



THE AMERICAN LEGION

MEMBERSHIP

PUBLIC RELATIONS GUIDE





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SECTION ONE

THE CHANGING MEDIA WORLD

...AND HOW TO ENGAGE IT WITH YOUR POST PUBLIC RELATIONS PLAN

“If you build it, they will come,” was the theme of the popular 1989 film “Field of Dreams.” But while the characters in the baseball fantasy received some supernatural assists, a sound public relations strategy requires far more than simply having a good product.

The American Legion is a great product but if people don’t know about it, they won’t simply come and join. That is why it is vital for American Legion departments, districts and posts to formulate, maintain and adapt a strong public relations program as a permanent component to its membership efforts. This guide is designed to give you all of the essential tools that you need (except money) to implement such a program.

Just as the invention of the transistor began the space age rush to microchip processor computers that get smaller and more powerful every day, the explosion of the Internet and social media have had a profound effect on the way Americans get their news and information. In the late 1990’s, web-based technology was looked at suspiciously by some practitioners of traditional media, who underestimated its lasting impact. Today these technologies are dominating the way people can - and must - be reached. Many daily newspapers across the country have literally “folded,” or gave way to all electronic versions. As a result, many journalists are now doing double and triple duty. Reaching out to them in pitching membership story ideas requires a whole new approach - and toolkit of ready materials - to compete for their attention and time. *Moreover, good news directors and editors will dismiss overt membership pitches* as “unearned media” and transfer these thinly disguised advertisements to their sales representatives and only run what you are willing to pay for. If it smacks of spam (an unsolicited bulk email, usually for commercial purposes), it will probably be deleted without ever being opened.

But even with these obstacles, the modern media age offers far more advantages than disadvantages. It has given birth to a generation of “citizen journalists,” which means virtually any person with a computer can control his or her own message and send it to the world.

A strong public relations effort need not be cost prohibitive. An entire new genre of social media has sprung up, leaving public relations practitioners who have not embraced its use in the dust. Television stations have cut back staff, including reporters and photographers, requiring many to become “one-man-bands,” reporting and shooting the video themselves. Radio stations are moving to more “syndicated” programming, requiring fewer staff and live shows. Satellite radio offerings have increased dramatically, reaching national audiences while

offering little to no local access opportunities. And social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube are free for anyone to use and post content.

Web technologies offer limitless access to both general and targeted audiences. Harnessing these opportunities is critical to a healthy and effective communications outreach for American Legion family activities both at home and abroad.

Developing a communications/public relations plan that addresses the use of today's media technologies is the first step in successfully reaching the target audience(s) needed in your community.

But while the tools have, and continue, to change dramatically, the basic techniques of communications and public relations remain the same.

WHAT IS PUBLIC RELATIONS?

As the term implies, Public Relations (PR) requires that you relate to the public in some manner. The question is, "What is a 'public' and how do we relate to it?" Several 'publics' require our attention as American Legion public relations practitioners. These include but are not limited to:

- Our members
- Wartime veterans eligible for The American Legion who are not members
- The media
- Local and national elected officials and decision-makers
- Local community members
- Participants and potential participants in American Legion programs
- Donors and potential donors to American Legion programs
- U.S. citizens in general

HOW you relate to the public depends on which public it is and what your message is.

In a nutshell, Public Relations is primarily about **IMAGE**. And every member of The American Legion plays a role in communicating our image to the various publics to which we relate. The positive and negative things seen and heard at every level of the organization affect peoples' perceptions of The American Legion. Perception is reality for most people. Nobody wants to join an organization that they do not feel positive about.

The familiarity and reputation of its name are two of the greatest assets of any product or organization. In modern advertising terms, it's called "branding." It's the first thing you think of when you hear a name. For instance, what is the first thing you think of when you hear the word "Lexus"? Do you immediately think of luxury and quality? How about "McDonald's" or "Hyundai"? Now apply the same exercise to "The American Legion." Just remember that your perception will be different than what other people might have because your image of a product or organization is based on your experiences and knowledge.

An organization's image is based on the character, integrity and total performance of the organization. It

consists of every contact the organization has with its various publics. It is a composite of:

- The organization's history in dealing with people
- Internal attitude toward members
- External attitude toward community responsibility and involvement
- News releases, interviews and other dealings with the media
- Internal and external publications
- Internet presence
- Institutional advertising

What is the image of The American Legion today? It depends on which public you ask. To the media in general, we are the largest veterans organization in the nation and are considered to be a reliable source of information relating to veterans issues. In some local communities, The American Legion has no image because no community programs are conducted. In other local communities, members of The American Legion are experts on important issues and pillars of the community. Still others may view an American Legion post as a watering hole for older veterans without offering much for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans or their families. Each public's perception is their reality, and if a negative perception exists, people aren't likely to join.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF A POST PR OFFICER

Public relations representatives might have any number of titles in corporate and government circles. Public affairs, communications, publicity, marketing, media relations and several other like titles may be used. As discussed here, all these roles are combined into your job description as public relations officer or chairperson for your post or department. All office-holders in The American Legion should be concerned about membership and this goes double for the public relations officer.

In many ways, the public relations function is the most important function at any level of The American Legion. It is our job to inform, enlighten, persuade and convince our many publics of our beliefs, events and goals.

The first responsibility should be to determine your image in your community, if you don't already know. And you should constantly review your organization's standing on the image meter. Ask media representatives how they perceive your organization when you talk to them. Talk to your community leaders and to your post's neighbors. Talk to your members – not just the ones who are always there to help, but the members who seldom show up for meetings or events. Find out why they don't show up so you can begin to change their perceptions about the post and get them involved.

Your primary responsibility now will be to alter or maintain the image of your post and/or The American Legion and to communicate your various messages to each of your many publics. Based

on your knowledge of what your image is, you can better focus your message(s) to achieve your goals, whether it is to garner support for a veterans issue or convince members to support a post function. Gaining support for your programs and issues should go hand-in-hand with recruiting new members and retaining existing ones.

THE MILITARY PUBLIC RELATIONS MODEL

For years, the United States military has successfully utilized a three-tiered public affairs (relations) paradigm. From the Pentagon down to the post/fort/base level, military public affairs offices divided the PR mission into three separate, but related, functions:

Media Relations

Outreach to the general public is crucial to the success of any corporate or private entity. While there are varied ways to disseminate information, the media offer the best way to reach the largest number of people with your information.

Why won't your local newspaper run your story about the membership drive or open house you're having this weekend? What is that TV reporter doing inside your post at the bar with a photographer interviewing your members? How did that story get printed without me (or the post commander) knowing anything about it?

Effective media relations mean that you and the various media in your area have a good working relationship. It's a mutual relationship based on trust and honesty. They call you when they need answers on veterans' issues, and you know who to call to provide a local angle to a national story regarding The American Legion. Building these personal relationships will require real time and effort but the payoff will be well worth it.

Internal Information

Notify your members through newsletters, the Internet, email, and social media of what is going on at your post, as well as passing on local and national policy and program issues of importance to all members. Don't assume that just because your members pay their dues every year that they understand what The American Legion is all about. Keeping our members informed of ALL of the issues is critical to keeping them motivated and active at all levels. Members who are constantly kept in the communications loop about what your post is doing are much more likely to renew their memberships.

Community/External Relations

Whether you are inviting members of your community to attend a ceremony or function at your post, having a membership drive or conducting an area-wide information campaign, you will need to reach people who are not members of your post. This will involve coordination with not only the media, but all other elements in your community to include outreach to businesses, elected officials, schools and religious leaders as well as other civic groups in your town or neighborhood. It may involve obtaining sponsorships for post events.

As good citizens of your community, your post members should ask to be represented at various civic functions or meetings. While the post commander will most often be the point of contact for civic and community functions, the PR officer should be the one to advise the commander on specific issues and will act as spokesperson on occasion. Good community relations should also include a post speakers bureau to be able to tell The American Legion story in speeches to other community groups.

Good public relations begin with the post commander establishing policies and practices that are ethical, honest and in keeping with the public interest. Then the PR officer can take those policies and practices to the public for acclaim, understanding and, if need be, for clarifying any misconceptions.

The post PR officer is expected to provide four basic services:

- **Advice and Counsel.** The PR officer should advise post officers of the PR impact policy decisions will have on the media, on the community and on members.
- **Communications Service.** The process of letting the members and the public know about events and policies via newsletters, booklets, speeches, news media, good citizenship, examples and other means.
- **Public Relations Research.** Identifying, evaluating and communicating information of community or world events to the post leaders and members who would help the post manage its affairs better.
- **Public Relations Promotion.** Development and execution of a variety of programs and activities designed to gain acceptance for the post among members and within the community. Post revitalizations, recruitment drives and target milestones will not reach their full potential if nobody knows about it.

CONTINUITY IS CRITICAL

Public relations require development of relationships with various officials, media representatives, and department and national staff members. It's critical to have some form of continuity in your efforts to maintain these relationships. In a volunteer organization, it's difficult to saddle one individual with this much responsibility for an extended time. As an alternative, try to spread the responsibilities to several individuals, allowing them to specialize in various areas.

At the very least, maintain a comprehensive PR log or computerized excel spread sheet at your post/district/department to provide continuity for each person assuming the responsibilities. The data should include contact names, deadlines for various media, submission procedures for articles or public service announcements (PSAs) and a contact history for various individuals to include what was discussed, etc.

PLANNING

Quite often as we plan events, we will know where every table and chair will be placed and exactly when everything will happen to the minute. But publicizing the event is frequently done at the last minute,

sometimes to the detriment of success. Likewise, sending a news release or media advisory several months before an event makes it more likely to be tossed aside and long forgotten by the time the event occurs.

Because much of what we do in The American Legion is cyclical, creating an annual calendar should be the first step in the planning process. You also need to make sure PR is on the agenda for all planning meetings. Each aspect of the event should take into consideration the impact on Public Relations as it applies to all of the areas discussed above.

For special news events and campaigns, your plan should include an objective statement and a detailed outline on how you intend to reach your target audience(s) with your message. What is your goal and how do you intend to reach that goal? How will you know you've reached your goal? Take advantage of the many products available on the national website, such as press releases, speeches, message points, etc.

DOCUMENTING

As an event or media campaign develops, document your activity and the results. This is done not only for you, but also for the person in charge of next year's event. Document anything you think might be useful for planning future events, including:

- Helpful contacts not listed in your manual.
- Missed opportunities or things you wish you had done.
- Which media attended your event and/or reasons others gave for not attending.
- Things that went right AND things that went wrong, including the reasons why.

EVALUATING

As part of the documentation phase, make sure you provide an honest evaluation of how you think the event turned out. Whether it's a media event or a post holiday party, take the time to ask some hard questions and provide honest answers.

- Did we reach the target audience with our message?
- Although our message was included in various media, did we reach the people we needed to reach?
- What was the reaction to the message? Did it cause people to react and/or take action as we intended? Why?

CONCLUSION

When you have everything documented and evaluated, make sure someone else knows about it. Share your plans and evaluations with others. Mentor new members and bring them in to help you so you will have some continuity for next year's event(s).

For many reasons, public relations can be considered the single most important function within your post, district or department. Every member is involved in it, most without even realizing it. Public

relations will have an impact on everything you do at your post, and everything you do at your post will somehow impact public relations. Remember that strong membership equals strong public relations and vice versa.



SECTION TWO

MISSION OF YOUR MEMBERSHIP TEAM

In one word, the mission of any American Legion membership team - whether it is at the national, department, district or post level - is “growth.” Whether it be in the single digits or by hundreds of thousands, the goal at all American Legion levels should be to increase membership every year. The most common methods to achieve this goal can be broken down to the three “R” s. And no, we are not referring to readin’, ‘ritin’ and ‘rithmetic! The three golden membership opportunities can be achieved through recruitment, retention and revitalization.

A strong public relations plan should be part of all three. Community relations are a vital aspect of “good PR.” Anytime you represent The American Legion in public, whether you know it or not, you are practicing public relations.

RECRUITMENT

With the exception of those who have been drafted, most military veterans have had firsthand experience with recruiters. The principles of American Legion recruiting are not that different than military recruiting. The job of the Legion recruiter is to convince eligible men and women that The American Legion is an organization worth joining.

Recruiting can be done a number of ways. Direct mail and leaflets can help. So can advertisements, public service announcements and e-mails to local military units. But most successful recruiters will say that the best way to recruit new members is to simply ask.

Legionnaire Nathaniel King belongs to Post 267 in Columbus, Ga. He has recruited thousands of new members into The American Legion over the years and has won four National Recruiter of the Year awards. “I’m on Facebook all the time. I’m on Twitter. I even did a reconnect at Fort Benning using Skype. I got 50 members through that,” he said.

Another tried and true method is knocking on neighborhood doors and personally inviting veterans to an open-house or meeting at your post. “One of the keys is knowing our product,” says King. “In my post, we have several membership workshops through the year. That’s a tradition we started.”

And it’s a tradition that’s yielding results. With 2,062 members in 2013, Post 267 has been designated a “king-size” post.

Potential Legion recruits can often be identified through student veterans groups at local colleges and universities. By discussing benefits availability, claims processing, education benefits and service officers, you can convince these young veterans that The American Legion truly is an organization that looks out for their interests.

Moreover, nearly every community has a local guard or military reserve unit that is also comprised of Legion-eligible veterans. Since 1996 the American Legion Department of Illinois

has been conducting annual “Membership caravans,” in which national, state and local Legion representatives visit the department’s 24 districts. In the 10 years prior to the caravan, Illinois gained about 2 percent to 3 percent of its membership in January. Since the caravan, it has never gained less than 5 percent during that month.

Past National Commander Marty Conatser, of Champaign, Ill., said that posts hosting the caravan contact local media for coverage and offer reporters the opportunity to interview the national vice commander, department commander, department Auxiliary president and Sons of the American Legion commander.

“The caravan does help new member recruiting but it also pushes posts to work renewals,” Conatser said. “Having a national officer and the state leadership visit 24 posts during what is usually a slow membership month has helped Illinois get refocused after the holidays. The Department of Illinois believes that membership caravans are very valuable.”

RETENTION

The American Legion usually recruits about 300,000 new members a year. Unfortunately, half of the new members drop out after the first year and even more by their second and third years. The Membership Team Training Guide <<http://www.legion.org/publications/160965/membership-team-training-guide>> published by national headquarters contains dozens of suggestions that posts can use to retain members. Public relations can play a huge role in the success of these initiatives.

Often times members who have left the organization say it’s because they have had little or no contact with their American Legion post. This is where a pro-active public relations team can come in.

For instance by publishing a “New Member Newsletter” to first year Legionnaires, your post can highlight the activities and accomplishments of the local American Legion while at the same time making the new members feel special and appreciated. The newest members are the least likely to know about the regular activities and, therefore, the most likely to either not participate or drop out.

The New Member newsletter is basically a summary of the most important information that has been sent to them via other formats, such as the post newsletter, department newspaper and national magazine, with further explanation and background. These publications usually go out quarterly. After their first renewal, they can stop receiving it.

External media can also play a key role in retaining members. Remember, membership is a year-round process not a one-time task. By repeatedly answering the questions ‘what’s in it for me?’ and ‘how are you serving veterans?’ members will stay.

It is possible to make the renewal process itself the story. If a story is pitched to a news director or editor that your post “signed up some new members,” it will probably not illicit much more than a yawn, a glazed look and thoughts of a mundane, administrative task.

However, a friendly “renewal competition” among neighboring posts might include a wager such as the post that comes up short having to sing the fight song and wear the team colors honoring the local school of the triumphant rival post. Dunking booths, renewal fairs or other campy events are ways to attract local coverage. The events could be family affairs and include The American Legion Auxiliary and Sons of the American Legion. Remember, if you treat the renewal process as routine, so will the media.



STINKY TO THE RESCUE

This photograph, first published in the March 1950 edition of the *Hoosier Legionnaire*, shows the lengths to which Indiana members once went to seek renewals. The Charles B. Reeves Post 27 in Plymouth, Ind., received an assist by a goat named “Stinky.” The membership team first posted the names of non-renewed members on the post home wall, then at the start of the campaign, delivered “Stinky” to the first member on the list, who had to keep and care for the goat until he secured a fellow member’s dues and paid his own. “Stinky” changed hands 65 times during his first day of work. The lucky goatkeeper shown still in his nightshirt was Elmer Davis, others were, from the left, Phil Gephard, Tommy French and Larry Peregrine. While goats might not work as well in all communities, campy and outside-of-the-box thinking are good ways to attract media.

Moreover, some ex-Legionnaires decline to renew because they are angry at an individual or feel slighted by the post. Whether it's real or perceived, often times the misunderstanding can be resolved with an in-home visit, a phone call or personal invitation by the commander to discuss the issue. What is certain, however, is that if the post doesn't reach out to the nonrenewal, the alienation will continue and perpetuate into a growing cycle of nonrenewals among other members.

Marketing can help prevent much of the alienation. By surveying members on a regular basis, the post can learn what it does well and what areas it needs to improve. Members can rate certain areas with letter grades and provide comments. Even if it's determined that a particular post is not the best fit for an unhappy member, the wartime veteran might be able to serve proudly in a different post and still benefit The American Legion through his or her membership.

A strong public relations program is analogous to a dialog, not a monolog. Only by getting feedback from the membership and the public can The American Legion be the best that it can be

The post newsletter and other media tools can also be used to explain the ease of the renewal process. Members can simply go to www.legion.org/renew and click "Renew Now" to safely and conveniently pay their post dues on an annual and automatic basis. Once a member enters the information requested, he or she can set up an account for automatic annual renewal. They can also call the toll-free American Legion customer service line at (800) 433-3318.

Regardless of whether the renewal is made online, in-person or as a response to a mass mailing, it is important that the post acknowledge its appreciation to the member. The post PR team could produce certificates of appreciation during milestone membership anniversaries and perhaps offer incentives to "earlybirds" who renew first.

By rewarding renewal efforts as much as initial recruiting efforts the post sends a message to its existing members that he or she is just as important as the first-timer who just walked in.

REVITALIZATION

Some communities are so accustomed to having an American Legion post home that its presence is taken for granted. Members of the media are no different. Their perception of the Legion is that of a private club that has always been there. Little thought is given about how many veterans and young people would be short-changed if the post went away. No American Legion Baseball or students attending Boys State. No Oratorical Contest to award scholarships or service officer to help veterans understand and obtain benefits. Most communities would indeed miss The American Legion if it disappeared.

That is why post development and revitalization are so important. Again, media and public relations play an essential role.

To determine where a post should belong in a community, or where a post should be revitalized, start with a thorough and honest evaluation of the status quo. Resources for the evaluation can be

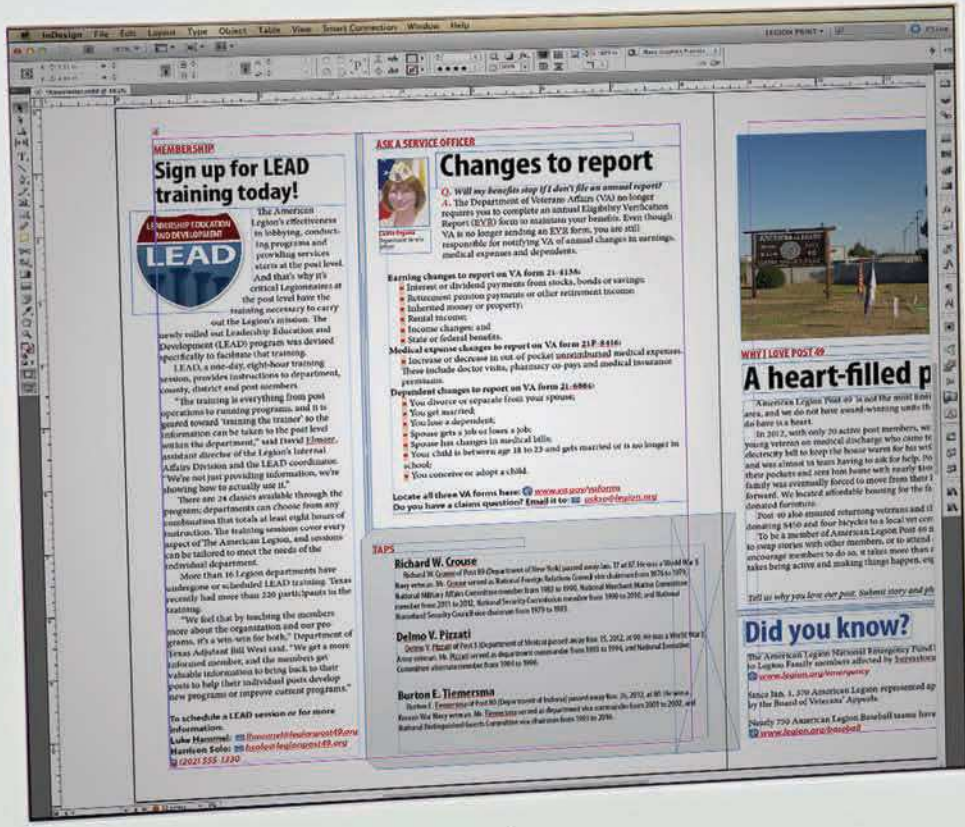
downloaded here: http://www.legion.org/documents/word/PDR_Procedures310.doc or be obtained at no cost by contacting national headquarters.

The membership staff at the national headquarters, with the help of department leadership, can assist with post development and revitalization efforts. Whether it's providing timelines and material or actually being on the ground to train and conduct the development and revitalization, a team from Indianapolis and your state American Legion can help.

Nothing can be more demoralizing, however, than holding a post revitalization event without any potential new or expired members showing up. Getting the word out via news releases, articles, radio and television announcements, e-mails solicitations, social media, flyers, and, most importantly, personal invitations are a critical factor in determining the success of the revitalization.

Announcements should include the time, date and location of the event and what services will be available. For instance, the announcement should mention that a trained service officer will be on hand to explain veterans benefits. The post commander should be available to explain activities and programs that the post engages in and why eligible veterans in the community should join. The revitalization team should also welcome any suggestions offered by the visiting veterans on how it can meet his or her needs.

By using the communication tools that are offered in this guide, along with the PR Systems Toolkit < <http://www.legion.org/prmedia/pdf/prtoolkit.pdf> > and the Membership Team Training Guide < http://www.legion.org/sites/legion.org/files/legion/publications/membership_team_training_guide.pdf > new energy can be injected into even the most endangered of posts.



MEMBERSHIP Sign up for LEAD training today!



The American Legion's effectiveness in lobbying, conducting programs and providing services starts at the post level. And that's why it's critical Legionnaires at the post level have the training necessary to carry out the Legion's mission. The newly rolled out Leadership Education and Development (LEAD) program was devised specifically to facilitate that training.

LEAD, a one-day, eight-hour training session, provides instructions to department, county, district and post members.

"The training is everything from post operations to training program and it is geared toward 'training the trainer' so the information can be taken to the post level within the department," said David Elmer, assistant director of the Legion's Internal Affairs Division and the LEAD coordinator.

"We're not just providing information, we're showing how to actually use it."

There are 24 classes available through the program; departments can choose from any combination that totals at least eight hours of instruction. The training sessions cover every aspect of "The American Legion, and sessions can be tailored to meet the needs of the individual department.

More than 100 Legion departments have undergone or scheduled LEAD training. Texas recently had more than 230 participants in the training.

"We feel that by teaching the members more about the organization and our programs, it's a win-win for both," Department of Texas Adjutant Jim West said. "We get a more informed member, and the members get access to help their individual posts develop new programs or improve existing programs."

To schedule a LEAD session or for more information, contact: Education@americanlegion.org, Marketing@americanlegion.org or 1-800-255-1220

ASK A SERVICE OFFICER Changes to report



Will my benefits stop if I don't file an annual report? The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) no longer requires you to complete an annual Eligibility Verification Report (EVR) form to maintain your benefits. Even though VA is no longer asking for an EVR form, you are still responsible for notifying VA of annual changes in earnings, medical expenses and dependents.

- Earning changes to report on VA form 21-4136:**
- Interest or dividend payments from stocks, bonds or savings
 - Retirement pension payments or other retirement income
 - Inherited money or property
 - Rental income
 - Income changes and
 - State or federal benefits.
- Medical expense changes to report on VA form 21F-8816:**
- These include doctor visits, pharmacy co-pays and medical insurance premiums.
- Dependent changes to report on VA form 21-8886:**
- You divorce or separate from your spouse
 - You get married
 - You lose a dependent
 - Spouse gets a job or loses a job
 - Spouse has changes in medical bills
 - Your child is between age 18 and 22 and gets married or is no longer in school
 - You conceive or adopt a child

Locate all these VA forms here: www.va.gov/forms
Do you have a claims question? Email it to: askajp@legion.org

JAPS
Richard W. Crouse
Richard W. Crouse served in the U.S. Army from 1954 to 1957. He was a World War II hero who served in the Pacific Theater. He was a member of the National Military Officers Association from 1958 to 1960, National Merchant Marine Commission member from 1971 to 1973, National Security Council member from 1980 to 1982, and National Handicapped Society Council member from 1979 to 1983.

Delmo V. Pizzati
Delmo V. Pizzati of Fort 3 Department of Medical retired after 20 years of service. He served in the Department of Defense from 1955 to 1974, and National Executive Committee member from 1981 to 1983.

Burton E. Timmersma
Burton E. Timmersma of Fort 30 Department of Medical retired after 20 years of service. He served in the Department of Defense from 1957 to 1977, and National Handicapped Society Council member from 1979 to 1983.



WHY I LOVE POST 49

A heart-filled post

"The American Legion Post 49 is a real heart-filled post, and we do not have a single member who does not have a heart."

In 2012, with only 20 active post members, we began veterans on medical discharge who came to obituary hell to keep the house warm for his wife and was almost to leave having to ask for help. No one had any idea how to help him. We had to get their pockets and see how home with nearly 800 family was eventually forced to move from their 1 forward. We located affordable housing for the 1 forward.

Post 49 also assisted returning veterans and if donating into and four bicycles to a local vet center.

To be a member of American Legion Post 49 is to keep stories with other members, or to attend encourage members to do so, it takes more than a takes being active and making things happen, etc.

Tell us why you love your post. Submit story and photo.

Did you know?

The American Legion National Emergency Fund for Legions. Family members affected by September 11 can apply for assistance at www.legion.org/emergency

Since Jan. 1, 2008 American Legion representatives appointed by the Board of Veterans' Appeals.

Nearly 750 American Legion Base Ball teams have been formed. www.legion.org/baseball

SECTION THREE

INTERNAL MEDIA

One of the unfair raps associated with internal media is that it is “preaching to the choir.” While it is true that most of the readers and viewers of your internal media will already be members of The American Legion, we already established the importance of retention. If well done, your internal mediums such as a newsletter or a website can by itself be an incentive for members to renew or join.

Thanks to user-friendly software and some easy-to-follow publishing principles, one need not possess a Columbia University journalism degree or have the code-writing ability of a Mark Zuckerberg to produce effective internal media.

This section will focus on these basic communication tools that can play an important part in attracting and keeping members.

NEWSLETTER / NEWSPAPER

As much as we would like it to be otherwise, there are members who never attend post meetings or other events. Their only exposure to The American Legion might be what they read about in The American Legion Magazine, the department newspaper or the post newsletter.

Editors and contributors to these publications should keep in mind that they should always be selling – selling The American Legion that is!

The post newsletter should be entertaining, informative and positive. It should never be used as a “gossip rag” or a tool to embarrass members. It should be well-written, timely and accurate.

A regular “Why You Should Belong” column could provide constant reminders to members about the benefits and value to a community that their association with The American Legion brings.

Depending on the size of a post, the publication’s size can vary from a single-sheet newsletter to a multi-section newspaper.

Recognition of membership anniversaries, “earlybird renewals” and top recruiters are also worth including in the newsletter.

Tips to make your newsletter work include the following:

- Avoid burnout. One person need not provide ALL the content. Ask post officers to contribute columns. Include an invitation and a point of contact in each issue for readers to submit announcements or articles.
- Publish only items that are germane to your post or the overall American Legion.
- Make it visually pleasing. Whenever possible, use an action or candid photograph as opposed to the “grip-and-grin.” Try to show diversity of membership by varying the photographs by war eras, ethnicities and gender.
- Text should be clear, correct, concise, comprehensible and consistent. The Associated Press

Stylebook is an excellent resource for this and is used by many professionals in the industry. It is available at most bookstores and online.

- Proofread, proofread and proofread again! Remember that spellcheck is your friend, but it is not your *only* friend. Ask for a second or third person to read the text before publishing.
- A newsletter can be produced on something as simple as a Microsoft Word document. Other popular newsletter programs include Publisher and Apple's Pages.
- Join the National American Legion Press Association (NALPA). For just \$15 per year, you can join this association of editors, writers, public relations officers and staff professionals who are members of The American Legion, Sons of The American Legion, American Legion Auxiliary and other subsidiary organizations. NALPA presents annual press awards to the best internal newsletters, newspapers and websites. Its own newsletter provides members with valuable PR advice. For more information about NALPA, visit www.nalpa.org or call (317) 630-1253. You could also find out if your department has a press association of its own.

WEBSITE

Design, Usage, Tips and Info

A website which is well-designed and user-friendly can help you engage new members and involve them in your post or department. Building and hosting it can be a daunting task – especially if those in your post or department have little or no web development experience.

However, it is now easier than ever before to create a strong web presence without being a programmer or having a large budget to create a website. You just need to know where to look for the tools to get started.

Register a domain name

If you don't already have a domain name, even if you aren't yet ready to build your site, it is important to sign up for one.

Most non-profits choose domain names which end in .org, but it is also advisable to register the .com and .net versions also. It's easy to register domain names for a number of years at one time and there are a number of reputable companies to go to when purchasing a domain name.

Two very affordable and highly reputable domain registrars are:

- NameCheap (<http://www.namecheap.com>)
- GoDaddy (<http://www.godaddy.com>)

There are many others that can easily be researched by searching on Google or your favorite search engine. Just keep in mind you never should be paying more than \$20 a year for a domain name.

Evaluate Your Needs

Determine what kind of web presence you want and how you plan to maintain and fund it before jumping into the creation of your website. Determining your website strategy will ultimately save you

much time and make your mission much clearer in the long run.

- **What is the purpose of having a website?**
- **What resources do you have to build your site?** Do you have staff available to help plan, build and maintain your site? Do they have the knowledge to do this from scratch, have just some knowledge or know absolutely nothing when it comes to building and maintaining a site? There are solutions for each of these issues.
- **How will your site incorporate your current graphic look and feel?** You want to make sure that your website and other printed materials have the same look and feel. It is easy to realize that the emblem will be predominant on websites along with printed material, but the style of fonts, the colors and overall design that is evident on your print material should echo what is on your website.

Determine a web-development tool

Whether you have experienced volunteers within your post or department will determine what web creation tool you ultimately choose. Building the site is half the battle. Maintaining it is the other half. Keeping information up to date is paramount for a number of reasons. You want your visitors to come back, to become involved; in short, you want to hear from them. If your information is old, what reason would a visitor have to return? If you are constantly updating your content, the search engines will re-index your site more often and this helps boost you in the search engine ranking pages.

If there is no one within your organization who can create your site, or has the time to devote to this, The American Legion does sanction a company who has been providing pre-built websites to posts and departments. This company is Legionsites and it can be found at <http://www.legionsites.com>. They will provide you with a pre-built website and the ability to easily maintain the information along with hosting it and setting up your domain name at a very reasonable price.

If you choose to create your site on your own, there are many web hosts available at affordable pricing to get you started.

You could start your search with your current Internet service provider. Many of these “ISP’s” offer a hosting program for websites. You can also research easily by searching on Google or your favorite search engine.

Blogging Software

By incorporating a blog into your website, you are giving visitors a great opportunity to interact and become involved with you.

If you are hosting your website at any one of the many independent hosting companies, you will find that they already have one of the blogging software files installed on their servers. In many instances this is Wordpress (<http://www.wordpress.com>). Using it within your site can become as easy as “turning it on” in the admin area of your web host. Wordpress is one of the most popular and easy to use blogging software applications today.

If you do not have the option with your web host to incorporate Wordpress or another blogging software application, you can easily sign up for an account at Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>). It takes about five minutes to set up your blog and you can easily link it to your website. Blogger is owned and hosted by Google.

Integrate E-mail with Web and Social

Even with the increase of social networking sites as a prime source of community building, it is still important and viable to incorporate an email newsletter into your online strategy. Keeping in touch and offering subscribers valuable information will continue to drive them to your website and keep them involved.

Tracking statistics about your e-newsletter is almost as important as having one. You want to know who is opening, reading, clicking on further information and forwarding your e-newsletter on to friends. The best way to do that is to use a service expressly built for this. They are called ESP's (email service providers) and their services are available at a variety of prices and can handle from very small to large lists.

Below are a few companies that offer affordable email newsletter services for a number of years.

Constant Contact (<http://www.constantcontact.com>)

Graphic Mail: (<http://www.graphicmail.com>)

Exact Target: (<http://www.exacttarget.com>)

Website Content

Make Your Site Media-Friendly

Getting media attention can have a huge impact. Whether the media attention brings in more members or simply raises your profile, getting attention from journalists, bloggers, and anyone else with an audience is important.

Make it easy for journalists to find information.

Include profiles of your officers. Make sure you include contact information (email and phone) for each of these key people. Have a downloadable media kit that includes everything your print media kit does.

Offer downloadable images (hi-resolution and web ready) from your site so journalists and bloggers don't have to contact you and wait on a reply. Make it clear that journalists and other organizations may use these items in news coverage without contacting the organization for prior permission.

Remember journalists are message "multipliers." If you can get the journalist to publish or transmit your positive message about membership, your recruiting and revitalization efforts will become much easier.

Make Your Site Volunteer-Friendly

Make it easy for visitors to your site to find information on how they can get involved. Whether you provide detailed information about volunteering directly, steps people can take on their own, or just contact information for your volunteer organizer, make sure you don't overlook this crucial bit of information.

Make Sure the Mission is Immediately Obvious to the Visitor

How many times have you gone to a website and not had a clue what the site was about? This happens all too often. Too often, those who create websites know the organization so well they take for granted what visitors to their site will already know about it. Do not assume.

Considering how much information is pushed into small pieces on sites like Twitter and Facebook, there's no telling how much or how little visitors will know. Put an abbreviated mission statement on the home page and include a link to a page that will take the visitors to an "About" page that goes into greater detail.

It goes without saying that your post website should have a "join now" button and a link where existing members can renew. The links to these web pages should be easy to find from the homepage.

Make Sure Your Content is the Focal Point

Design on any site should be transparent. That's not to say your site can't have an interesting design, just that the design should revolve around your content and your mission, not the other way around. Take into account the types of information you'll be providing on the site and the formats that will be used.

Consider up front how many multi-media items will be used. Consider if they will be on every page of your site or if there will be a separate section or gallery for the various multi-media formats. Make sure your columns are wide enough to accommodate an embedded YouTube video if this is in your site plans. If the columns are not wide enough, an embedded video or other similar element will literally "break" the site design and look terrible to the visitors.

Always Proofread

Make sure the content is consistent which means proofreading and copyediting your website in the same way you do your print materials. Even though it is easier to change content on a website, errors give a negative impression overall.

And remember, throughout your website, you should always be telling the Legion's story. If the story is well-told, people will want to join!



SECTION FOUR

EXTERNAL MEDIA

While a post can control the content of its internal media, it's largely at the mercy of reporters, news directors and editors to determine what, if any, external media coverage it gets. That is why having a friendly and professional relationship with the media is so important. Ideally, by the time you are asking for coverage of your membership drive you will already know the people that you are pitching to.

Treating members of the media to an occasional lunch or awarding certificates of appreciation in recognition for excellent work are nice ways to build and establish these important relationships. There will be times, however, when you have to "cold pitch" to people that you do not know. Either way, your story pitches are often competing with a hundred other items jammed into a reporter's inbox or email account. It's important to "cut to the chase" and quickly establish what you request to be covered if you want your pitch to avoid being placed in the online or aluminum trash can.

The following article, which was published in the Sentinel newspaper in Brunswick, N.J., is a great example of a post getting its membership message published:

AMERICAN LEGION HOLDS MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

The Lt. John Farnkopf American Legion Post 401, 148 Major Road, Monmouth Junction, is holding an early-bird membership drive.

New members will get the rest of 2013 and all of 2014 included in their \$35 membership fee.

The benefits to eligible veterans, reservists and active-duty personnel for joining Post 401 include reduced rates on hall rentals and participation in post-sponsored events. Post 401 is also heavily involved in community activities such as Boys State, children's coloring contests, American Legion Baseball, Boy Scouts, programs for hospitalized veterans, Adopt-a-Highway, placing flags in cemeteries on Memorial Day, and hosting Memorial Day and Veterans Day services.

Through the American Legion, members receive discounts on hotels, car rentals, eyeglasses, computers, the ability to participate in members-only insurance and prescription plans, and a subscription to the American Legion Magazine and New Jersey Legionnaire newspaper. In addition, members are welcome at other American Legion posts worldwide.

For more information, visit <http://post401.angelfire.com/> and click on the membership icon, or stop by the post to pick up an application.

The article included all of the essential information in a concise manner. The article itself resembles a basic press release.

If you are holding a membership event, such as a post revitalization, it is important to send out advisories to media outlets in advance. Since coverage assignments are sometimes made early, it's a

good idea to send the advisory at least a week prior to the event, and another reminder the day before the event. Repetition does not hurt when trying to get the attention of a bustling newsroom!

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 10, 2013

MEDIA ADVISORY

American Legion Posts to Assist Bergen County Vets

Who:	National and local American Legion officials, including New Jersey State Commander Eugene J. O’Grady.
What:	Service seminars informing veterans of their benefits and programs that are available to them through The American Legion.
When:	10 am - 5 pm, Friday and Saturday, May 17-18; 10 am- 3 pm, Sunday, May 19.
Where:	American Legion Post 170 33 West Passaic Street Rochelle Park, N.J. 07662
Background:	Founded in 1919 by a group of World War I veterans, the 2.4 million member American Legion is the nation’s largest veterans service organization, www.legion.org .
Contact / RSVP	Bob Salvani, Bergen County Commander, (201) 270-8711, bobsalvini@att.net

Background:

- The American Legion is dedicated to its four founding pillars of a strong national security, veterans affairs, Americanism, and youth programs. Legionnaires work for the betterment of their communities through more than 14,000 posts across the nation.
- The American Legion created the original GI Bill and played a pivotal role in the passage of the Post 9/11 GI Bill and the elevation of the Department of Veterans Affairs to cabinet level status.
- The American Legion assists ALL veterans, regardless of their membership status with accessing their benefits. Eligible wartime veterans are welcome to join Post 170 and can learn more about the benefits of Legion membership at the seminar.

A news release more closely resembles an actual article. It can be just as effective at promoting membership events. You can replicate many of these releases simply by substituting names, dates, addresses and quotes to match your unique event.

American Legion



NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS P.O. BOX 1055 INDIANAPOLIS, IN 46206-1055

(317) 630-1321 Fax (317) 630-1413

For God and country

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

American Legion Posts to Help Charleston Area Veterans

INDIANAPOLIS (Aug. 6, 2013) – Military veterans in and around Charleston are invited next week for a special service session at John Brawley, Inc. American Legion Post 20 located at 415 Dickinson St. in Charleston.

National and state teams from The American Legion will be in town to discuss veteran's benefits and service to the community.

All wartime veterans in these areas are invited to American Legion Post 20 to learn more about The American Legion and veteran benefits. Membership and veteran information staff will be available from noon to 4 pm on Sunday, Aug. 11; and 10 am to 5 pm on Monday and Tuesday, Aug. 12-13 along with members of American Legion posts in the Charleston area to kick off this community and veteran service campaign.

A Veteran Service Officer will also be available all three days for all area veterans with claims or other veteran-related questions.

In keeping with the tradition of The American Legion, the rejuvenated American Legion posts in this county will focus on community service and assistance to veterans. The scope and nature of the posts' community service will be determined by its members and inputs from local civic and community officials.

"Service! That's what The American Legion is all about," said Frank Nicholson, Commander of The American Legion for the Department (state) of West Virginia. "We exist to help each and every veteran, their families and the communities they live in."

-more-

Veterans 2-2-2-2-2

“The greater Charleston area is an ideal place to strengthen partnerships between the veterans and the community,” Nicholson added. “The people here care about their community and practice good citizenship every day. Now, wartime veterans have a special place from which they can make a difference.”

Since its founding in 1919, The American Legion has been a key advocate for veterans’ benefits, children and youth, patriotic American values, a strong national defense and quality-of-life issues for those serving in today’s armed forces.

The organization, which created the original draft of the GI Bill, has been the leading advocate for a strong and responsive veterans health care system. Creation of the federal forerunner of the Department of Veterans Affairs as well as the agency’s ascent to cabinet-level status is due in part to The American Legion’s advocacy. The American Legion was also instrumental in the establishment of the veterans home loan, veterans hiring preference and just compensation to veterans suffering from illnesses related to their military service, including those whose ailments stem from exposure to Agent Orange and mysterious Persian Gulf origins.

Equally significant are The American Legion’s efforts to instill values in young people through numerous programs, including American Legion Boys State, American Legion Boys Nation, Junior Shooting Sports, the National High School Oratorical Contest, American Legion Baseball, Teenage Suicide Prevention, Child Health and a McGruff Safe Kids Program. The American Legion has supported Scouting since 1919. Many American Legion posts also support Junior ROTC high school units, fund-raising for handicapped children, and partnerships with other nonprofit organizations such as Special Olympics.

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Contact: Kenny Smith, Department of West Virginia Membership Chairman at: 304-702-1010 or e-mail: kesmith42@comcast.net

American Legion



For God and country

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS P.O. BOX 1055 INDIANAPOLIS, IN 46206-1055

(317) 630-1321 Fax (317) 630-1413

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Revitalizing American Legion Posts in Hays and surrounding areas; Veterans Wanted

INDIANAPOLIS (July 17, 2013) – Wartime veterans of Hays, Kan., and surrounding areas, now have a new outlet to interface with, and to serve, the community. The American Legion, the nation’s largest veterans organization, is inviting all wartime veterans in the area to join them in revitalizing The American Legion posts in Hays and surrounding areas.

Officers and staff members of the Indianapolis-based American Legion national headquarters and Kansas American Legion state headquarters will be in town Thursday, July 25 to Saturday, July 27 at the following location:

American Legion Post 173
1305 Canterbury
Hays, KS 67601

A veterans service officer will also be available to assist all area veterans with claims or other veteran-related questions on Saturday, July 17 at American Legion Post 173.

In keeping with the tradition of The American Legion, the American Legion officers will focus on community service and assistance to veterans. The scope and nature of the post’s community service will be determined by its members and inputs from local civic and community officials.

-more-

New Post 2-2-2-2

Since its founding in 1919, The American Legion has been a key advocate for veterans’ benefits, children & youth, patriotic American values, a strong national defense and quality-of-life issues for those serving in today’s armed forces.

The organization, which created the original draft of the GI Bill, is the leading advocate for a strong veterans health care system. Creation of the federal forerunner of the Department of Veterans Affairs as well as the agency’s ascent to cabinet-level status is due in part to The American Legion’s advocacy. The American Legion was also instrumental in the establishment of the veterans home loan, veterans hiring preference and just compensation to veterans suffering from illnesses related to their military service, including those whose ailments stem from exposure to Agent Orange and mysterious Persian Gulf origins.

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Contact Paul Sanford, 620-353-3708 or email mpsanford@gmail.com

Jan. 20 - 29: 2012 American Legion Department of Illinois Annual Caravan to Deliver Veterans Assistance and Rehabilitation Message

National Vice Commander Milton G. Heifner to join in visits to VA hospitals in Illinois
For Immediate Release

BLOOMINGTON, Ill./EWORLDWIRE/Jan. 18, 2012 --- Among the issues to be spotlighted during the 2012 American Legion Department of Illinois Annual Caravan through the state are veterans’ healthcare and Medicare reimbursement, maintenance and operations of Arlington National Cemetery, and the women veterans’ program.

This year’s forum continues the theme of “Veterans Assistance and Rehabilitation” and will focus on delivering key updates to military service personnel about issues that directly impact them, and to attract new members to the Legion’s active base.

In recent weeks, the American Legion Department of Illinois was joined by the Illinois State Senate with its endorsement of an initiative to create a centralized communications channel centered on

veterans - Veterans Special Programs American National Network, also known as V-SPANN.

Community outreach efforts kick off Friday, Jan. 20, 2012, in Milan and will proceed through the state during a week-long state tour.

Statewide visits to V.A. clinics will feature National Vice Commander Milton G. Heifner, along with state and local leaders. Heifner was elected during the closing session of the 93rd National Convention in Milwaukee in September 2011; he has held many leadership positions at the post, department and national levels. A U.S. Air Force veteran of the Vietnam War era, he retired from the U.S. Air Force Reserve in 1992. Previous positions he has held include branch manager of Brenton State Bank in Woodward and agent for Erickson Insurance in Granger, Iowa.

A complete and comprehensive schedule is available at ILLegion.org (<http://www.illegion.org>).

Friday (Jan. 20)

Milan (309-787-4149)
Rock Falls (815-626-3862)
North Chicago (847-336-4767)

Saturday (Jan. 21)

Wooddale (630-238-1205)
DeKalb (815-756-4551)
Dwight (815-674-3107)

Sunday (Jan. 22)

Chicago (773-330-5219)
FDR Post 923 (773-278-0093)

Giles Post 87 (773-363-2920)

Calumet City 330 (708-862-8665)

**Jan. 23-26: State Veterans
Homes Visits**

Thursday (Jan. 26)

Fairfield (618-847-5161)

Friday (Jan. 27)

Benton (618-438-0861)
Newton (618-783-2622)
Litchfield (217-324-6213)

Saturday (Jan. 28)

Alton (618-462-2644)
Bluffs (217-584-1770)
Cuba (309-785-5456)

Sunday (Jan. 29)

Delevan (309-244-7591)
Farmer City (309-928-3055)
Hoopston (217-283-6312)

Since its founding in 1919 and subsequent congressional charter, The American Legion organization has operated unlike any other, exerting a compelling influence on national leaders on issues of global significance. Legion operations enhance the lives of military families struggling through wartime and economic sacrifices. Members serve the community by building homes for disabled veterans, raising money for scholarships, coaching baseball teams, adopting military units, fighting to protect and enhance veterans' benefits, promoting wholesome youth activities and much more.

National Vice Commander Heifner stated, "This is an unprecedented time in our nation's history, with so many in need - our veterans especially need our help, and we have a moral obligation to support them. I invite everyone to join us in our annual family membership caravan at a post near you."

To learn more about how to get involved and support the activities of the American Legion, visit [JoinTheLegion.org](http://www.jointhelegion.org) (<http://www.jointhelegion.org>) or [ILLegion.org](http://www.illegion.org) (<http://www.illegion.org>).

CONTACT:

Mark Sides, American Legion Department of Illinois, PO Box 2910, Bloomington, IL 61701
Phone: 309-721-3886



SECTION FIVE

SOCIAL MEDIA

While the 1990s and early 21st century were the decades that introduced most of the world to the Internet, social media have been called “Web 2.0,” and have quickly taken over as the next phase in which communities and organization converse. Organizations and brands no longer rely on their websites alone to get their online messages out.

Your American Legion post should be no different. Unlike most traditional websites, social media allow users to publicly comment. If the page or social media account is owned by an organization or corporation, these comments could provide valuable feedback and suggestions. If you do not use social media, rest assured that your children or grandchildren probably do!

The leading social medium is Facebook and it has more than a billion users. It is highly likely that many of your members are on it already, just as most members of the military have social media accounts.

Social media are driven by text, photos, audio and video and simulated environments. The goal of all social media is to engage people. And isn't that also a goal of all good American Legion posts, to engage its members?

TOP SOCIAL MEDIA SITES

There are far too many social media sites for your post to be present on all of them. But if you hit the big ones, your message will be seen and, hopefully, re-posted and transmitted repeatedly to your desired audience. The sites include:

- **Facebook** (www.facebook.com) – According to Facebook, more than one billion people “like” and comment on Facebook pages an average of 3.2 billion times a day!
- **Twitter** (www.twitter.com) -Postings on twitter are called “tweets” and are limited to 140 characters. Great for concise messages like “Post 10 Mtg Thurs at 8 pm. Bring your fellow vets. Earlybird deadline approaching.”
- **LinkedIn** (www.linkedin.com) – Primarily used as a professional networking site. Great way for your American Legion post to establish an identity with media members and town bigwigs.
- **YouTube** (www.youtube.com) – Owned by Google, this video-sharing website has 800 million unique users a month. It has been ranked as the third most visited website on the Internet, trailing only Google and Facebook. What better way to document the fun activities at your post than to show the video and hope it goes viral?
- **Instagram** (www.instagram.com) – Especially popular on smartphones, this site enables users to post videos and pictures and share them on other social network sites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Flickr. It confines photos to a square shape giving them the vintage ‘Polaroid’ look.

SOCIAL MEDIA ETIQUETTE

You can set up an account on most social media sites for free. While the discussions that occur on these sites often seem to have no rules, most organizations take great care not to embarrass their brand. If you want to use your social media as an effective membership tool, you should ensure that the administrator adheres to a few of these guidelines:

- Avoid politics. The American Legion is nonpartisan and focuses on issues, not personalities.
- Be careful with humor. Personal social media accounts can sometimes be very raunchy.
- Don't censor your visitors. Visitors to the page should be allowed to voice frustrations or air some gripes about your post. The administrator should keep things professional in his or her response. Remember, you probably shouldn't say anything on the Facebook page that you would be unwilling to publish in the post newsletter. Racist comments, personal threats or libelous attacks by your visitors should be quickly removed, however.
- If you post it, it is public. Nothing ever disappears from the Internet!
- Remember that social media are just tools. Not all of your members will see your Facebook messages and tweets. Social media should supplement but not replace phone calls, emails, personal contact and traditional media in getting the word out.

GOING VIRAL

The most predictable thing about items on social media is that they are unpredictable. Even the most talented million dollar advertising agencies on Madison Avenue cannot guarantee that a message will catch on with the masses. It is usually the unplanned or unscripted items that win the public's affection.

Whether it's a video of a young boy crying that "Charlie bit my finger!" or Susan Boyle making her singing debut on a popular talent show, viral videos or postings usually contain an element of cuteness or surprise.

In 2010, Charles Bennett, a district commander from the Department of Maine, had his brush with fame thanks to Youtube. Offended that an art project at the University of Maine-Farmington included the placement of American flags on the floor, he registered his outrage with university officials. Bennett wasn't aware that the school's chapter of the College Republicans was capturing his confrontation on video. The moving video, in which the Legion-cap wearing Bennett, witnessed misguided students walking on the flags quickly generated more than 130,000 unique views on Youtube and led to several media interviews with Bennett. It generated great publicity for The American Legion. Had Bennett lost his composure and acted violently, the story could have had an entirely different and embarrassing outcome.

The video is captured here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QH9bVRAe4NE> or by entering the words "UMF" and "flags" on youtube.com. The moral of the story? Always stay professional when wearing a Legion cap or representing the organization. You never know who's watching. You might become a social media star!



SECTION SIX

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Community relations are the force multiplier for all that we do in The American Legion. Its dominant feature is personal contact which complements and reinforces all of our internal and external communication efforts as we tell the Legion story. The more people know and learn about The American Legion, the more likely they are to join if they are eligible. And if they are not eligible, they may be able to join the Auxiliary, the Sons of The American Legion or spread the word to eligible friends or family.

Through personal contact with community entities, your American Legion post can develop and carry out programs that earn understanding, acceptance and support of the Legion's role in providing service to veterans, their families and their communities. A well-planned community relations program can reap tremendous dividends for your post as others in your area actually help you achieve your goals.

COMMUNITY RELATIONS OBJECTIVES

- Increase public awareness and understanding of the missions, policies and programs of The American Legion.
- Inspire patriotism and encourage young men and women to consider serving in the military.
- Foster close relations with the public.
- Attract eligible veterans to join and existing members to renew as we continue to serve America, our community and our fellow veterans.
- Maintain a reputation as a good neighbor, as well as, a respected professional organization dedicated to enhancing the lives of veterans and maintaining American core values through the four pillars of The American Legion.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF YOUR COMMUNITY

Community relations vary from place to place. Each community or geographic area has its own character: structure, personalities, problems and organizations differ. Community relations are a local activity that must be tailored to fit local needs. No matter what the message is from the national, department or district level, you have an opportunity to craft a message of understanding and acceptance at the local level. Whether it's holding a "welcome home" event at the local Guard or Reserve unit, a 9/11 Remembrance Day or a townhall meeting about the VA budget, you have an opportunity to influence the public's perception of The American Legion.

FACT FINDING

You don't have to hire a marketing firm or a PR company to do an assessment of how your post is

perceived by residents of your community.

Research through local news media and the Internet can give you an idea about how people view the local American Legion. It can also reveal who the town's "movers and shakers" are. Office holders in your post, and especially the membership and public relations teams, should review or seek answers to the following:

- What are the needs of veterans in the community? Are they being met? Does the community know what the needs of the veterans are?
- What is, and who are in, the power structure of the community?
- What is the community's attitudes toward, and knowledge of, The American Legion?
- What are the community clubs and organizations, and what do they do?
- What are the mutual needs and interests of the community and The American Legion?
- What is the history of the relations between the post and community?

Once you have answered these questions, you will have a better idea of how to tailor your programs for the community.

WHO'S WHO IN THE COMMUNITY

The different social groups in any given community are referred to as publics. There are both internal and external publics. Internal groups can include members of your post, the American Legion family and other veterans organizations. External groups can include community organizations such as civic, trade, industrial, youth, ethnic heritage, women, religious and education; government entities at the local, state and federal level; professional organizations, civic leaders, bloggers and others.

Suggested publics that your post should be in touch with regularly include:

- **The Chamber of Commerce:** The purpose of the chamber is to provide assistance in promoting, starting, managing, growing and advocating for businesses within its community. Chamber members may be veterans themselves or have employees who are veterans. Your post might be able to recognize or award businesses that have a strong record of hiring veterans or employers who go the extra mile by paying workers who are deployed. Many chambers will allow American Legion posts to join. Other opportunities might exist for The American Legion to provide speakers at chamber luncheons, publish articles in chamber newsletters and be seen as a team player and resourceful asset to area businesses.
- **Military Units:** Active-duty, National Guard and Reserve units provide a variety of opportunities for promoting The American Legion through personal contact. While most military bases and installations forbid private organizations from overt membership solicitations on their premises, these venues are outstanding opportunities to demonstrate The American Legion's advocacy for the troops. Whether it's through a "Reconnect" visit; an Operation Comfort Warriors event for the wounded, injured or ill personnel; or a benefits

seminar for troops about to leave the service, military units offer great opportunities for Legionnaires to interface with the current generation of veterans. And don't forget about the local recruiting offices!

- Public Service Organizations: Law enforcement agencies, fire departments and utility companies tend to have a higher rate of veterans than other groups. Putting them on your list of speaking engagements and mailing them the post newsletter are but a few ways to foster a relationship and to place the Legion name in their vocabularies.
- Churches / Synagogues: The Preamble to the Constitution of The American Legion begins with "For God and Country." While Legionnaires run the gamut of all religious faiths, religious institutions often share American Legion values. Church bulletins are often great tools for publishing Legion announcements or messages. Fellowship sessions after worship services can also be helpful in promoting American Legion programs, post development and revitalization.
- Schools / Universities: Educational institutions from pre-school to college offer many opportunities for your post to convey our messages of support for veterans and our commitment to Americanism. Many members of faculty and school staff are veterans. Add in parents, counselors and associates who do business with the schools and colleges, and you have a new audience to approach for participation in Legion programs and possible membership.

ACTIVITIES

Although community relations programs will vary from one location to another, the approach is usually the same. Legionnaires can incorporate the programs of The American Legion into three main activities: special events, community partnerships and information venues.

Patriotic holidays, troops support venues, post development and revitalizations are just a few occasions that warrant Legion and community common interest.

One post was revitalized when it combined a troop support rally with the presentation of Blue Star Service Banners. Key publics from the community were invited along with soldiers and their families. Local citizens brought photos of their loved ones in the armed forces that were displayed on a large poster for the entire town to view.

State legislators, local officials, police officers, business leaders and clergy joined the American Legion post in welcoming the brave warriors and their families. As a direct result of the event, the seed was planted to start a local support group for the families of local soldiers that were deployed.

"Our efforts to bring the community together with our troops not only resulted in a local veteran support group being formed, but we also gained 28 new members for our post," then-Department of Massachusetts Commander James Brehio, a member of Post 373, said.

Suggested speeches about Veterans, Memorial Day and The American Legion birthday can be found on the publications page of the national website, www.legion.org. Official proclamations honoring

the birthday and the anniversary of the Legion's congressional charter are also opportunities to increase public awareness. In addition to the proclamation below, other examples can be found in the PR Toolkit and the Legiontown website: <http://www.legion.org/publications/160968/public-relations-toolkit> and <http://www.legiontown.legion.org/proclamation>

Community Proclamation

WHEREAS, the American Legion was chartered by Congress in 1919 on September 16th as a wartime veterans organization based on the four pillars of Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation, National Security, Americanism, and Children & Youth; and

WHEREAS, over the years, the American Legion has become a preeminent community-service organization which now numbers more than 2.4 million members -- men and women -- in over 14,000 American Legion posts worldwide working a variety of programs that support the four pillars and benefit our nation's veterans, its service members, their families, the youth of America and its citizens; and

WHEREAS, the members of the American Legion are dedicated to upholding the ideals of freedom and democracy, while working to make a difference in the lives of fellow Americans; and

WHEREAS, the (insert year) observance of American Legion Day provides an opportunity to recognize Legionnaires in our community for their many contributions to our community (or state).

NOW, THEREFORE, I, (name), (position or title) of the City (or State) of _____ (insert city & state) do hereby proclaim September 16, (insert year), as

THE AMERICAN LEGION DAY

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this (written day of month), in the year of our Lord two thousand (insert year).



Photo by David Paul Morris

SECTION SEVEN

MASTERING MEDIA INTERVIEWS

Few factors can influence a news story as much as the interview. If the interview subject appears ill-prepared, viewers and listeners will render an unfavorable verdict even if the facts and circumstances are favorable to the person being interviewed. Likewise, if the person is confident, friendly and knowledgeable, he or she can mitigate an otherwise unfavorable story, or better yet, really hit one out of the park!

As a representative of The American Legion, your goal should be to control the interview. Share your enthusiasm about the organization with those in the media. Research the subject matter in advance and never grant an interview unless you know what you plan to say. There are techniques that will help you, as the interviewee, control the message.

You should always have message points prepared in advance of the interview. If you are doing the interview by telephone, easy-to-read index cards that include the main points that you would like to make can help guide you through. For television interviews, it is even more important that you review your points in advance so you can appear confident on camera.

STAYING ON MESSAGE

Most of us learned at a young age that when asked a question, answer it and don't wait for another to be asked, especially in a classroom. Just sit down. If we were asked another question we followed the same process: answer and sit down. A diagram of such a conversation would look like this:

Q, A. Q, A. Q, A. Q, A.

We call this a "Question-Answer – Question-Answer – Question-Answer" dialogue. In this situation the individual asking the question has complete control.

But when an individual is being interviewed, he or she should go beyond simply answering the question. The individual being interviewed can take control of the interview with the use of information from message points. To take control you simply answer the question and then add the relevant position of the organization. This is not being deceptive. This is "staying on message," making certain that facts we deem fundamentally important to the interview are not overlooked.

This technique serves the best interest of the media and The American Legion. A diagram of this type of interview would look like this:

Q, A.A.A. – Q, A.A.A. – Q, A.A.A.

We call this a "Question-Answer-Answer-Answer" dialogue. You take control. You answer the question and then bridge to your message points.

Without fail, prior to every Veterans Day and Memorial Day, broadcast outlets and newspapers across the country prepare their stories about the "dying American Legion." The reporters pre-suppose

that the departure of so many World War II veterans has left the organization spiraling downward.

National headquarters receives many of these queries. They typically run like this:

REPORTER: *Isn't it true that with so many World War II and Korean War veterans passing away, The American Legion is really struggling with its membership?*

American Legion spokesman: Naturally, we would always like to have more members but The American Legion remains by far the nation's largest veterans service organization. While it's true that there are some posts and areas that are struggling with membership, Post 347 in Lady Lake, Florida has more than 4,300 members! We have "king-sized" posts throughout the country that are thriving with thousands of members. It is important to remember that The American Legion remains by far the largest veterans service organization in the country and the biggest segment of our membership is from the Vietnam War era. Additionally, anybody who has served one-day of active duty – including those who received federal orders while in the National Guard or Reserves – since August 2, 1990 is eligible for American Legion membership. This is the longest membership window that's been opened in the history of The American Legion. So yes, many veterans from the greatest generation are leaving us, but young veterans continue to join The American Legion every day, just as previous generations of veterans replaced our original Legion founders. Did you know that there are 2,000 more American Legion posts in this country than there are Starbucks coffee shops? And as of 2014, there are an estimated 18 million Legion-eligible veterans. We have only scratched the service and have a huge population of veterans that we can recruit to our organization.

REPORTER: *But isn't the American Legion mostly old, white and male?*

American Legion spokesman: The American Legion believes a veteran is a veteran. In fact, women veterans could vote for the national commander of The American Legion before they were legally allowed to vote for the president of the United States!

Moreover, while the military did not desegregate until 1948, The American Legion was always open to wartime veterans of every race and faith since our founding in 1919. We also passed a national resolution in 1923 condemning groups like the Ku Klux Klan and other organizations that fostered racial and religious strife as "un-American" and a "menace to our liberty."

The American Legion does not have statistics on average age, race, religion or gender because we don't ask those questions on our membership applications. Again, while we welcome diversity, a veteran is a veteran!

REPORTER: *What is The American Legion doing to attract young members?*

American Legion spokesman: The American Legion believes in service first and membership second. The Legion has thousands of trained service officers across the country to assist veterans with

accessing their benefits, free of charge, regardless of whether they are members of The American Legion or not. We have outstanding youth programs like American Legion Baseball, Boys State, Boys Nation, Oratorical contests and shooting sports. We award millions of dollars in scholarships annually and assist injured and wounded heroes through our Operation Comfort Warriors program. We are also one of the most influential organizations working in Washington to make sure that troops, veterans and their families are able to receive the pay, health care and other benefits that they deserve. We have also sponsored thousands of veterans job fairs across the country and this organization wrote the original GI Bill. Younger veterans are like everybody else. If you provide outstanding service and value, they will join. We encourage wartime veterans of all ages, regardless of where they were stationed, to visit our website at www.legion.org or stop in their local American Legion post and see what this great organization has to offer.

INTERVIEW RULES TO LIVE BY

- Never lie to the media. If your post is down in membership, admit it but don't dwell on it. Acknowledge it, then move on to the great programs and legislative accomplishments of the Legion on the national, department and local level.
- If your post is up in membership, repeat it. Shout it from the mountain tops. It's good news!
- Give the post and website addresses. Invite interested veterans to visit and learn more about The American Legion.
- Stay positive! Even if you get frustrated with the reporter, don't show it. Emphasize the part of the glass that's full.
- Avoid the bar or lounge when giving media interviews. A meeting room or even outside in front of the flagpole would yield fewer distractions and lessen unfortunate stereotypes.
- Wear your American Legion cap. It reinforces our brand.

Most of us learned at a young age that when asked a question, answer it and don't wait for another. Remember: the only reason you or your representatives are consenting to the interview is because you have a message to tell. Before the interview begins, know your message points. Then work to get your message points in the interview by taking control.

BRIDGING

What would happen if you were involved in an interview about a major event at your post? You were prepared with message points in mind but were never asked the question to give you the opportunity to "get on message?" Taking control becomes natural when you understand a few tricks of the trade.

Seldom will a reporter ask you the "right" question. That is where the simple process of "bridging" comes into the picture.

Bridging is used to move from your quick answer to the question into the first of your message points. Bridging is as simple as moving from the answer to the question with a phrase. Some examples:

“The real issue here ...”

“Yet, it’s really a case of ...”

“What is important ...”

“That is just the first step ...”

With practice you will soon learn how to take control without regard to the question asked.

A common misconception is that you only need to make your point once. In fact, the more you make the same point the better chance your message point will be aired on radio or television or printed in the newspaper. Interviews that last 15 minutes or more demand that you make your point over and over again because only a brief part of what you say will make it to the story.

FLAGGING

The technique to make it easy for a reporter to remember your key point is known as “flagging.” Think of flagging as a way of telling your best friend the most important point of an issue. When you’ve covered a lot of information over 15 or 20 minutes of interview, flagging will help the reporter sort out the key point – quickly.

Many times an interview will end with the reporter asking if you’d like to say something that hasn’t been covered. That’s the perfect time to “flag” by reemphasizing the most important point. The simple phrase: “Yes, if you only remember one thing in looking at this issue ... remember ...”

An opportunity to “flag” will often arise earlier in the interview, and you can do it by using strong phrases such as:

“There are many facets to the problem – but what you must remember is ...”

“The most important fact to remember is ...”

“It all boils down to ...”

Flagging always leads to your most important message point. By returning to that point several times in the interview you help the reporter understand what is important.

In every interview situation you will find you know the central issue better than the reporter. That is why the media has come to you or a post member. You are the experts. You understand the “human” impact of the issue. Take advantage of this position by helping the reporter grasp the complexity of the issue – make it obvious to them what is most important. They get an understanding of the issues and then report the “message points” that you make certain they absorb.

Message points about national programs and issues may be obtained from The American Legion website.

SHATTERING OLD STEREOTYPES

The *Wall Street Journal* reported in a front page headline, “The American Legion, Once Civic and Social Power is Slowly Fading Away.” The article went on to say, “The old members are dying off and the young ones aren’t interested... Across the U.S.A., it is much the same. The American Legion,

once a hub around which revolved so much of community, social and civic life is slowly ebbing in importance... There is also an indefinable but strong sensation among many veterans and among the Legion's critics that the organization is simply an anachronism, an echo from a past left far behind. There are many signs that it has lost much of its vigor."

Since the article was published on **May 19, 1971**, The American Legion has already done an excellent job at refuting the writer's erroneous predictions. The older members were the World War I veterans and "the young ones," who were not interested are the Vietnam War veterans, who today form the largest segment of our membership. Since 1971, The American Legion has played a key role in crafting crucial veterans' legislation, hosted several presidents of the United States at national meetings and conventions, and processed millions of veterans' disability claims. It remains the nation's largest veterans organization.

Like Mark Twain, reports of our death have been greatly exaggerated. It does not hurt to quote from the 1971 *Wall Street Journal* article the next time you run into a young, enterprising reporter set on repeating the same mistakes.

HONOR OUR VETERANS



[LEGION.ORG/HONORVETERANS](https://legion.org/honorveterans)

SECTION EIGHT

ADVERTISING & PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS

As a nonprofit veterans service organization, The American Legion conducts veterans and community-service programs that can be publicized for free with public service announcements in both print and electronic media. Newspapers and broadcast stations frequently donate space and time to free activities that benefit their audience. This service is offered voluntarily on a case-by-case basis as a public service as space and time allow. Billboard companies are sometimes willing to donate space until they can find someone willing to rent it. Clearly the priority of the media outlet or company is to “sell” the space or time commercially to bring in revenue – the reason they are in business.

There are a number of reasons to consider purchasing media advertising, even if you are successful in placing post program information as public service material. Web-based advertising also presents a number of opportunities, including paying per number of clicks.

Most media outlets are willing to sell advertising for less than the cost posted on their rate cards. Legion posts might consider sharing the cost with other area posts in their district. Like many other purchases, remember to never pay retail! Most ad-sellers expect to negotiate and are often willing to cut nonprofit organizations a significant break.

MEMBERSHIP IN CORPORATE COMMUNITY

By doing business with local media, you establish a relationship as a respected corporate entity. It is clearly easier to open doors within the newspaper or broadcast station when your post is on the list of advertisers. Promoting your membership drive or publicizing a veterans event may be easier when there is an established positive business interface.

VISIBILITY WHEN NEEDED

Purchasing advertising puts you in control. Your American Legion message will run exactly when you want it for as long as you want it. For example, a post could advertise for new members in time to process them well in advance of deadlines to qualify for appropriate awards. Whatever American Legion program or service a post may want to promote, running an ad in a newspaper or a spot on radio and television lets you select your audience when and in what media you choose.

MAXIMUM OUTREACH

When you buy broadcast time, you can select the exact programs, radio station format and time of day to send your message. While a free public service announcement may not cost your post a penny, it may air at 3 a.m. when most folks you need to reach are sound asleep. If you buy time, you can select the exact personality and program you want the spot to run on and the specific time window to run it. Clearly, a radio spot about the benefits of joining The American Legion will reach a maximum audience

during the morning or afternoon drive time when most people are going to or returning home from work in their vehicles.

Buying advertising enables narrow selection of the intended audience based on intent and budget. A post reaching out to young, active-duty military personnel can use rock or hip-hop format radio stations during the times when most are commuting to and from the nearby base or post. Looking for mid-grade NCOs and petty officers? Consider country and adult-contemporary radio stations. If older veterans are the targets of a current campaign, examine the possibility of advertising on talk, oldies or country format radio stations and the local newspaper.

CAMPAIGN VS. TARGETED ADVERTISING

When Procter & Gamble sells soap, it launches a media campaign to reach the maximum number of consumers to sell the highest number of bars of soap to make the maximum number of dollars. It does this by determining the best period of time to “saturate” consumers with its message. Then, it buys a blitz of advertising on television, radio, cable systems and newspapers that make it impossible to not see or hear the message within a two- or three-week period. For manufacturers, advertising campaigns pay off because consumers respond by buying products that more than pay for the cost of advertising.

Unless your post is unusually large or is enjoying the proceeds from a rich benefactor’s multi million-dollar estate, the full-blown campaign approach is probably not a viable option to reach out to your community.

TARGETED ADVERTISING

Selecting one or two media outlets at a time to carry your post’s or department’s message is a more practical and economic approach to advertising. It enables a message to be tailored specifically to the intended demographic at an affordable price for a measured period of time that can be analyzed for effectiveness and future use. The key to effective advertising is maximum repetition of the message. The more often readers, viewers or listeners receive your message, the more prone they are to take the action step in your message.

WHAT IS THE BEST MEDIUM IN WHICH TO ADVERTISE?

Each media has advantages and disadvantages based on the type of message and audience you want to reach.

TELEVISION

Allows highly defined selection of audience. Station sales representatives can tailor advertising based on your post’s objective. The demographics of who you wish to appeal to should be considered. Looking for younger veterans? They probably aren’t watching classic westerns. You would do well to consider televised sports coverage or spots during the sports section of the local newscast. Television buys you a large number of viewers for your message. The potential downside is relatively high cost per spot.

CABLE

As with local television stations, you have the high degree of selectivity of programs. The advantage of advertising with a cable system is a much broader range of programs and a significantly lower cost. Cable advertising executives can tailor a schedule to get your message to the widest number of the folks that you need to reach and usually are willing to assemble custom packages to suit your requirements.

RADIO

Radio stations can provide some of the best advertising bargains for reaching out to specific audiences. As a rule, AM radio stations tend to feature news, sports, religious and talk formats with loyal audiences. Many cover veterans affairs, national security and social issues on a regular basis. FM stations tend to be formatted according to types of music and entertainment.

Radio advertising can be affordable, depending on the size of the station's audience, power of its transmitter and signal reach. Obviously the smaller the station, the lower the cost of advertising. Spending post dollars with the local "mom and pop" station in town will be affordable but must be weighed against the message and who you are trying to reach. It might be ideal if you are looking for volunteers to assist with an American Legion event.

When considering radio advertising, become familiar with all the radio stations covering your area. Select those you think might be best for your message, and then meet with station sales executives. Be prepared to ask plenty of questions about their track record, personal recommendations and expected results.

Radio executives can offer a variety of specials, including two free spots for every one purchased and discounts for length of time spots are run, as well as different time periods during the day. Cost can range from \$5 a spot with small stations up to several hundred dollars for spots on clear channel, 50,000-watt stations that transmit over several states.

METRO TRAFFIC

Found in most mid- to large-size markets, metro traffic provides rush-hour traffic reports to a good number of radio stations serving the city or metro area. Sponsors "buy" individual traffic reports by the week. A common purchase would be 180 reports over a two-week period on a number of different stations. The advantage is being able to reach out to virtually all target audiences during peak hours with the undivided attention of commuters. The reports can include all format stations. Each report includes a "brought to you by The American Legion." The report ends with a 10-second trailer such as the following:

OPEN: This report brought to you by The American Legion....

(Report on traffic)

Closing messages:

#1 If you're a military veteran, you know there's strength in numbers. Join The American Legion

of the 21st century. Become a Legionnaire. Call Post # at (number).

#2 Serving men and women in uniform – today and tomorrow. There’s a place for you in The American Legion. Join today’s American Legion. Call (number).

#3 Today’s military is the best ever – and you need the best pay and technology. We believe you should have it. Join the nation’s strongest voice for a strong military — The American Legion on the Web at (post website address).

#4 Active duty or retired – you need to be a member of The American Legion of the 21st century. Continue the legacy of the American veteran. Become a Legionnaire. Call (number).

#5 Military service builds a common bond – The American Legion continues that bond for the future. Find your role in The American Legion of the 21st century. Join online at (post website address).

#6 Duty. Honor. Country. Legionnaires share that commitment with you today. Won’t you share that commitment with us? Become a Legionnaire. Call (number). Start making a difference for tomorrow – today.

#7 The world is a dangerous place. The service and sacrifice of active-duty and retired military members deserve the best benefits. Become a Legionnaire and help fight for your rights. Call (number).

#8 Want to get involved in American Legion Baseball, Boys Nation, High School Oratorical, youth programs and health care for veterans? Join today’s American Legion. Call (number).

In keeping with the old adage “you get what you pay for,” metro traffic is highly effective but relatively expensive. As an economic alternative, consider approaching one radio station of your format choice that does traffic reports and request a traffic sponsorship with their station alone.

NEWSPAPERS

Placing an ad in newspapers can also reach specific audiences, depending on which section the ad is placed, the size (full page to small column) or insert (a postcard or membership application). Weekly newspapers are more cost effective. Daily newspapers more expensive depending on area served and size of circulation.

Consider neighborhood sections in major metropolitan dailies.

Advertise in the section that best reaches your target audience – sports, gardening, cooking, national news, neighborhood news or even the obituary section. Cost will vary according to placement, size and frequency.

SPECIALTY ADVERTISING

School newspapers and broadcast stations sometimes offer opportunities to advertise. Check locally for advertising opportunities to reach young people with ads on Legion youth programs. If your community includes a military installation, consider advertising in the base newspaper or on its website.

Billboards offer long term, high visibility for The American Legion message. They offer the advantage of frequent repetition of the message for commuters who see it several times a day. Cost will vary depending on location. A one month commitment is an industry standard, but all lengths are negotiable. Regional publications such as pennysavers, city magazines and local corporate in-house newsletters offer additional exposure at widely varying ad rates.

You can also consider and emphasize some of the niche groups inside The American Legion. For instance, did you know that The American Legion established The American Legion Amateur Radio Club in 2011? The fast growing club, www.legion.org/hamradio, is open to any American Legion family member and is comprised of 1,500 ham radio operators from around the country. Another niche within The American Legion family are The American Legion Riders. A membership advertisement featuring the Riders could best be used in publications and broadcasts that target motorcycle enthusiasts. Moreover, there are some American Legion posts comprised entirely of firefighters, police officers and other professionals. Nearly every profession has specialty media.

INTERNET ADVERTISING

Web or “online” advertising offers a broad range of options including search engine marketing, search engine optimization, traditional website advertising and social media optimization. The first two options concentrate on getting your message out when people conduct searches on the Internet using key words.

For instance, if someone were to enter the name of your community and the word “veterans” in the Google search engine, where would your American Legion post website place on the list? Would it even be on the first page of web page listings? Through search engine marketing, you can ensure that your advertisement shows up during these searches. Search engine optimization can help ensure that the post website is at or near the top of the list as well.

Social media optimization can make your social media sites easy to find for users on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other popular sites. Best of all, online advertising can be very budget-friendly with easy-to-track results.

While a “homepage takeover” ad of Yahoo will cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, most of the popular search engine advertising services allow you to set your own budget on a “pay-per-click” basis. For instance, the popular Google AdWords charges only when someone clicks on your ad to go to your website. You can set a daily budget for \$10, which would allow your ad to accept 25 clicks per day.

More information can be found about inexpensive “per-click” advertising options on these popular sites:

- Google.com/adwords
- Advertising.yahoo.com
- BingAds.com
- Facebook.com/advertising

It might also make sense for you to advertise your post on traditional websites that veterans from

your community are likely to visit. If you are already advertising in the local newspaper, television or radio outlets, see if they will include your advertisements on their websites as a “value added” benefit or for a small additional fee. Websites for the local military base or reserve unit might also accept advertising, particularly on their Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) pages.

OUTDOOR ADVERTISING

Outdoor signage catches viewers when they are away from their homes during the course of their daily activities. There is no filter, no time when the sign or billboard is not available. Your post’s message could reach commuters to and from work every day for as long as your message is posted. It can target veterans and their families in your immediate area for weeks and months at a time. A good surface billboard should reach about 10,000 to 20,000 viewers per day and a highway location should reach from 60,000 to 200,000 sets of eyes daily.

Outdoor signs generally come in three sizes:

- The Freeway Bulletin is 14’x18’ (visible from 500 feet)
- The Highway Bulletin is 12’x24’ (visible from 300 feet)
- The Street Sign is 6’x12’ (visible from 150 feet)

Electronic digital and LED signs continuously rotate messages and artwork is loaded by computer. These boards are especially popular in shopping malls and downtown areas. They offer an advantage in that the message can be easily changed at anytime without printing physical sheets. The disadvantage is that your message can be placed as one of many in a rotation.

Most likely there are billboards located throughout your area but finding one that is available can be a challenge. You may wish to:

Browse the website www.outdoorbillboard.com under the heading “billboards for rent.”

Check Internet or yellow pages under “outdoor advertising” and contact a local representative

Drive around the area and note the billboards in your area that offer potential for your membership messages and visit those companies to discuss vacancies and the possibility of public service assistance to The American Legion. If there are Legion-eligible veterans working for the billboard company, be sure to sign them up!

If your billboard message has an action step requesting that veterans call your post, remember that the outdoor billboard is working for you 24/7. Be sure that the phone number posted will always have a cheerful and professional responder no matter what time the call is made. The person responding should have all of the information about how to join and when the next meeting or event occurs. If you post a website, be sure to use a short URL. People driving can easily remember www.legion.org or post123.com. The galvintbriscolegionpost123@aol.com is much more difficult to jot down while driving. Remember, the objective is to get your message out quickly, not cause a wreck.

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS (PSAs)

Due to the high cost of advertising, many posts instead rely on Public Service Announcements (PSAs) for broadcast media and Public Service Ads for print. Even these can be costly to produce. National headquarters frequently creates free PSAs for Legionnaires to pitch to their local media.

Whether its radio or television, a good relationship between the broadcast or station manager and the Legionnaires can greatly increase the odds of air time. Patriotic holidays such as Veterans Day, Memorial Day and Independence Day offer prime opportunities for stations that are looking to demonstrate their support for the military. The publications page of the national American Legion website, www.legion.org/publications has public service ads with editable fields to help posts and local print media observe patriotic holidays. Membership campaign ads are also available on that page.

It's important to remember when pitching these opportunities that stations are not obligated to run your PSAs. Be professional and thorough in your approach and respect the media representative's time. Above all, express your appreciation if the station does run the PSA.

The American Legion Public Relations Toolkit includes links to a whole series of PSAs available for posts to use free of charge. You can also find video, audio and PSA copy at these links:

<http://www.legion.org/presscenter/video>

<http://www.legion.org/presscenter/audio>

<http://www.legion.org/presscenter/psacopy>

If you prefer to adapt your own radio text, you may consider the following (As a general rule, radio copy is printed double-space in all caps):

Service Officers

60 Seconds

(168 words)

TWENTY-TWO MILLION AMERICANS ARE MILITARY VETERANS. THEY'RE MEN AND WOMEN WHO HAVE EARNED BENEFITS BECAUSE OF THEIR SERVICE AND SACRIFICE.

YET, TOO MANY AMERICAN VETERANS DON'T KNOW WHAT THEIR BENEFITS ARE — OR HOW TO CLAIM THEM.

ARE YOU A VETERAN WHO NEEDS TO FIND OUT ABOUT YOUR BENEFITS? ARE YOU GETTING WHAT YOU EARNED BY YOUR SERVICE? DO YOU NEED HELP WITH A VA CLAIM? IF YOU ANSWERED YES TO ANY OF THESE QUESTIONS,

YOU NEED TO TALK WITH AMERICAN LEGION POST _____ SERVICE OFFICER
_____. HE/SHE IS READY TO HELP YOU — AT NO COST.

CONTACT _____ BY CALLING _____. THAT'S
_____.

IF YOU'RE A VETERAN — IF YOU NEED ANSWERS ABOUT YOUR EARNED
BENEFITS — YOU OWE IT TO YOURSELF TO PICK UP THE PHONE AND
MAKE THE CALL. AMERICAN LEGION POST _____ SERVICE OFFICER
_____ IS READY TO HELP YOU. CALL HIM/HER AT
_____.

HELPING VETERANS IS WHAT THE AMERICAN LEGION IS ALL ABOUT. WE'VE
BEEN DOING IT SINCE 1919. CALL US TODAY.

###

BOTTOM LINE: COST VS. EXPECTATIONS

Unlike advertising to sell soap or widgets, The American Legion is selling an image and the value of membership, so the direct result of advertising isn't always apparent or easily measurable. Depending on the number of phone calls, membership applications or website hits immediately following ads or spots promoting them, success can sometimes be immediately determined. At other times, results will be purely subjective, merely enhancing the image of your post in the community.

A post advertising campaign can run anywhere from several hundred dollars to tens of thousands, depending on the media selected and length of run. Regardless of your budget, advertising will enhance your post image, improve relations with local media, and expose The American Legion to both veterans and the general public. The same can be said for public service announcements.

Advertising is not a prerequisite to running a strong American Legion public relations program. Sometimes the funds just aren't there. As with all investments, there is risk involved but it can be a great tool for telling The American Legion story and reaching out to your community. If your post can afford it, try it — but ease into it. Like investing in the stock market, immerse your post slowly into advertising. You might find it very effective.





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