

# SIERRA STAR™

how to use

## The Local Paper



*A primer for publicity*

# *First things first...*

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**S**o you've been named by your group as the person to "get things in the paper." Congratulations! And we want you to know you have nothing to worry about, because we're here to help.

Your job is one of the easiest in your organization, and by the time we're finished working together, you'll be able to brag — and show 'em the scrapbooks full of clippings. The other members will be patting you on the back because of the successful projects, well-attended because of the publicity you have achieved and the public awareness you have created for your organization and its projects.

Your job is to present the news of your organization to the public. Our job is to help you. The information you give us should be accurate, brief— and timely. Do that, and your colleagues will applaud you. We're sure of it!

To meet the needs of Eastern Madera County's schools, clubs, organizations, groups, governmental agencies and businesses, the **SIERRA STAR** has prepared this handbook to help you.

This booklet will help you develop simple press release writing skills as well as serve as an aid for determining what is — and what isn't — news. It will help you eliminate problems like inaccuracies in copy, incomplete information and the failure to meet the newspaper's deadlines. It will also help you get your news to the right person at the **SIERRA STAR** who can help you with your publicity role.

## *Plan ahead*

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**O**nce a decision has been made to hold an event, recognize that the primary key to success is intensive publicity. Yes, intensive publicity is available in your community newspaper. Just plan ahead, and work with us.

Before you actually decide on the date of an event, we'll gladly check our calendar to see if we know about anything else on the date your organization has chosen. (Also, the Oakhurst Area Chamber of Commerce, Yosemite Sierra Visitors Bureau and the Coarsegold and North Fork Chamber of Commerce maintain master calendars listing many community projects.)

For best results, time your event later in the week or on the weekend so you can take advantage of a big splash in the edition of the **SIERRA STAR** that comes out just before the event.

However, we recommend that you also plan your date so that, at least, you can get some mention in the paper for two consecutive weeks. Remember, all of us like advance notice and like to plan ahead for the activities in which we would like to participate.

In other words, don't surprise the people you hope will be coming by informing them of your activity, fund-raiser, etc., just a few days before it is scheduled. A lot of people who might be interested in attending won't be there.

Once the date has been chosen, start working with us — even if your group hasn't completed all of the details of the event. Call for an appointment and work with someone on our news team, so that together we can work on complete publicity for you. (The best days to schedule the appointment are Wednesday and Thursday. We can't help you on Monday or Tuesday, when we are all very busy assembling the next edition of the **SIERRA STAR**.)

**D**uring our meeting with you, we'll work out a suggested schedule of news releases and pictures. During our chat, we'll come up with a lot of ideas to help you with publicity—but we'll rely on you to follow through. We don't have a large staff of reporters; there are three of us in the newsroom covering all of Eastern Madera County, assisted by a few free-lance writers. Often, the news team is busy with breaking news, so out of necessity, publicity and promotion of your activities might have to be a lower priority. We're sorry, but that's the situation we face.

## *What news is – and news isn't*

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**A**n important step for you (and for us) is an initial “press release” about your planned activity. Please, don't be intimidated by the term “press release.” This is simply a sheet of paper onto which you have written the basic details of your project. We'll discuss the contents of a “news release” a little later.

First, ask yourself: *“If I were not a member of my organization, would this*

information be of interest to me?” If your answer is, “Yes, of course,” then your information is news and you need to get it in the **SIERRA STAR**. If your answer is “no,” you do not have a news item and it is best to save yourself time here, before you begin writing and before you spend your time on something that is unlikely to be published.

**The following is a list of items that may be considered news:**

- Club election results and/or installations.
- Unusual events at club meetings  
*(i.e., a guest, upon meeting a member, discovers they attended first-grade together years ago in another town).*
- Entertainment.
- Fashion shows.
- Anniversaries or club milestones.
- Craft shows.
- Member participation in local, state or national affairs.
- New projects.
- Guest speakers.
- Tours and demonstrations.
- Awards won or given.
- Competition with other groups.

... And this is only a partial list of possible subjects for stories about your organization that you can get in the **SIERRA STAR** with relatively little effort.

**B**e careful when writing your news release that you do not advertise a commercial product or a supporting business. If your intent is to thank a business for its support of your cause, the way to do that is with a letter to our “Hats Off!” column on the Commentary Page, or through paid advertising. We receive dozens of publicity notices every week. Many of these “news” items end up in the wastebasket because they are considered advertisements instead of news. However, it is seldom that the activities of a community organization would fall into that category.

You also need to recognize that if you’re pushing a major fund-raiser, there

is considerable benefit in strengthening your promotion of it through display advertising in the newspaper. We offer what is known as a “nonprofit” advertising rate, with substantial discount below normal advertising charges.

(One more note about advertising: if you place paid advertising anywhere — radio, television, other newspapers, Internet — then we naturally expect you include the **SIERRA STAR** in your advertising budget.)

## *Writing your release*

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**A** “news release” is simply a written fact sheet. If you want to “write” a news story, give it a try. But do not be intimidated because you feel you “have to write something.” You don’t; you need only give us the accurate facts.

We prefer you send us your “release” by email, but we will also accept typewritten “releases” — it is easier to read than struggling to decipher handwritten “copy.” When submitting a hard copy, please make sure you set your computer application (such as Microsoft Word) to double-space. Use standard letter-size sheets of **WHITE** paper; please, no color paper. Information written on color paper is difficult to read, and is impossible to use for electronic scanning purposes. Please do not submit information on odd-sized sheets of paper, which tend to get lost in the shuffling of the reams of paper we receive daily.

(Don’t believe it if someone advises you that the editor is more likely to notice something submitted on color paper, “the brighter the better”; fact is, editors tend to discard things written on color paper.)

In typing, use capital and small letters only, as we have done here. **DO NOT TYPE IN CAPITALS ONLY** — all capitals are difficult to read, impossible to scan and, frankly, make our job difficult.

Include at the top left corner of your release the name of your organization, your name and office in the organization, and the telephone number where we can reach you during a normal business day. (It helps if there are several names and phone numbers, in case you aren’t available when we need answers.)

Be certain to also include the date you’re writing the release, and when you’re referring to the date of an event, include day and date—Thursday, August 23, for example.

## An example of the information we need:

Submitted: July 24, 2009

### **MOUNTAIN PARENTS CLUB**

Sue Smith, Publicity Chair

555-5555

Event Date: August 23, 2009

## *Some other helpful hints:*

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- Type or print “MORE” at the end of the page if there is more than one page; type or print “PAGE 2” (and so forth) in the upper left corner of each additional page — AND repeat your name and phone number in case the pages get separated. (We receive LOTS of pages of LOTS of releases every week.)
- At the end of your release, type END or the pound signs ##### to indicate the end. (If your release is more than two pages, you’ve probably written too much for this particular release.)
- Also, for style purposes, please note that the **SIERRA STAR** requires the use of historic names of roads in Eastern Madera County, followed by the road number, if there is one: Bass Lake Road [222]. *This information must be included in your copy.* Our style also requires Mountain Area be capitalized, as the reference is to our specific geographic area.
- Please assist us by avoiding some buzz words and phrases which we will not use, such as “input” (comments is a better word), or “family members” (relatives is a better word). People have died; they have not “passed away.”
- And finally, always keep a copy of the release you submit. As we have explained, we receive reams of paper and your release might get lost in all of that. Also, you can refer to what you have submitted to help you note changes in wording we might have made, and this helps you further understand our preferences and styles.

**The following is a sample “news release”:**

Submitted: July 24, 2009

**MOUNTAIN PARENTS CLUB**

Sue Smith, Publicity Chair

555-5555

Event Date: August 23, 2009

A yoga class will be held Tuesday nights starting at 7:30 at the Mountain Community Center, 33333 Bass Lake Road [222], by the Mountain Parents Club, beginning September 1 and continuing through November 1.

Robin Smith will teach disciplined application of basic body structure, poise, flexibility, release of tension and the ability to relax.

Sessions on how to relax at work and on nutrition will be presented by guest speakers.

The sessions are open free of charge to the public.

Information:

Cathy White, activities director,

555-4444 (days) or 555-3333 (evenings).

**N**ote that this release explains the project, where it is, when it is, who is involved, the cost of admission and provides the name of someone to call for additional information. (A reader might want to know something additional, or might want to know how to contact Robin Smith to see if she is available to present a program for another organization.)

**T**he following do’s and don’ts will help you gather information and write a good, informative release.

Be sure to include the answers to the journalism questions of “who,” “what,” “when,” “where” “why” and “how” of your story. Try to include those details early in your release. In the same release above, the Mountain Parents Club is the who; the yoga class is the what; the dates are the when; the Mountain Community Center is the where; Robin Smith will teach ... is the why and the how.

This information is considered the most important and will serve to capture the reader’s attention.

Follow the details with the rest of the story. Because of space limitations, we might have to cut off some closing paragraphs. Also, parts or even the entire press release, might have to be rewritten by our news team to follow the editorial style of the **SIERRA STAR**.

You may want to keep a checklist of data when jotting down notes for your news release. The following may be helpful:

- **WHO** are the people involved  
(who’s speaking, who’s being honored).
- **WHAT** organization or group is involved in the story?
- **WHEN** does the event take place?  
*Hint: always think of the “when in terms of BOTH the day and date because we try to make certain they match — and if they don’t, we’ll be on the phone to you. We usually publish both the day and date in a story, a double-check for the reader, too.*
- **WHERE** does the event take place?  
*Hint: don’t assume everybody knows where the Mountain Community Center is located — include the address, intersection or other information. (And remember, our area is fortunate to have several community centers, more than one senior center — and readers are everywhere in the Mountain Area. We need to help them with details such as this.)*
- **WHY** does this event take place? What is the story behind the event? What makes it newsworthy? What’s the point? Is this a benefit for something, or someone, in particular?
- **HOW** does the event take place?  
Is there a special sponsorship of the event?

## *Spell it right!*

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**D**ouble-check all of your facts! Time, place, date and spelling of names. Don’t guess; your dear friend “Jane Smith” might actually spell her name “Jayne Smyth.” If her name is misspelled in the paper, guess who is blamed, (“The paper never gets anything right!”)

**K**ee your news release brief and to the point. Omit adjectives and personal opinions. Keep the release simple and direct. The best words are simple ones. Use active verbs when possible for variety and impact. The content of your release should follow logical order.

## *Photographs*

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**Y**es, you can take pictures and submit them ... but be warned that photographs are very tricky. The quality needs to be good. Polaroid-type pictures are seldom of good quality for reproduction. Digital images work well, but must be of an acceptable quality for print.

Don't create a mob scene for the picture. Three or four people is the maximum; more than that and the chances of your picture being used diminishes.

The people need to be doing something. We will not use a picture of people passing a check as they smile, and shake hands. Such pictures, and closely similar setups, are known as "grip and grin" and simply are not as usable in the **SIERRA STAR**.

(If the point of a picture is presenting a donation, figure out something to show what the donation is being used for and make this the subject of the picture. For example, Kiwanis donates to the library to buy books. The picture should include a representative or two from Kiwanis at the library with someone from the library staff displaying a sample book purchased as the result of the donation.)

You can request the help of our news team, but appointments need to be scheduled well in advance, and we usually can't help on Mondays and Tuesdays, our busy production days for the newspaper. Evening appointments, and weekends, are doubtful; we need personal time and a life of our own, too.

You need to help us when the picture is being taken by providing names and other information. (Remember, spell those names right!) Identify people left to right and those in front, then those behind. If there is no particular order, provide us with other information such as "tall man with glasses" and "older women with striped dress.

A technique we recommend is to ask people to remain in place, then pass a note pad among them asking them to PRINT their names as they prefer to see them in the paper.

If you've made an appointment for one of us to do the photograph, be certain everyone understands they need to be there at the appointed time. *We can't wait!* Have all the props — aprons, pancake turners, etc., ready.

If you're submitting a photograph you hope we can use, be certain it is properly identified. Don't write on the picture with ink; don't use staples or cellophane tape.

Pictures can be submitted via e-mail — [editorial@sierrastar.com](mailto:editorial@sierrastar.com). When emailing large images keep in mind many Internet Service Providers (ISPs) limit the allowable sizes of emails. If your images are particularly large you may not be able to send them through your email. You may bring in your USB flash card to the **SIERRA STAR**.

## *Different places in the paper*

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**P**lease note that there are specific elements of the newspaper for getting your story out. There is what we generally refer to as “ROP,” or “Run of the Paper” — general stories that run where space is available throughout the edition of the **SIERRA STAR**.

This is where the stories about the event, and the photographs, fall. Sometimes it is possible to come up with a color picture that runs on the Front Page. Don't count on this, don't expect it. However, early planning that provides a good, interesting story and a lively, colorful picture might qualify.

We are always looking for material — “copy” and photographs — that we can use for the full-page feature section of each edition. Don't hesitate to offer suggestions to the news team for such features — perhaps regarding your organization and/or its projects. With your help, it can happen!

**P**erhaps the single most important “spot” in every edition of the **SIERRA STAR** for promoting an event is *Community Calendar*. This collection of activities, meetings and other events has proven to be a popular “destination” for readers who want to know what's going on.

Entries can run for up to two weeks in *Community Calendar*, and this is another reason for starting early with publicity. The event can be included in *Community Calendar* right away, will remain among the listings in every edition. (Please

don't request that we "keep running" if your item is about a monthly meeting. We include a "pull date," and if the item is to repeat after a month, you'll have to re-submit it.)

There are some specific rules (always listed among the *Community Calendar* entries), including one event per submission; must be on letter-size white paper. All other "press release" rules explained elsewhere in this booklet apply. There is a 50-word limit for each *Community Calendar* entry.

## *Making contact with us*

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**W**e've already discussed the importance of setting appointments so we can talk about your project, your organization, etc. That helps you, and it helps us. Through personal contacts, you can keep us apprised of that your group is up to — and we can help you with ideas and together we can plan ways the **SIERRA STAR** can help promote your event.

We strongly recommend that your organization designate one person to handle publicity. More than one person can cause confusion and conflicts.

Your effectiveness as a publicity person depends upon the publicity you manage to gain for your organization. You will have an excellent chance of getting your organization's message to the public through the **SIERRA STAR** if your news appeals to a broad spectrum of people and if it is presented in the best possible form.

If the information in your press release is correct, then we make every effort to present it correctly in the newspaper. We don't offer excuses, but we do process a lot of words with only a few people available to do it. We make mistakes, and when we do we rectify the situation as quickly as practical. We are just as irritated by mistakes as you are.

We will do everything we can to help insure that the stories about your activity and your organization are correct, but obviously we rely on you to provide accurate details in the first place. And please, before you call to complain about an error, check your notes first; check the photocopies you kept of your releases.

**Y**ou are encouraged to visit the Publisher or the Editor if you feel that your group is continually being wronged when it comes to publicity, or if you feel your group isn't getting the publicity it deserves. Together, we will find a solution.

# SIERRA STAR™

Serving the Mountain Area since 1957

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