

Building strong media relationships

By Guy Clifton

As a reporter, I basically need three things from a committee in order to cover their rodeo: A place to park, a place to work and access to the competitors.

That might seem simple, but when I first started covering the Reno Rodeo in 1999, all three of those items were a challenge.

- While the rodeo had a lot designated with a sign that said "Media Parking," it was generally filled with committee members' vehicles or reserved for "VIPs" such as the mayor or the some committee member's brother-in-law.
- The "press box" was a box-seating area inside the arena. While it was a nice place to watch the rodeo, it was not a practical area to actually do any work. There were no electrical outlets to plug in a computer and no tables to place the computers and no way to prevent anyone from entering the box and stealing the computer while you were off doing an interview. One year, the PR firm (thankfully used for only one rodeo) used the "press box" tickets for their employees. I had nowhere to work for the entire rodeo. Instead of being able to write during breaks in the performance, I was forced to rush back to the newspaper office to write.
- Access from the "press box" to behind the bucking and roping chutes was difficult at best. Reporters needed a ticket to sit in the box seat, a media pass and a chute pass. The volunteers manning the gates had a hard time deciphering all the different requirements. It was time-consuming and, as anyone who covers rodeo will tell you, if you don't get to the cowboys quickly after their event, you might not get them at all.

Over the past few years, all those things have changed for the better. Here's why: The Reno Rodeo committee asked media members how they could improve things. More importantly, they listened and took action.

Here was the situation for the 2003 and 2004 rodeos.

- A volunteer monitored access to the media parking lot.
- A media platform was constructed with direct access to the bucking chutes. Passes were simplified and volunteers were better informed of who could go where.
- The media platform included a table where reporters could place our computers and a power strip to plug them in. This past year, a cable with high-speed Internet access was also made available. The result of those changes was more - and better - coverage of the rodeo. Here are a few tips for rodeo committees on establishing relationships with local media:
- Be proactive: Designate a media representative from your committee. This person should contact the city editor and sports editor at your local newspaper and the sports or news directors at your local television stations well in advance of your rodeo. The media representative should get the names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses of the reporters who are likely to be assigned to the rodeo and contact each of them individually. Getting the information about your event into the right hands is a big part of getting coverage.

- **Be accessible:** In addition to the media representative, you should provide contact information for key individuals on your committee (executive director, president, other officers). It's also a good idea to provide contact information for certain committee chairman (parade, parking, etc.). Include cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses.
- **Be selective:** You need to establish that media passes for your event are for the "working media." The PRCA has guidelines it uses for the NFR and Tour Finales. Get their guidelines and customize them to fit your rodeo. If you want to allow non-working media, such as the newspaper publisher or TV station general manager, (or even the retired sports anchor who did a great job for you through the years) that's fine, but don't do it at the expense of your working media. Make sure your "working media" has a place to work.
- **Be helpful:** The vast majority of reporters have little knowledge of rodeo. Loads of information to help them out is available from the PRCA's communications department. In addition, have your media representative available to answer questions. If they don't know the answer, have them find out from the stock contractors or someone more knowledgeable on your own committee.
- **Solicit feedback:** After your rodeo, talk to the media people who covered the event for an honest critique. Remember, the easier you can make it for them to do their jobs, the better coverage your rodeo will receive.

Guy Clifton covers rodeo for the Reno Gazette-Journal and ESPN.com/prorodeo. In 2002, the PRCA honored him as Rodeo Writer of the Year.