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A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and mustache, wearing blue medical scrubs. He is smiling slightly and has a white stethoscope around his neck. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue.

# Newsflash: Working with Reporters Can Help Veterinarians

Good Press Can Go a Long Way

by Jen Reeder

HEATHER LOENSER, DVM, WAS SCROLLING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA one night when a casting call for a reality TV show piqued her interest. They wanted a veterinarian who does emergency medicine and surgery.

People auditioning for the gig needed to send a “sizzle reel.” So she Googled “sizzle reel,” and asked a friend to film her at work to show what the life of an emergency room vet is like.

She submitted it—and heard nothing.

Eventually, Loenser emailed the publicist to follow up and learned the showrunners had decided to cover Australian veterinarians caring for dolphins and koalas instead.

Then the publicist asked, “But could you do CPR on ‘Fox and Friends’ this week? One of the vets I’m working with can’t go.”

She answered “yes.” The publicist gave her media training to get ready for the TV appearance—which went so well, they asked if she could come back the next week to share tips for introducing a new baby to your dog. (The topic was timely because Prince William and Princess Kate were about to bring home their first child.)

Nearly a decade later, Loenser is a sought-after expert who has appeared on the *TODAY* show, Hallmark Channel, Martha Stewart Radio, and most of the news networks in New York, Philadelphia and Washington, DC. She’s also a guest blogger on numerous pet lifestyle blogs.

In 2016, the American Pet Products Association awarded her the Excellence in Journalism and Outstanding Contributions to the Pet Industry Award at Global Pet Expo.

“Just be brave and say yes to stuff, even if you think it’s crazy,” she advised.

Loenser, who is Chief Veterinary Officer at Suveto and former Chief Medical Officer at AAHA, says there are numerous benefits of working with the media for veterinary professionals. It helps build a strong reputation while sharing valuable information with pet owners. Plus, it can be fun—and educational.

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—DR. HEATHER LOENSER

“A lot of people want to write client education material or start blogging or start a podcast,” she said. “By being a guest in somebody else’s content, you can learn a lot.”

If she has to say no to a media request, she still responds quickly—and suggests colleagues as alternate sources.

She definitely recommends hiring a media trainer before jumping into TV.

“It is safer to have a media trainer—just the same way you get mentored when you’re learning a new surgery,” she said. “In a new communications technique, it’s a whole new world.”

Veterinarians can often find success working with local news outlets, according to Mary Tan, a former broadcast journalist who spent 13 years reporting for regional TV stations, CNN, and Fox before switching to public relations for the pet industry as the principal of Whisker Media. She is also Public Information Officer for the nonprofit Animal Humane Society in metro Minneapolis, Minnesota.

“I feel like there’s no reason why a veterinarian or a veterinary hospital cannot get coverage,” she said. “There are so many amazing stories.”

One of her contacts at a local news station even told her ratings increase by 20% when they showcase an animal or run a story on pets.

Tan recommends reaching out to local reporters about holidays like National Dog Day but to also be quick to respond to breaking news. For instance, when controversy erupted after a police officer shot a dog, she successfully pitched a veterinary behaviorist to a local TV station to discuss signs of a dangerous dog.



“Pitch right after the event happens,” she said. “You have a very short window. It’s called ‘newsjacking.’”

For print and digital interviews, Tan always encourages her clients to offer a phone interview rather than asking the reporter to email questions they can respond to in writing.

“A reporter will appreciate you more in a phone interview,” she said. “They can ask follow-up questions.”

Preparation is key before any interview, according to Laura T. Coffey, a senior writer and editor for the website of NBC’s *TODAY* show, TODAY.com. She’s also former vice president of the Dog Writers Association of America and author of the national bestseller *My Old Dog: Rescued Pets with Remarkable Second Acts*.

For print and digital interviews, she suggests thinking about one or two points you’d really like to make during the interview, then consider how to convey those points in a clear, concise, and conversational manner. Before a TV interview, practice in front of a mirror or have a trusted friend record a video of you answering mock interview questions.

“Yes, it can be a cringe-worthy experience to watch a video of yourself like that, but the experience can

improve your public speaking for years to come,” she said. “It will help you to avoid pitfalls like saying ‘ummm’ or ‘uhhh’ too often or talking in long, rambling sentences.”

She recommends speaking in full, coherent sentences and repeating the TV reporter’s question—particularly in pretaped interviews. So if they ask, “Why is it that so many dogs are itchy and can’t stop scratching during the month of May?” try responding with, “That’s an excellent question. Many dogs are itchy and can’t stop scratching during the month of May because...”

Coffey noted the journalism industry has been under assault in recent years, but veterinarians should try to approach interviews with trust and respect.

“The term ‘fake news’ has been batted around so much that far too many people believe a sinister, behind-the-scenes badness permeates most news organizations,” she said. “In my more than 30 years in journalism, though, I’ve never once encountered a journalist who wanted to get anything wrong.”

At a time when journalists are facing so much public mistrust, Coffey noted that credible sources are invaluable in news and feature stories.

“I think being accredited by an organization like the American Animal Hospital Association can help a veterinary source get called upon for interviews and potentially become a relied-upon expert source,” she said.

After a piece runs, she suggests emailing a brief thank you to the journalist and sharing the story on social media.

Veterinarians who want to become a go-to source but aren’t being contacted by journalists should examine

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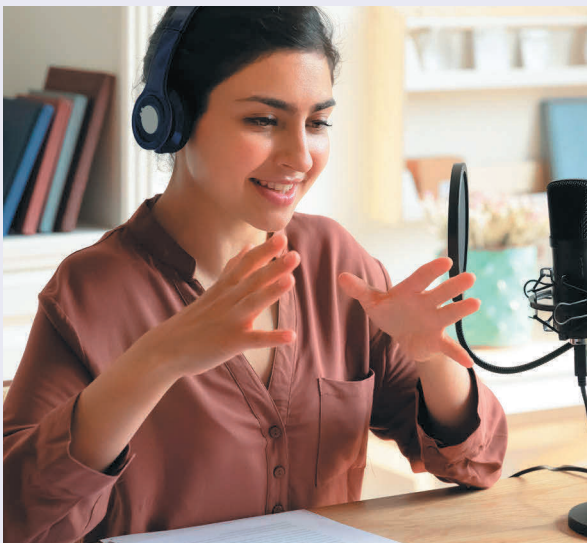
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—MARY TAN

## Pro Tips: Avoid These Issues When Working with the Media

Laura T. Coffey, a senior writer and editor for the website of NBC's *TODAY* show, shared these pitfalls to avoid when working with the media:

- Don't give a whole interview and then say, "Can I see this before it goes to print?" Credible news organizations do not allow journalists to share stories with sources before publication.
- Don't ask to speak "off the record." This especially holds true after you just said something interesting during an on-the-record interview.
- Don't blow off interview requests entirely. If you're too busy to prepare for and participate in an interview, that's fine—just send a brief, thoughtful, and appreciative note explaining that you're not available at the moment, but you'd love to be interviewed at a future time.
- Don't be late for the interview and/or keep rescheduling it. Remember that journalists are under intense pressure at work. Do what you can to make their jobs easier, not harder.
- Don't be upset if all your credentials and academic accomplishments aren't included in print. Unlike academic publications, mainstream publications are all about clarity and speed for the reader. Long lists of credentials can clunk up the flow of a story — and can potentially make a reader stop reading.



how easy it is for reporters to find them, according to freelance journalist Jodi Helmer, whose work has appeared in many publications, including *Entrepreneur*, *The Guardian*, *National Geographic Traveler*, *AARP*, *Modern Farmer*, *WebMD*, and *CNNMoney*.

"I often want to reach out to a source only to discover that their clinic has no email or is completely nonresponsive to media inquiries," she said. "Consider adding a media tab to your clinic's website or offer up a dedicated media address for emails and respond to those inquiries quickly."

Helmer said availability and responsiveness are the reasons why the same veterinarians are quoted repeatedly in the press. She also appreciates veterinary sources who can explain things in easy-to-understand terms.

"Sometimes pet owners are searching Google to try to decide what might be wrong with their pet and the added stress of needing to decipher an article filled with jargon or looking up additional medical terms will make them click away," she said. "It's always helpful if veterinarians can explain things in the same way they would talk to a client in a clinic."

Linda Kaplan, MHA and president of BluePrints Veterinary Marketing Group in California, said publicists can be extremely helpful to independent practitioners—both in prepping for interviews and landing them.

"When your story is picked up somewhere, that's a third party endorsing your practice," she said.

BluePrints offers clients step-by-step guidance, starting with:

- Build relationships and treat journalists with respect. During the holidays, BluePrints also makes donations in honor of journalists to Not One More Vet in appreciation for their work.
- Develop a long-term plan rather than focusing on a single story.
- Know the tools you need to use to communicate with reporters. For instance, understand when to offer a press release, a pitch letter, a white paper, a photo opportunity, or a media alert, Kaplan noted.
- Develop a media list for community news. "Oprah is not going to care that you just got a new CT machine.



Good Morning America is not going to call,” Kaplan quipped. “Who are the people that are going to care about your extended hours? Local news is going to care because they’re going to feed that information to the pet parents and the community who will benefit from that.”

While general-assignment reporters might be unfamiliar with the veterinary industry, some journalists specialize in pets. Freelance journalist Lavanya Sunkara started covering animals after adopting her dogs, Indu and Andy. In addition to *Trends*, she’s written for publications like *Reader’s Digest*, *Forbes*, *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, and *USA Today* and cofounded the Pet Creatives Network, a community of about 16 pet writers who support one another.

“We have definitely discussed the topic of how to help veterinarians, especially in light of what we’ve learned about what’s happening in the industry,” she said. “One way we want to help is sharing contacts amongst ourselves of who can benefit from the press.”

As a woman of color, Sunkara is passionate about interviewing diverse sources. She hopes veterinarians of color will reach out to her through her website at [nature-traveler.com](http://nature-traveler.com). She also writes frequently about telehealth because she believes it will lessen the burden on veterinarians and ER doctors.

Sunkara wants veterinarians to know that plagiarism is a huge sin in journalism, so sources should never email interview answers that are copied from other interviews, articles, or the internet—even from their own blog.

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—LAURA T. COFFEY

Natalie Marks, DVM, CVJ, previous owner of AAHA-accredited Blum Animal Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, and owner of Marks DVM Consulting, is a go-to veterinary source who’s been featured in *The New York Times*, *Real Simple*, *Chicago Tribune*, the *TODAY* show, and *CBS Nightly News*.

Marks prefers email interviews and tries to answer questions “as if I’m sitting in a coffee shop across from a reader with my Starbucks in hand and we’re having an active discussion.” For TV appearances, she takes a breath while being asked each question to calm her response and body language and really listens to the questions being asked rather than trying to remember talking points.

She hopes more veterinary professionals will make media appearances for the good of themselves, their practices, and the veterinary industry.

“We need more veterinary professionals in the media. So many pet parents adopted family members during the pandemic and never met their veterinary team, and that is a barrier to trust,” she said. “Look for journalists in your current client base, follow them on Twitter, and even reach out to local radio and TV stations with your willingness to be a subject matter expert when animal news presents.” ✧



Jen Reeder began narrowing her focus as a journalist to pets over a decade ago after she and her husband adopted a Lab mix named Rio. She has the utmost respect and gratitude for the sources who helped with this article. Visit her online at: [JenReeder.com](http://JenReeder.com).