERSHIP ON THE CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Newspapers have merged or closed, leaving fewer reporters to fill a smaller news hole. TV newsrooms also have thinned in recent years, and social media and online news services have expanded dramatically to take the place once occupied by the print and broadcast news media.

***“It’s getting harder and harder to get media coverage,” Jeff said. “When we recently announced we were again cutting electric prices, we didn’t get a lot of media interest because we’ve done it quite often. Same with winning the J.D. Power and Associates customer satisfaction awards year after year for about 20 years. It seems softer stories sometimes sell better these days — as well as anything about solar energy or battery storage,” he commented.***

## TIP 5: A CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE ISN'T ALL BAD

Sometimes you can use the changing media landscape to your advantage. For example, blog posts on your utility's website, or social media posts, can be picked up by members of the news media, either as a tip that sparks an interview and leads to a story, or as a self-contained nugget that runs as a brief, with minimal editing.

***“In today’s media landscape, you have more ways to tell your story,” said Randi. “We hardly ever send out news releases, but we’re busier now than ever. In our area, DTE Energy can post to NextDoor. Not every NextDoor chapter allows posts from corporations, but if you can, try to get on it — you can use that vehicle to inform your customers in specific areas about things that affect them, like power restoration times or construction projects.”***



## TIP 6: DEVELOP AND NURTURE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE NEWS MEDIA

Despite the reality that there are fewer and fewer reporters and editors working in the Detroit and Phoenix areas, Randi and Jeff are big believers in face-to-face interaction with those members of the media who cover their companies.

***“This is an investment, but it is 100% time well spent,” Randi said. “If a reporter or editor knows you, they’re more likely to include your side of the story. Also, it’s harder for a reporter or editor to be nasty to someone with whom they’re broken bread. Ideally, efforts to build a face-to-face relationship should be directed equally to reporters and editors.”***



## TIP 7: MAKE FRIENDS WITH LEGAL SERVICES AND HUMAN RESOURCES

Developing a new HR policy or participating in litigation can take weeks, months or even years, a far more measured pace than life in the Media Relations fast lane. A lot of media inquiries concern legal or HR issues, and the news media won't wait that long for answers. To help the legal and HR professionals understand that the news media operate on a rapid timeline, spend time with them when there is no crisis or media inquiry hanging fire.

***“We’re extremely lucky that we have a great working relationship with Legal,” said Randi. “Based on my conversations with other practitioners, what we have is rare. They understand we need to move quickly on some stories, such as when an employee or customer is injured or killed in an accident involving the utility. This comes from a long time working closely with Legal and HR. I recommend you reach out to Legal and HR well before there’s a crisis.”***

## TIP 8: ESTABLISH A BEAT SYSTEM

If you have more than one media relations professional at your utility, Jeff and Randi strongly recommend establishing a “beat” system, similar to the way news organizations have structured their reportorial resources.

*Having a well-defined “beat,” the responsibility for certain areas within the utility, allows you to develop some subject-matter expertise. But more importantly, it allows a media practitioner to develop relationships with subject-matter experts in those departments. “Our beat system has been a huge success,” Jeff said.*



## TIP 9: PROVIDE MEDIA TRAINING TO YOUR LEADERS

The best way to convey what you do is to show someone! Both Randi and Jeff said the media training their teams provide to executives and fellow employees is one of the most impactful demonstrations of the value they provide.

*“These workshops have been very popular,” Jeff said. “Anyone who thinks media relations work only involves tossing off one-line soundbites to the news media leaves the workshops with a much better understanding of how to work effectively with the media.”*

*“It really helps people stay on message, deflect hostile questions and more effectively handle ‘ambush’ questions,” Randi said.*



## TIP 10: EDUCATE THE MEDIA

Media practitioners must continually educate the reporters who cover your utility. Reporters are only as good as their sources, and a utility’s media relations professionals need to be a reporter’s first and best source for anything involving their utility.



**For more information on these tips or for a free 30-minute consultation with John Egan about your media relations function, feel free to contact us at 720-949-4906 or [John@EganEnergy.com](mailto:John@EganEnergy.com).**



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