

Working with the Media

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Planning your media strategy

The media can be a critical partner in advocating for children and families. Media attention not only raises awareness and educates the community, it can also help influence decision makers, funders and potential supporters.

The trick to getting good media coverage is to think like a reporter and get to the REAL story behind an event or issue. Public forums, rallies or other special events are an opportunity to rally supporters and bring media attention to your efforts. While only a small number will actually attend an event, thousands more may read a news article or see a television story about it.

Here are some general guidelines for planning your media strategy:

Define your audience—Decide who you want to reach, whether state or local leaders or the general public. This will help you determine which media format will work best.

Set goals and objectives for your media efforts—Your goals may be as general as educating the public about

child abuse and neglect but objectives should be more specific. Objectives include a specific time frame for completion and measurement for success.

Select the best approach—There are a number of vehicles available for conveying your message through the media. These include:

- News/press releases
- Press conferences
- Letters to the editor
- Guest editorials
- Meetings with editorial boards
- Public forums or events
- Speaking directly with reporters who cover children's issues



Consider your organization's needs and goals and choose the best approach for you.

Develop personal contacts—Reaching people in the media can be difficult. Keep in mind that reporters and editors have frequent deadlines and may have odd office hours. Be patient and persistent. Try alternative ways of connecting, either through email or fax.

ACTION AGENDA

Why work with the media?

- To achieve maximum exposure and publicity for your group's message or event.
- To effectively communicate to target audiences why they should care about your issue and how they can get involved.
- Positive media relations can amount to invaluable, free advertising for your agency or cause!

Getting effective coverage

- Look for opportunities to link child welfare to issues in your community. Be creative! Economic downturns link to quality child care; welfare reform can be linked to the need for quality child care.
- Know your contacts. Watch local newspapers and television shows to identify key reporters who cover children's issues. Go beyond the feature writers and lifestyle reporters. Include the business reporter, editorial reporter, and hard news reporters in your media efforts.
- Become a resource. Establish yourself as a good source of reliable information.
- Write a letter to the editor. They are among the most highly read features in a newspaper. Tie your letter to a current community issue or link your letter to a recent story in the news. Keep it short and to the point. If your letter comments on a news article, submit it as quickly as possible after the story appears.
- Submit an op-ed column. This is a guest editorial, usually longer than a letter to the editor, written from an expert perspective rather than a general reader.
- Meet with your newspaper's editorial board. Editorials can be very influential and editorial boards determine what the editorials will say. Make a point of getting to know the editorial board members and supplying them with information about you and your organization.
- Take to the airwaves. Volunteer to be an expert on a local call-in show or to respond to calls from parents.
- Take advantage of seasonal opportunities. Tie your issue to a certain time of year or holiday and you are more likely to get coverage. For example, holidays are great for discussing safe toys for children.
- Give a local perspective to national news. As national stories break, provide local reporters with information on how the story affects children or programs locally.
- Keep talking! The more you brainstorm for opportunities to keep your issues in the news and the more reporters see you and your organization as a reliable source for information, the more coverage you will get.

Target the people at your local paper or television station who work in community affairs, write human interest stories or cover special events. When you get a reporter or editor on the phone, be brief and professional. Tell them who you are and who you represent. Ask them how you can make their jobs easier and offer to send them information about your group or its key issues.

Keep the lines of communication open. Make sure that your business card or contact information is included in any information you send. Provide an after-hours telephone number and when a reporter calls, try to be responsive. Return calls promptly, get the requested information out as soon as you can and include background information whenever possible.

Make their jobs easier—Once you have identified a journalist or reporter who may be interested in your information, ask them how they prefer to receive news, via email, fax or phone. Ask about their deadlines. Find out which days are best for submitting information for a story.

Tools of the trade

Advocates have a number of tools at their disposal for engaging the media to promote an issue or cause. Here are some that you can apply to your own advocacy efforts.

Media Advisories—One-page information sheets that provide the who, what, when, where and why of an event, along with any photo or visual opportunities. Fax media advisories no more than a week prior to the event. Address the cover sheet to the appropriate editor by name.

Phone Calls—Follow-up calls are critical. Always call to see if the right

editor received your fax or release and offer to provide additional information.

Media Kits—These contain background information on an event, organization or issue, as well as printable materials such as photos and logos. They can be distributed at an event or news conference or simply mailed out to interested journalists.

News Releases—News releases are one to two page documents with headlines that are used to announce news or events in story form, with relevant background and quotes. Some smaller media organizations will actually run press releases in their entirety without changes.

Backgrounders—Backgrounders provide relevant background, historical perspective or supporting information about the organization, issue or event.

Public Service Announcements—Also called PSAs, these are 15-, 30-, or 60-second radio or television spots that communicate a message, describe an event or announce some news. They can be produced as full TV or radio spots but are more typically submitted in written form to be read by announcers.

Interviews—There are many opportunities to get your message out through one-on-one interviews with the media. Offer to provide advance interviews with key organizers prior to an event. Or set up a live television interview during an event, if you coincide with the noon or 6pm broadcasts. Set up morning show interviews or arrange a call-in interview with your local radio station during drive time.

News releases

News releases, sometimes referred to as press releases, are the cornerstone of any publicity program. Keep in mind

The six “C’s” of news writing

- 1 **CLEAR**
Keep it simple. Write to express, not to impress. Avoid jargon. Spell out acronyms on first usage and briefly explain what they mean.
- 2 **CONCISE**
Use short words, short sentences and short paragraphs.
- 3 **COMPLETE**
Answer the questions: Who, What, When, Where, Why and How.
- 4 **COORDINATED**
Organize the story, organize your facts. The first paragraph (your “lead”) should summarize key elements and grab readers’ attention.
- 5 **CONSISTENT**
If you choose to spell out the word “percent” instead of using a “%” sign, do it every time.
- 6 **CREDIBILITY**
Get your facts straight. Spell names correctly. Inform and educate.

Need to see a sample?

Sample news releases are available by following the advocacy toolkit [Samples link on the website.](#)

ACTION AGENDA

Writing the news release

- Write releases so they read like a news story.
- Write a headline that commands attention.
- Answer the standard questions— who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Quote a spokesperson from your organization. Reporters may place these quotes directly into their stories.
- Always provide a contact name and phone number.
- If possible, send the release to a specific individual, either an editor or reporter.
- Put the most important points first.
- Edit your release for spelling and grammar. Have someone review your work for accuracy and clarity.
- Fax your release to papers in your area as well as local television and radio stations.
- Follow up on your release in two to four days. Ask the reporter if they need additional information.
- Track the coverage for your files.

that you are competing with hundreds of other releases for an editor's attention. Using the proper format is as important as content. Writing a news release takes practice. The first priority is to know why you are writing the release. Is the information important? Does the story have a local angle? Do you have all of the facts needed to present a clear picture of the story?

If you can time your release to coincide with a national event that has generated a lot of media coverage, there is a better chance of getting local coverage. These national events may be good or bad and include national news broadcasts and shows such as 60 Minutes, Primetime, Dateline, etc. Remember, you can use the opportunity of negative press to make lemonade out of lemons. News releases can also relate to proactive events such as Stand for Children Day or Child Abuse Prevention Month.

News releases should be sent to broadcast and print media and should always be followed with a phone call. It is good to send a copy to both reporters and editors.

Most news releases consist of the following:

- A headline
- The organization name and a contact person's name and telephone number
- An introductory paragraph that summarizes the news and...
- A quote from the organization president or executive director

The news release should be as brief as possible. If it extends to a second page, insert the word -more- (between hyphens) at the end of the first page to indicate continuation, and xxx to indicate the end.

Reporters may use information from your press release to supplement stories they are already writing or may be inspired to write stories based on the content of the releases. Remember, they can't write anything if they don't get your release!

Reduce your news release hassles

- Update phone, fax and email lists at least once a year. News organizations turn over personnel quite frequently.
- Limit the number of pages. Your release is more likely to get read and you save on paper and postage.
- For releases that go over a page, try using 8½ x 14 (legal size) paper instead of 8½ x 11 (letter size).
- Don't equate fancy letterhead with successful news releases. Editors are more interested in what is on the paper than what the paper looks like.
- Enclose more than one release in an envelope to save on postage and preparation costs.
- Print on both sides of the paper if possible.

ACTION AGENDA

Promoting an event

- Fax media advisories at least three days before an event. Call to ensure the advisory is in the right hands.
- Pitch the story to an editor or reporter. Find out the deadlines for the day of the event. Have ready a list of people who can conduct interviews. Call again the day before the event.
- Use a media kit. Include a news release, the organization's background, logo, biographies and photos/contact numbers of key people.
- Follow up after the event. Provide additional information, if requested. Take the media kit to reporters who couldn't come to the event. Pitch the story as a feature, if appropriate.

What is the point?

Questions to ask before you promote an event or story to the media:

- What makes the event story interesting or unique?
- Is your news or event relevant to a large number of people or a smaller target audience?
- Is the message breaking news, a feature story or a calendar item?
- Is the event or story better for print media or television?