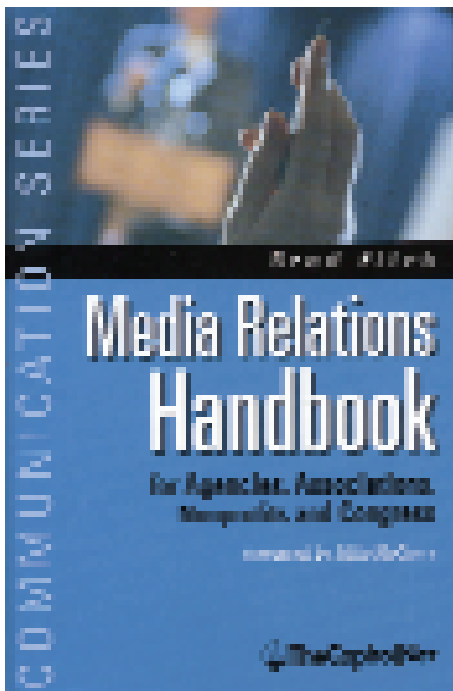


## HELP FOR PRESS SECRETARIES



*Media Relations Handbook for Agencies, Associations, Nonprofits and Congress* by Brad Fitch, TheCapitol.Net Inc. 2004. P.O. Box 25706, Alexandria, Va. 22313-5706. 368 pages. \$45. Available at [www.MediaRelationsHandbook.com](http://www.MediaRelationsHandbook.com).

We should pay attention when an author gets Tucker Carlson and James Carville to agree on his book.

Brad Fitch, a current communications teacher at American University and a former congressional press secretary, has written a useful handbook aimed at those who do media relations for government agencies and elected officials. He offers advice on ethics; dealing with the media; producing video news releases; developing Web sites; creating a crisis communications plan; and writing press releases, speeches, newsletters and opeds. He knows this turf well and, unsurprisingly, communicates it easily.

“Right or wrong, the media do not like to cover good stories about government,” he writes, which sums up many of the difficulties government officials, agencies and non-profit organizations have when competing for a slice of the media pie.

Although targeted for new media relations staff or ones starting a new press office, even

the most experienced public information officer can learn from this book.

The advice can be downright obvious “Avoid calling radio stations during busy times” to thought provoking “Whether it be a standard news article, political speech or op-ed piece, policy arguments without tangible people connected to them are distant and often weak.”

He dispenses valuable insights into technology, reminding us that it can’t solve everything. “Don’t expect technology by itself to invent interest in your mission. Start with your core beliefs, a logical target audience and build from this.” He lists items that all online newsrooms should have, talks about the importance of getting the rest of the organization to buy in to online strategies, and tells us the difference between online steak and sizzle.

Fitch graciously offers the reader valuable sources for more information and counsels us in the profession of things we should be reminded of from time to time. Some personal favorites:

- ◆ Events. “Like all good plays, your event must start with a compelling story.”
- ◆ Press releases. “When writing a quote, if you start with the phrase, ‘I’m pleased,’ start over.”
- ◆ On government/agency PR strategies. “We are not selling soap—we’re selling ideas to improve the world.”
- ◆ Mailers. “Communicating one idea to hundreds of thousands of people is a lot better than communicating many ideas to just a few.”

The book lists his 13 rules of media relations, which includes: “Never underestimate the superficial nature of the media;” a glossary of public relation terms; and freedom of information guidelines.

Most important are the passages that talk about dealing with the boss. “You must identify the strengths and weaknesses of the principal, assessing which forums and public relations vehicles work best, and develop a strategy for improving his or her skills,” he writes.

Fitch obviously has survived the “Cross-fire” of D.C. politics. As a result, all of us in this business can learn from his experience.

—Gene Rose, NCSL