

## At Least 40 Reasons Why Not to Routinely Publicize Proclamations

By Jim Pumarlo



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The dairy industry is vital to the economy and central to the livelihood of thousands of communities. Its contributions are celebrated each year during June Dairy Month and provide a springboard for stories and commentaries in newspapers.

June Dairy Month, and the innumerable proclamations celebrated throughout the year, should give newsrooms pause to evaluate these press releases when they cross their desks.

Proclamations are wonderful for club scrapbooks, but these declarations in and of themselves are not news. If newspapers routinely cover the news, editors should have little problem rejecting routine proclamations that often offer little substance.

A word of caution, however. Formulating and implementing a policy must be done carefully.

Proclamations typically recognize the work of myriad civic groups that are at the heart of a community's fabric. Proclamations are one avenue to recognize these contributions that otherwise may go unnoticed.

Following are some guidelines to consider when fielding requests for publishing proclamations:

- Publicize proclamations only when connected with a local event. It's common practice for local groups to submit a proclamation from an umbrella organization, doing little more than inserting their name in a template. Newsrooms should be comfortable in setting a standard that a local initiative is a requisite for recognizing proclamations.
- The focus of any stories and/or photos should reflect the initiatives and accomplishments of the local group or event, and not focus attention on who is issuing the proclamation. For example, draw attention to Week of the Child-Care Provider by interviewing a local day-care provider, not by publishing a photo of a mayor signing a proclamation. Public officials have plenty of opportunity to get their names and photos in the newspaper during the normal course of their duties.
- Proclamations typically recognize organizations that do year-round work. Newspaper coverage need not be restricted to specific days, weeks or months – as identified by proclamations. Crime Victims' Rights Week, Mental Health Awareness Day, Black History Month – these proclamations and many more draw attention to issues and activities appropriate for coverage at any time.
- Coordinate coverage of activities scheduled in conjunction with proclamations. For example, be aware that several nursing homes might forward news releases for Long-Term Care Week and each will seek publicity. A single story acknowledging special activities at all nursing homes is preferable to half a dozen stories generated by the submissions.
- Decide what is more appropriate and beneficial both in terms of news value and advancing the cause of the local group – promoting an event or covering an event. Keep in mind that newspapers have limited resources to cover all events. And, in many cases, activities are static and do not lend themselves to a story or photo – for example, a booth at a shopping mall publicizing American Heart Association Month.
- Don't forget that proclamations often provide an opportunity for revenue, too, by soliciting ads to sponsor a page recognizing the contributions of a local group.

The premise for setting policy should not be interpreted as a way to avoid publicizing proclamations. Some proclamations admittedly deserve attention, especially if they are observed communitywide. National Volunteer Recognition Week, complete with honoring a city's top volunteer, is an example.

And, as noted previously, proclamations might provide a singular opportunity to promote the contributions of a group that otherwise go unmentioned. Editors and reporters certainly should not dismiss proclamations out of hand. Instead, they should seek substantive coverage.

It's become commonplace for organizations to issue proclamations solely as a public relations tool. Newspapers must be aware that if they publish one proclamation, other groups will seek similar treatment.

Contributions of community groups are important to local quality of life. Their work should be recognized and publicized. How newspapers do this should be clearly communicated to groups in order to avoid hard feelings and misunderstanding.

As for the 40 reasons – and more – of why newspapers should not routinely publish proclamations? The secretary of state's Web site in Minnesota – my home state – identifies 40 proclamations for June alone. The declarations range from Former Prisoners of War Day and Cheerful Givers Day to Food Allergy Awareness Week and Sexual Assault Awareness Month to Workers Memorial Day and Teen Pregnancy Awareness Month. And June Dairy Month did not even make the list.

*Jim Pumarlo writes, speaks and provides training on Community Newsroom Success Strategies. He is author of "Votes and Quotes: A Guide to Outstanding Election Coverage" and "Bad News and Good Judgment: A Guide to Reporting on Sensitive Issues in a Small-Town Newspaper." He can be contacted at [www.pumarlo.com](http://www.pumarlo.com).*

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