

 **END CORPORATE RULE. LEGALIZE DEMOCRACY.**
MOVE TO AMEND

Earned Media: A Guide for Move to Amend Affiliates
- September 2011 -*

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INTRODUCTION

Knowing how to work with the media effectively is important in grassroots campaigns. Whether you are trying to educate the public, sway elected officials, or grow your organization (or all three), knowing how to get your message out there is key. This guide is intended to demystify media work for those who are just getting started, and to help those who are more experienced improve their capabilities.

WHAT IS EARNED MEDIA?

This guide focuses on *earned media*. This is media that doesn't cost you money, but that you have to "earn" (which is why it isn't called "free media"). Examples include newspaper articles, radio newscasts and television interviews.

Earned media can be contrasted with *paid media* and *owned media*. Paid media is media that you pay someone else for (i.e. advertisements), while owned media is that which you control (e.g. your email list, website, and Twitter account). Though they can be useful, these types of media are outside the scope of this guide.

DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Before doing media work, you should understand clearly why you are doing it. What are your goals? Whom are you trying to influence? What do you want them to do?

Answering these questions will help you figure out what to communicate, what types of media to use, and how and when to use them. Together, these decisions should come together to form a coherent *communications strategy* to help you achieve your goals.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TELLING STORIES

Human beings love stories. We think in stories, tell stories to each other, react to stories, and repeat them to others. And so if you are trying to communicate something important to voters, elected officials or anyone else, the best way to do it is through a story.

You wouldn't expect a child to listen to a bedtime story that was just a collection of facts or a policy prescription - so why would you expect your media audience to do so? To make it interesting, think of what you are saying as a narrative. This means you should consider the elements of narrative when designing your communications. In other words, who is the protagonist? The antagonist? What is the conflict, and how might it be resolved? What supporting details make the audience care?

And you do need the audience to care - it is crucial that your story have an emotional impact. Drew Westin, author of the excellent book *The Political Brain*, sums it up well:

In politics, when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins. Elections are decided in the marketplace of emotions, a marketplace filled with values, images, analogies, moral sentiments, and moving oratory, in which logic plays only a supporting role.

You may dislike the idea that the world is ruled by emotion rather than by logic. If so, however, ask yourself why you are reading this guide to begin with. Is it because you care about your country? Or because you feel moral outrage at the power unjustly claimed by large corporations over our lives? Chances are good that emotion plays a large role in your involvement with Move to Amend - and that's how it should be. Though logic is important in helping us understand the world, emotion is what drives us to try to make it better.

Big-Picture Stories and Messages

There are two kinds of stories you should think about when doing media work: *big-picture stories* and *messages*.

The big-picture story is the broad one that tells why you are doing what you're doing, and why it is important. It is a single, coherent story about your campaign. In the case of Move to Amend, it will probably include the struggle for power between large corporations and the American people, the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, the long-term strategy for amending the Constitution, and how your group's actions fit into that long-term strategy. It also may include specific subplots related to the impacts of the status quo on voters, small businesses, future generations and other groups.

The message is a short, succinct story that is part of your big-picture story. It is the specific story that you are sending to the outside world in a particular interview, newspaper article, or blog post. You will use several messages to communicate different aspects of your issue, but they should all fit smoothly together because they are all part of the same big-picture story.

Developing Concise Messages

The average newspaper quote is about 30 words long, and the average television clip is about 10 seconds. Sharpening your messages to fit these constraints will help you get them into these media. Even in a longer-form medium (such as talk radio or an op-ed), it is useful to focus your ideas into short, well-designed messages that you can build the rest of your story around. Doing this will help you communicate your main points to your audience, and avoid the sort of long, unfocused ramblings that cause people to stop reading or change the station.

Messages in this short form are often called *sound bites*. Sound bites are a key part of today's media, and reporters are always looking for good sound bites to incorporate into stories as

quotes and short video or audio clips. If you don't give a reporter good sound bites to work with, your message is not likely to appear in the media. Or, even worse, what you say may be edited down to a sound bite, and only a fragment of your message will appear. So it is worth your time to craft good sound bites.

A useful guideline when creating sound bites is the 27/9/3 formula: a maximum of 27 words, 9 seconds, and 3 points. Getting a message to fit these constraints is not as hard as it seems. If you are having trouble getting started, try writing out your message without worrying about length. Then underline the key words, and rewrite your message only using those words. Ask yourself if there is a clearer, shorter way of making each point, and edit accordingly. If you can't make your message fit the constraints, you may be trying to make too many points; in this case, try to cut one. When you have written something you like, read it out loud. It should roll easily off the tongue. If you stumble over any words, change them to make the sound bite easier to say. And finally, when you have compiled several sound bites that you like, memorize them so that you have them ready when a reporter asks you a question.

Here are some examples that follow the 27/9/3 formula:

We need to amend the Constitution to make it clear that corporations are not people and money is not speech. Democracy is for real people, not corporations.

Big money's turning our elections into auctions, and our elected officials into corporate servants. Our government shouldn't be for sale to the highest bidder.

We've all been at a party where one loudmouth talks nonstop - nobody else can be heard. That's what's happening here: corporate money is drowning us out.

Even a small child can tell the difference between Monsanto and a human being - so why is this so hard for the Supreme Court?

GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS

Once you've developed a good message, you need to get it across to your audience. This means not only getting your message in front of the audience, but getting them to notice and remember it.

The Power of Repetition

Repetition is key to getting your audience to remember your message. Or rather, repetition, repetition, repetition. As a general rule, it takes at least six exposures to get a message through to people.

Even if you feel like you've been saying the same thing forever and people must be getting sick of it, they probably aren't. Remember that other people are not living and breathing your issue like you are. They don't listen to every radio spot and read every newspaper article that your organization generates, and the overwhelming odds are that most of them haven't even heard your message yet. So keep saying it.

The Importance of Consistency

You are trying to tell a story to your audience, and to repeat it enough so that they remember it and internalize it. It doesn't help if different members of your organization contradict each other. Also, your opposition can use any such contradictions to undermine the story you are trying to tell. Therefore, if different people from your organization are working with the media, you should take steps to keep their messages consistent.

First, your group should decide who your media contacts will be. It is a good idea to select a few primary spokespeople, who will be the main ones speaking on your organization's behalf. You should also decide whether others are permitted to speak to the media, and if so, who these people are (are these just a few additional individuals, or everyone in your organization?).

Next, you should get everyone who will be working with the media on the same page. Take time to discuss your big picture story with them. Draft a set of talking points (short, clear messages about different aspects of your big picture story) and also a list of likely questions with a response to each one, and share these. Stress the importance of staying on message, and help them learn the techniques to do so (such as those covered in the next section). Taking these steps will help your group work as a team to tell your story.

STAYING ON MESSAGE

Staying on message when being interviewed by a reporter or talk show host can be challenging. Knowing how to do so is especially important when the person asks you something unexpected, or even tries to trick you into contradicting yourself or looking bad on camera. Luckily, there are several techniques you can use to stay in control of the situation and on message.

Mastering the Pivot

The first thing to realize is that you do not have to answer a question just because a reporter asks it. Doing this gives control over your message to the reporter, who probably doesn't have the same goals as you, and in some cases may even be actively trying to get you to contradict yourself. Though your natural instinct is to answer every question, in this case it is wrong. Having a conversation with a reporter is not the same as having a conversation in regular life: it is acceptable, and indeed expected, that you will manage your answers carefully to stay on message. Answering every question is a very common mistake of inexperienced or

undisciplined spokespeople, and one that everyone speaking on behalf of your organization should learn to avoid.

So how do you not answer a problematic question without looking evasive, or even dishonest? The answer is simple: you don't *answer* it, you *respond* to it. And you do this calmly and in a way that is not defensive (because defensiveness can make you look both evasive *and* dishonest).

The solution is to use a *pivot*. A pivot is a verbal redirection that allows you to respond to a question with your message. The basic formula is:

Pivot = Pivot Phrase + Talking Point

Useful pivot phrases include the following:

"The thing is..."

"In reality..."

"The truth is..."

"The facts are this..."

"What's important is..."

"The issue here is..."

"What it sounds like you're really getting at is..."

"That's an interesting question, but first I'd like to comment on..."

For example:

Reporter: "Is this a socialist plot?"

You: "The reality is that Americans across the political spectrum agree on this. We need to amend the Constitution to reclaim our democracy."

Reporter: "The ACLU thinks *Citizens United* was a good thing - are you saying that they're stupid?"

You: "What's important is that the American people's voice cannot be heard above the din of corporate money. We need to amend the Constitution to get our country back."

Reporter: "Do you really think voters will take this seriously?"

You: "What it sounds like you're really getting at is whether corporate power is a problem in our country. I think we can all agree that government should serve We the People, not We the Corporations."

Not only does a pivot allow you to avoid saying something damaging, but it quickly gets you right back to something useful: your message. This makes it more likely that your message will end up in the television clip, the newspaper article, or the radio listener's mind. And with a little practice, your pivots will come across as perfectly natural to your audience.

Here is a good way to practice the pivot. Pair up with someone, take a simple message (e.g. "my grandmother hates pickles"), and have the other person play the reporter and try to get you off your message. The conversation might go something like this:

Reporter: So do you think that the recent economic news is good or bad?"

You: "Well, the important thing is this: My grandmother hates pickles."

Reporter: "So you don't care that people are suffering?"

You: "My grandmother suffers because she hates pickles. And I think that is an outrage."

Reporter: "I heard that you were out with your boss's daughter last night. Is that true?"

You: "What everyone is really most concerned about right now is how much my grandmother hates pickles. And they are right to be concerned."

Reporter: "So you're not going to comment?"

You: "We all know that my grandmother hates pickles. The real question is, what are we going to do about it?"

Never Repeat a Negative

Sometimes you will want to respond directly to a negative question, rather than pivoting away from it. This will be the case when it's important to neutralize the question, *and* when you have a good response ready (this is why you should prepare a list of likely questions and responses beforehand).

When responding directly to a negative question, it is important not to reinforce the negative that you are responding to. For example:

Reporter: Last week I heard radio talk show host Jack Green say that your organization hates America. Is that true?

You: No, of course we don't hate America. We love our country.

Though your intention was to set the record straight, what you've really just done is strengthen the association in the audience's mind between your organization and America hating. Even if the audience consciously understands that you don't hate America, the idea that you do is likely to linger in their subconscious.

Instead, it would be better to respond like this:

Reporter: Last week I heard radio talk show host Jack Green say that your organization hates America. Is that true?

You: Actually, our members are very patriotic. That's why we're willing to volunteer our time to help make our country a better place.

Guiding the Conversation

During a media interview, realize that you don't need to wait for a question before delivering your message. If the reporter doesn't ask you the right question (or doesn't ask it soon enough), just say something like "I'm happy to talk about that, but first I'd like to explain how..."

WHAT IS NEWS?

Before you offer a story to a reporter, it's important to think carefully about whether it is really news. Just because something is interesting to you does not mean that it will be interesting to a broad audience. And if it's not, then it's not news.

Always try to think about your story from the audience's perspective, rather than just from your own. And do what you can to make it more interesting. Four concepts will help you do this, and we will discuss them in turn: the story's news value, its angle, the peg and the hook.

News Value

News value (or *newsworthiness*) can be defined as what makes a story interesting enough to warrant coverage. Generally, a story will need to score highly in two or more of the following categories to be newsworthy:

1. **Conflict:** Human beings are naturally interested in conflict, and most good stories involve some element of it. It may be a direct fight or argument (e.g. partisan bickering in Congress, war), but it may also be conflict of an ethical or moral nature (e.g. local people fighting back against huge corporations).
2. **Novelty:** This refers to whether the story is new or unique. It is captured by words such as "first," "biggest," "best," "only," and "unusual." For example, if your child learns to ride a bicycle it is probably not news. If your dog learns to ride a bicycle, it probably is.
3. **Timeliness:** How long ago the events in the story occurred is a key part of whether it is news. Often something that is news today won't be news next week, or even tomorrow.

4. **Proximity:** This is how close a story is to the audience. Proximity can be geographic; for example, the results of a local election in Chicago will be more newsworthy there than in New York or Los Angeles. Proximity can also be along nongeographic lines; for instance, a factory workers' strike in Pennsylvania may be of more interest to union members in Wisconsin than it is to farmers in Pennsylvania.

5. **Prominence:** Prominence is the degree to which the people involved are important or well-known. This is why celebrities appear in so many news stories, and why it's a good idea to invite well-known people to speak at your rallies.

6. **Impact:** This is the number of people affected. A story about a power outage that affects 100 people will be less newsworthy than one that affects 100,000.

7. **Human interest:** As human beings we naturally empathize with other people, and can have strong emotional responses to hearing about an individual's adventures, successes and hardships. For example, the news value of a story about rising health insurance costs can be raised by painting a picture of how this is affecting the lives of individual people.

To evaluate the news value of a potential story, give it a score in each of the above categories using a scale of 1-5. Once you have done this, see if you can think of a way to reframe it so as to increase its ratings in each category.

A note on conflict: although it tops the list, be aware when you are reframing a story that conflict can be dangerous. After all, you don't want to come across as a conflict monger. If you feel confident that you can use conflict to your advantage (e.g. by portraying your organization's role as that of the "good guy" responding to an existing conflict), then do it. If not, you should focus primarily on increasing the news value in the other categories.

The Angle

The *angle* is the way in which you look at the story. In other words, it is what you emphasize about it and what you don't.

When presenting your story to a reporter, you should choose the angle that will be most likely to get it covered (while staying on message, of course). You can do this by looking at the news value ratings you gave your story in each of the seven categories, and then focusing on the categories where its news value is highest.

The Peg

Every story needs to be timely. There must be a reason why the story should run now, rather than next week or next month. This is the role of the *peg*.

A peg relates your story to something happening right now, and thus makes your story timely. For example:

Earth Day might serve as the peg for a story about endangered frogs.

The release of a war movie might serve as the peg for a story about the psychological stress suffered by veterans returning from Afghanistan.

A story about the negative effects of money in politics could be pegged to an upcoming election.

The peg typically appears close to the beginning of an article or broadcast news piece, so that the audience knows why the story is important. Unless your story is itself breaking news (and probably even if it is), you should peg it to something else to make it timely. The following list suggests some possibilities:

- A bill passed by Congress or your state legislature
- The filing of a lawsuit
- A Supreme Court ruling
- The release of a research study or poll results
- An arrest or indictment
- The release of a corporation's income tax payments
- The results of an election
- A corruption scandal
- A political protest
- A holiday
- The anniversary of an important event (e.g. the *Citizens United* ruling)

The Hook

The *hook* is the part of a story that grabs the audience's attention, and causes them to read, watch or listen to the rest of the story. A hook can be just about anything: a memorable quote, a funny anecdote, a shocking statistic, or a compelling phrase. Ideally, the hook should stick in the audience's mind, helping them to remember your message (e.g. "Friends don't let friends drive drunk," or "Tired of shoveling snow? Blame global warming."). You can think of the hook as being like the catchy jingle in a television commercial: it may be meaningless on its own, but it plays a central role in the appeal and memorability of the story.

Before pitching a story to a reporter, try to identify a good hook. Include it near the beginning of any press release, press advisory or pitch letter.¹ Finding a good hook takes creativity, and it

¹ For more on press releases, press advisories and pitch letters, see the section *Getting Your Story in the News* later in this guide.

can be challenging. However, having one makes the media much more likely to take up your story.

GETTING TO KNOW NEWSPAPER REPORTERS

In recent years newspapers have faced stiff competition from online news sources, and as a result their subscription rates have declined. However, the rest of the media still tends to follow the lead of newspaper reporters, and many online news sites are owned by print media companies. For these reasons, newspapers are as influential as ever, and newspaper reporters remain the most prominent. Therefore, it is important for you to know how to work with these reporters to get your story in the news.

Reporters are not another species; they are people with careers, relationships and interests, just like anyone else. Understanding a little better who they are, and what they want, will help you work more effectively with them.

Who Are These People and What Do They Want?

Quite simply, reporters want good news stories presented in a way that makes their jobs easier. If you can give them that, you both win.

Reporters compete hard with each other for space in the newspaper, even within the same newsroom, and they are all looking for the next big story. And as newspapers shrink their staffs, those reporters that remain are increasingly harried and short on time.

Though the reporter is not your friend, she is also not your opponent. You both have the same goal, which is to get good stories in the paper.

How a Newsroom Works

There are two ways that a story can get written. The first is by *assignment*, which means that an editor assigns a story to a reporter (this is a top-down method). Assignment is the way most stories are produced, but since they tend to be shorter they do not make up the majority of copy (i.e. actual text).

The second way that a story can be created is through *enterprise*. This means that the reporter herself finds the story and submits it to the editor (this is a bottom-up method). When a reporter gets a beat, she writes most of her stories by enterprise. These tend to be the better reporters and the bigger stories. For this reason, it is generally best to work mainly with the beat reporter, rather than with the assignment editor (though developing a relationship with the editor can be helpful too).

When a reporter thinks she has found a good story, she goes to her editor and makes a pitch (i.e. she tries to convince the editor that it should be in the paper). The editor gets pitches from many reporters, and has to decide which stories to include.

The editor makes a plan for what stories to include in the next day's paper. Commonly, however, these plans get reshuffled at the last minute as breaking news bumps other stories off. For this reason, it's easier to get stories in the newspaper if you pick times when not much else is happening.

Establishing Relationships with Reporters

If a reporter knows you, she is more likely to be receptive to your stories. Also, she may contact you for background information or a quote when she is working on a story related to your organization's issues.

You should seek to establish relationships with the reporters who are most likely to cover your stories. For example, if you are working on a local resolution campaign, these would probably be the political or city reporters who work for your local paper. A paper's website normally lists the reporters who work there, along with their beats.²

When identifying reporters to reach out to, also consider those that work for the local and specialty press. These are media outlets that serve specific constituencies (e.g. racial/ethnic minorities, religious groups, union members, specific professions, LGBT) or local areas (e.g. neighborhoods, campuses). Though these outlets by definition reach smaller audiences than most newspapers, building personal relationships with their reporters is often key to getting stories in them.

Once you have identified a reporter with whom you'd like to establish a relationship, do a little background research. See what she's written before, and get a feel for what types of stories she tends to cover.

Next, make contact. Call her, introduce yourself and your organization, and ask to schedule an introductory meeting at her office or over coffee. Tell her that you would like help her understand your issue better and be a resource for her.

When you arrive at the meeting, bring a media packet along to give the reporter. This packet should include a fact sheet with a brief overview of the issue and your organization, your contact information (plus that of any other spokespeople for your organization), and any other particularly relevant background material (e.g. poll results, clippings of previous articles on the

² A good time to identify reporters with whom to establish relationships is when you are building your press list. For more details, see the subsection *Building Your Press List* (in the section *Getting Your Story in the News*).

topic, etc.). The documents in the media packet should be few, short, and easy to understand with a quick read; do not try to include everything under the sun.

At the meeting, explain your issue clearly - don't expect the reporter to already understand it. Ask if she has any questions. Stress that you want to be of assistance to her: you are willing to help her on background (i.e. to understand the issue better), to connect her with people to interview on the topic, and to help her identify stories (if you already have some ideas for stories, you can suggest them). Be friendly, but respect her time - you are not there for a leisurely chit-chat, but to let her know what you can offer her. Come to the meeting well-prepared so that you can say what you want to efficiently.

If you are not able to set up a meeting with a reporter, send her your media packet. Follow up with a phone call to ensure that she received it, and to offer yourself as a resource.

Building Relationships with Reporters

The best way to build your relationship with a reporter is by giving her what she wants: good stories delivered in a way that makes her job easier. Always strive to deliver quality and to not waste her time.

As you identify good stories related to your issue, offer them to her.³ If the stories are not breaking news, consider offering them to her as exclusives - reporters love exclusive stories and this will help build your relationship.

When possible, transmit leads for stories that do not relate to your issue but are on the reporter's beat. This might mean relaying gossip that you've heard, or suggesting a story idea that has occurred to you. However, make sure that what you offer is likely to be valuable to her - you want her to see you as a consistent source for valuable material, not as a nuisance.

Remember, the reporter wants a dependable resource, not a friend. Don't tell her anything that you don't want to see in the paper. Though the phrase "this is off the record" comes up a lot in movies, in practice you should assume that nothing is ever off the record.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

Though you will probably spend most of your energy building relationships with newspaper reporters, there are other categories of media professionals to whom you may also want to reach out.

³ For more on how to pitch stories to reporters, see the section *Getting Your Story in the News* later in this guide.

One of these is newspaper editors. Editors can assign reporters to cover stories, and also are responsible for selecting which stories make the news. They also can play a role in getting newspaper editorials.⁴ For these reasons, it may be wise to establish relationships with the editors most likely to be interested in your stories (e.g. those responsible for city or political news). However, a word of caution: if you establish relationships with both a beat reporter and her editor, be sensitive to the fact that the editor is the reporter's boss. If you don't get what you want from the reporter, don't go to her editor unless there is a very good reason, as this could damage your relationship with the reporter.

Another group you may wish to reach out to is bloggers. These are people who publish stories online on blogs (short for "web logs"). Though some bloggers are on the payroll of local newspapers or organizations, many of them work alone and have no boss or editor. Blogs tend to reach a smaller part of the population than the mainstream media (i.e. traditional newspapers, radio and television), but they disproportionately reach certain influential demographics (e.g. the well-educated, the politically-savvy). They also play an increasingly important role in alerting the mainstream media to stories.

The bloggers most likely to cover your stories are probably local ones who write about community or political issues. A good way to identify local bloggers is to ask several internet-savvy and politically-inclined individuals to tell you whose blogs they read for local news; you should then look over each of these yourself to get a feel for them.

To establish a relationship with a blogger, you should treat her with the same respect that you would a reporter. Set up a meeting with her, explain your campaign, and offer to be a resource. As with a reporter, assume that everything you say to a blogger is on the record - and if anything, you should be more cautious about what you tell bloggers. Many bloggers have never been trained as journalists nor worked in the traditional news hierarchies, and so do not feel bound by the same journalistic standards as reporters. They may not wait to confirm stories, and are generally more likely to report on rumors and engage in speculation. So treat bloggers with respect, but also with caution.

Other individuals with whom you may wish to establish relationships include broadcast reporters, editors, producers and hosts, as well as radio news directors and the individuals responsible for screening and airing public service announcements. However, do not feel that you need to run out immediately and try to get to know the whole local media establishment; as you develop a need to work with these people, you can ask them to meet with you then. Developing good relationships with a few newspaper reporters is most important, since they will probably be your most valuable media contacts in the long run.

⁴ For more on how newsrooms work, see the subsection *How a Newsroom Works* (in the previous section, *Getting to Know Newspaper Reporters*). For more information on editorials, see the subsection *Editorials* (in the section *Opinion Pieces in Newspapers*).

GETTING YOUR STORY IN THE NEWS

Once you've got a good story, you will need to get it in the news. In this section we will discuss how to build a *press list*, and then how to use it in concert with press advisories, press releases and other tools to get your stories into the media. We will also provide tips for what to do if a reporter calls you.

Building Your Press List

A *press list* (or *media list*) is a list of media contacts who are likely to be interested in your stories. Every organization that engages in media work should build and maintain a press list.

A press list should include information about individual reporters, editors, broadcast producers, radio news directors, and bloggers. At a minimum, this should include the individual's name, employing news outlet, beat or area (if a reporter or editor), type of show (if a producer), phone number, fax number, and email address. It should also include a record of past contact with your organization, past stories by the individual about your organization and issues, and any useful notes (e.g. "drinks coffee black," "from Florida," "politically conservative," etc.). You can also choose to include additional information, such as the outlet's circulation, the outlet's audience, the individual's supervising editor or manager, her submission preferences for stories (e.g. email, fax), her Twitter handle, etc.

When choosing the individuals on your list, be selective. Sending materials to reporters who are unlikely to be interested in them is seen as spamming, and is both rude to them and unhelpful to your cause.

To start building your press list, compile a list of newspapers, radio and television stations, and blogs in your area. When compiling your list, remember to include local and specialty press.⁵ Identify the individuals at each outlet who you think would be most receptive to your stories, and compile their contact and other information. If you can't find what you need online, you can call the front desk of the news outlet. When possible identify individual reporters, but be aware that at television stations the appropriate news contact may be the assignment editor, and at radio stations it is likely to be the news director.

One way to get started quickly is to ask another advocacy organization in your area for their press list. However, you should still do the work of checking over each contact listed, both to see whether she seems like a good fit for you (since the other organization and yours presumably aren't identical), and to make sure the information listed is current.

⁵ For more information on local and specialty press, see the subsection *Establishing Relationships with Reporters* (in the section *Getting to Know Newspaper Reporters*).

Once you have compiled your press list, make sure to keep it up to date by periodically reviewing each contact. This is your primary media outreach document, so it's important to keep it in good shape.

Press Releases

A *press release* (or *news release*) is a written summary of a story that you send to a reporter or other media professional. It should also be part of the media kit given to reporters at a press conference.⁶

Press releases are a very important part of news creation today. A well-written press release makes the reporter's job much easier, and this increases the chance that the story will make the news (sometimes harried reporters even cut and paste parts of the press release right into their news articles). The press release should provide sufficient information to allow the reporter to write a story using it alone, but should also provide contact information for spokespeople whom the reporter can call for additional details.

The press release should read like a news article. It should have an attention-grabbing headline at the top (written in present tense), and can also have a subhead below that (if desired). The release should be written in the inverted pyramid style of news writing - with the most important information first, followed by the most important details, and the general background information last.

Most press releases only get a few seconds' glance before going in the trash, so try to include a hook in the first sentence, and to make that first sentence as compelling as possible.⁷ Overall, sentences and paragraphs should be kept short, and the style should be simple and clear. Generally, the whole release should not exceed one page (and never more than two).

It is a good idea to include a couple of short quotes in the body of the press release. These quotes can be from members or leaders of your organization, or from other individuals relevant to the story (e.g. professors, workers, community members). It is common practice for the person writing the press release to compose the quotes first and ask people for their permission to attribute the quotes to them second (just make sure you *always* remember to get permission before sending the release to any reporters!).

At the top, write "PRESS RELEASE" and below that "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE." You should include the date, and also contact information for one or two spokespeople for your organization (make sure that these individuals are quickly reachable using this information). If the release exceeds more than one page, place the phrase "- more -" or "- 1 of 2 -" at the bottom (this is only necessary for a pdf or printed copy, not for a release included in the body of

⁶ For more on press conferences, see the subsection *Press Conferences* later on in this section.

⁷ For more on hooks, see the subsection *The Hook* (in the section *What is News?* earlier in this guide).

an email). The characters "###" should be placed at the bottom of the last page to mark the end of the press release.

Your organization's professionalism will be judged by the quality of your press release, so make sure that it is well written and that there are no mistakes or typos.

If you send the release by email, include it in the body of the email. You may also attach it as a pdf, but don't *only* attach it as a pdf - the extra step of downloading the pdf makes it much less likely that the reporter will ever look at it. Compose the subject line carefully: it should give the reporter an idea of what the email contains, pique her curiosity, and be short (less than 50 characters, and ideally less than 40). If you are sending it to the reporter as an exclusive story, include the word "EXCLUSIVE" in the subject line; if it is a breaking story, include the word "BREAKING".

Even if you are emailing the release to more than one reporter, it is best to send it to reporters individually, rather than by a mass email. If you really must send a mass email, use the "bcc" option to hide the addresses of the others you are sending it to.

If you have any good visuals to accompany the story (e.g. photos of your members collecting signatures for a resolution campaign), including one or a few of these in your email can help your chances. To do this, upload the photos to a photosharing service (such as Photobucket or Picasa) or to your website, and link to them in your email - *do not* attach the photos themselves to the email.

After sending your press release, follow up with a pitch call.⁸

Press Advisories

A *press advisory* (or *news advisory*) is a document sent to a reporter to alert her to an upcoming event, such as a rally or a press conference. It is an invitation that answers only the most important questions: who, what, where, when and why.

The advisory should only include enough information to entice the reporter to cover your event, and to give her the information she needs to do so. The opening sentence should hook the reporter's attention and communicate why the event is newsworthy. The body of the advisory should explain concisely what the event is about, where and when it will be held, and list any notable participants (e.g. speakers, musicians). Also describe any good photo opportunities.

⁸ More information on pitch calls can be found in the subsection *How to Pitch a Press Release or Advisory* (later on in this section).

The advisory should have a headline with the most important information. It should also include the date of release and the contact information of one or two spokespeople. At the top, write "PRESS ADVISORY" and use "###" to mark the end.

You should send your advisory to all reporters who you think might be interested in attending your event, or in interviewing your spokespeople about it. Send the advisory once 1-2 weeks before the event to get it on reporters' calendars, and again 2-3 business days beforehand to remind them about it. Each time you send it, follow up with a pitch call.

How to Pitch a Press Release or Advisory

Once you've packaged your story or event announcement into a press release or advisory, it is not enough to just send it to the reporter. To have a decent chance of getting it into the news, you also need to *pitch* it. This is typically done with a phone call, known as a *pitch call*.

You should make your pitch call right after sending the reporter your press release or advisory. The goal of a pitch call is to persuade her that your story or event is important enough to cover. You will probably not have much time to make your pitch (1-2 minutes), so plan to keep it short.

Practice what you will say before making the call (writing yourself a script to follow is also a good idea). Here is what you should include in your pitch call:

1. Introduce yourself and your organization.
2. If you know the reporter, connect briefly on a personal note (e.g. sports, weather) or compliment her on a recent story that she wrote.
3. Ask if the reporter if she has a moment to talk. If she says no, ask her when would be a good time to call back.
4. Give a brief summary of the story or event. Make sure to mention the important details (who, what, where, when and why). Try to paint a vivid picture of the story or event in the reporter's mind, and make sure to mention the aspects that have the highest news value.⁹ If you are pitching an event, describe at least one good photo opportunity. Be pleasant and upbeat.
5. Ask the reporter if she got your press release or advisory. If she says no, offer to resend it, and ask for the correct email address or fax number to use (and resend it as soon as you get off the phone).

⁹ This topic is discussed in the subsection *News Value* (in the section *What is News?* earlier in this guide).

6. If you are pitching an event, ask if the reporter will attend. If you are pitching a story, ask whether she plans to cover it. If she is noncommittal, ask whether there is any more information you can provide to help her decide (and make sure to send it to her as soon as possible after getting off the phone).

When making a pitch call, you should be prepared to answer the reporter's questions, and to give an interview on the spot if asked. If you get her answering machine you can leave a brief message, but also call back later to try to reach her in person.

If you are pitching a story (rather than an event) and that story is not breaking news, it is generally best to pitch it to one reporter at a time, rather than to many simultaneously. This increases your chances of coverage, and also builds your relationships with individual reporters (remember, reporters love exclusives). To do this, send your release to the reporter that you would most like to cover it first, and follow up with a pitch call. If she is not interested in the story, send it to the next highest priority reporter, and so on down the line until you find one who wants to cover it.

If you are sending a press advisory more than once, make pitch calls after each time you send it. If you connect with the reporter on your first pitch call and she sounds interested in attending your event, use the second pitch call to remind her of her interest and emphasize why she should attend. If the reporter tells you that she is not interested on your first pitch call, you do not need to send the advisory again nor make a second call.

Unless you are pitching breaking news, you should time your pitch to maximize your chances of coverage. The best time of day to make a pitch is in the morning, during the first couple of hours of the reporter's work day. Avoid calling reporters in the afternoon, since then they are usually writing stories to meet impending deadlines. The best days to make a pitch are Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, followed by Monday. Friday is the worst day to pitch. If a major news event occurs on the day that you had planned to pitch your story (e.g. 9/11, a major flood in your town), consider waiting a few days before sending your release or advisory and making your pitch calls.

Radio Feeds and Actualities

Radio feeds and *radio actualities* are auditory versions of the press release. They present short messages recorded by your organization, and are used by radio stations in their news broadcasts.

The heart of both feeds and actualities is a recorded clip from a speaker. The difference is that the clip used in an actuality is recorded live at an event (such as a rally), while that used in a feed is not. Stations typically prefer actualities, but don't try to fool them that a feed is an actuality - they won't buy it and you'll lose credibility.

A radio feed or actuality consists of an announcer introducing the speaker with a short lead-in, one sound bite from the speaker of no more than 30 seconds,¹⁰ a closing line by the announcer, and finally (after a brief pause by the announcer) the name and phone number of someone who can be contacted for more information. Normally (but not always), an outlet will only use the speaker's clip and edit the rest out. The total length of the feed or actuality should be no more than 60 seconds.

The speaker can be an expert (e.g. a university professor), a community leader (e.g. a local businessman), an elected official, or a "regular" member of the community. The announcer can be anyone able to speak well on the radio.

Radio feeds and actualities can be delivered as an audio file via email, or downloaded from your organization's website. They can also be transmitted the old-fashioned way, by phone, if you have the proper equipment. Not all stations accept feeds and actualities, so if you don't already know whether a particular station does, you will need to ask.

How to Pitch a Radio Feed or Actuality

You should make a pitch call to each radio station before sending them your feed or actuality. Just like when you are pitching to a reporter, make sure to keep your pitch short and make it as compelling as possible. Consider writing a script to guide you when making the call, and definitely practice what you will say before calling the station.

On the morning of the day that you want your clip to appear in the news, call the radio station and ask for the newsroom - this should put you in touch with the news director. Then do the following:

1. Introduce yourself and your organization.
2. Tell the news director that you have a feed (or actuality) and what it's about. At this point you may be told that the station does not accept feeds (or actualities); if this happens, say thank you, hang up and record this information in your press list. Otherwise, continue.
3. Explain the importance and timeliness of the clip in the feed (or actuality). If possible, tailor this pitch to the demographics served by the station. Try to be persuasive, but also make your pitch brief. Be pleasant and upbeat.
4. Ask if you should send the news director the feed (or actuality). Confirm the email address to use (or if sending it by phone, ask if she would like you to transmit it now).

¹⁰ The 27-9-3 formula for crafting sound bites is helpful here. It is discussed in the subsection *Developing Concise Messages* (in the section *The Importance of Telling Stories*).

5. If the news director wants more background information, offer to send a press release or other background information. Confirm the email address or fax number to use (and send it as soon as you are off the phone).

6. Ask if the news director has any more questions, and thank her for her time.

Pitch Letters

If your goal is to convince a news outlet to interview a member of your organization or to book her as a guest on a radio or television show, a useful tool is the *pitch letter*.¹¹

A pitch letter is a short letter addressed to an individual reporter, radio news director, television assignment editor, or talk show producer. There is no standardized format for pitch letters, but it is very important that they be short (ideally no more than three short paragraphs) and clear.

A pitch letter should clearly communicate why the person (or people) you are recommending would make for a lively story or broadcast. Is she an expert on a current topic in the news? Has she played a leading role in a recent campaign? Has she accomplished something inspiring, or experienced something of interest to the news outlet's audience? To make your pitch timely, try to link the individual's expertise or experience to a current event or hot news item.

A pitch letter should be sent to an individual, and tailored to reflect her style and the interests of her audience. It can be sent via email (in the body, not as an attachment) or by fax.

After sending a pitch letter, follow up with a pitch call. The substance of this call should be similar to one made for a press release or advisory.¹²

Press Conferences

A *press conference* (or news conference) is a staged event where one or more speakers present a story to reporters and answer their questions. It also provides photo opportunities to reporters.

Though press conferences are widely used by U.S. presidents, large corporations, famous actors and other prominent people and organizations, they can be difficult for small, volunteer-run organizations to use effectively. This is because as newsrooms continue to cut staff in response to declining revenues, the reporters who remain become increasingly busy. Attending a press conference is a significant time commitment for a reporter, so she is only likely to do it for

¹¹ A pitch letter can also be used to suggest a story to a reporter, but we will not discuss this use here.

¹² These calls are discussed in the subsection *How to Pitch a Press Release or Advisory* earlier in this section.

major stories. Holding a press conference takes significant work, and a poorly attended press conference may be worse than none at all, since it can damage your reputation with any reporters who do show up.

For all these reasons, any small organization should think carefully before holding a press conference. You should only do so if 1) you have a story that will be of high interest to reporters, 2) a press conference is the best way to get the story out, and 3) you think you can pull it off.

If you consider each of these questions carefully and decide that you want to hold a press conference, then these are the steps you should take:

1. **Clearly identify the story you want to tell:** This is crucial. Develop your message, talking points, and answers to questions that are likely to be asked.
2. **Find and confirm speakers:** The press conference should be kept short to respect reporters' time, so it is best to have no more than three people speaking for 5-7 minutes each (the entire event should not run more than 30-45 minutes, including questions). Try to include at least one person who is well-known, such as a local politician or public figure, since this will help draw reporters to the event. Share your talking points and other documents with the speakers, and make sure they understand what story you are trying to tell at the press conference. Ask them each to cover a slightly different topic related to the story. Pick a speaker order, and work with each speaker to make sure they are on message. If necessary, help your speakers develop good sound bites to include in their remarks (you may want to suggest underlining these in their prepared remarks).
3. **Find a moderator:** This person will introduce the speakers, manage the question and answer portion, and make sure that the event runs smoothly.
4. **Pick a location:** Visuals are important to reporters, so choose a location that has good lighting and provides a good backdrop (for example, for a story about recent legislation, holding a press conference in front of your state capitol might be appropriate). Think about the sound quality (is there background noise? could wind be a problem?), and also whether electric outlets are available to power audio equipment. Try to choose a location that is convenient for reporters (i.e. not too far from their offices and easy to get to). For outdoor locations, consider what you will do in the event of inclement weather.
5. **Pick a date and time:** This should be at least a couple of weeks in the future to allow for sufficient planning time (press conferences can also be planned around breaking news, but this is even more challenging to do well). The best days for press conferences are Tuesday-Thursday, and the best time is mid-morning (10:30-11:00am). Consider

how your press conference will fit in with other news events likely to be occurring (e.g. elections, legislative developments).

6. Deal with logistics: Arrange to get needed items, such as a podium, audio equipment, and seats for reporters. Plan your visuals, and arrange for anything needed to make them happen (e.g. banners, charts, a crowd of supporters). Also consider whether to provide light refreshments to the reporters, such as coffee or snacks (this will be appreciated by them).

7. Prepare and send press advisories: Send press advisories 1-2 weeks ahead of the event, and then again 2-3 days ahead. Follow these with pitch calls to reporters.¹³

8. Assemble media kits: A media kit is a resource packet given to reporters who come to the press conference. The kit should include a press release about the story being presented, bios and contact information for each speaker, background information about your organization (a one-page fact sheet is fine), and background information on the issues being discussed (including sources for cited figures and quotes). It can also include photos or other visuals, newspaper articles that have appeared about the issue in the past, or other materials that will be useful to the reporters in writing their stories. Make sure to print out enough media kits to have one for each reporter who you expect to come, plus some extras.

9. On the day of the press conference: Arrive early to make sure everything is in order. Ask your speakers to arrive early as well, so that you can go over the flow of the press conference and deal with any last-minute logistical issues.

10. At the press conference: As reporters arrive, have someone from your organization give them media kits and ask them for business cards. Start the event on time, even if not many reporters are present. At the beginning, have the moderator explain how questions will be handled, and then introduce the speakers. After the last speaker has finished, the moderator should invite questions from the reporters.

11. After the press conference: Follow up by phone with reporters who attended to answer questions. Send them the electronic version of the media kit.

12. Later the same day: Send the press release and other materials to reporters who showed interest but did not make the event. Follow up with a phone call and offer to answer questions.

¹³ Press advisories and pitch calls are covered in two subsections earlier in this section of the guide.

What to Do if a Reporter Calls You

Sometimes a reporter will call you for background information or a quote for a story she is working on. This is more likely to happen when you have established a relationship with a reporter, though sometimes one will call you out of the blue. Such calls are most likely to happen in the afternoon or early evening, since that is when reporters are generally working on stories under deadline - but you may get calls at other times of the day as well.

When the reporter calls, you should pick up. However, you do not need to respond to her questions immediately. Ask her what the story is about, and (assuming you are willing to talk to her about that topic) tell her you are in the middle of something and will call her back in a few minutes. Take 5-10 minutes to compose your thoughts and jot down some answers to likely questions, and then call her back.

If you get a message that a reporter called, return the call promptly (but after you compose your thoughts). She is likely to be working under a deadline, so if you wait too long to return her call she will probably write her story without you.

OPINION PIECES IN NEWSPAPERS

In addition to articles written by reporters, there are three types of newspaper opinion pieces that you can use to get your message out: letters to the editor, op-eds, and editorials.

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the editor are short opinion pieces submitted by readers. Since it is relatively easy to get letters to the editor published, and since this section of local newspapers is widely read, this is a good way for small organizations to get their messages out to the public.

The best letters to the editor are written clearly and make a single compelling point. They are written in first-person ("I...") and usually respond to a recently published piece (e.g. article, op-ed, another letter to the editor) or current news item. They are also short. Official word limits range from about 150-300 words, but it is best to make your letter shorter if possible. This increases the chances that it will get published, and decreases the likelihood that it will be edited heavily prior to publication (letters are often edited for length and clarity).

To get a feeling for what a good letter looks like, read through the letters to the editor section in your local newspaper. Notice which letters seem most compelling, and ask yourself why. Is it because the letter writer made her point in simple, clear language? Or because she stated a qualification (e.g. mother of three children, doctor, business owner) that increased her credibility? Perhaps it is because she backed up her point with data? Or because she used humor? If you find letters that seem especially good, save them so you can refer to them later for ideas (or even pattern your own letters after them).

To submit a letter, first familiarize yourself with the requirements of the outlet you are submitting it to. What is the word limit? The submission process? Is there an exclusivity requirement?

Even if your letter does not get published, it makes it more likely that another letter making a similar point will appear in the paper. Editors read all the letters they receive, and try to publish ones that reflect the sentiments expressed in the letters as a whole. For this reason, having many people submit letters on the same topic makes it more likely that your organization will get its message in the paper.

If you are asking many people to submit letters on a topic, it is a good idea to distribute talking points to them beforehand to help them compose letters with a consistent message. You can also provide some example letters to make the process easier for those who are not experienced letter writers.

Another option is to have a small team of letter writers, and a larger group of letter senders. The writers compose letters and give them to the senders, who modify them (if they wish) and submit them. This can be an efficient way to get many letters in the paper with a consistent message. Also, it can be a good way for talented letter-writers to use their skills (since editors will not usually publish letters signed by any particular individual more than once a month).

Op-Eds

An *op-ed* (short for "opposite the editorial page") is an opinion piece written and signed by someone who is not a member of the newspaper's editorial board. They are substantially longer than letters to the editor (typically 500-750 words) and so allow the writer to more fully develop her argument.

An op-ed is more likely to be published if it is signed by someone who is an expert on an issue or is well-known (e.g. an office-holder, researcher, or civic leader). If no one in your organization fits these criteria, consider reaching out to someone that does who supports your cause. If you do this, you should supply this individual with talking points and make sure that she understands your message. If she is too busy to write something herself, you can offer to write a draft of an op-ed for her to modify and submit.

However, sometimes "regular" people succeed in getting op-eds published too. This is most likely in smaller publications, such as local papers. Even if you don't have a fancy qualification, you should still try to identify yourself in a way that sets you apart from the crowd (e.g. farmer, social worker, high school student).

An op-ed must be timely. It can either be a direct response to a current hot topic (e.g. a critique of the governor's proposed budget), or be a more general argument pegged to a current hot

topic (e.g. an argument that we need to establish a carbon tax to curb global warming pegged to a recent series of tornadoes).¹⁴

A good op-ed is focused, clear and compelling. It should make a well-reasoned argument about a single issue - it should not be a rant. When writing an op-ed, use simple language and avoid jargon and clichés. Use active voice instead of passive, and come down clearly on one side of an issue (don't equivocate). Back up your argument with facts, and/or cite the opinions of experts.

It is also important that your op-ed have an emotional impact on its readers, so keep the elements of narrative in mind and appeal to your audience's values.¹⁵ Including personal stories, either about yourself or others, is another good way to elicit an emotional response.

When writing the op-ed, you should state your conclusion first, and then spend the rest of the piece making your case and backing it up with emotional appeals and facts. Start your op-ed off with a catchy headline, and hook the reader's attention with an intriguing first sentence. Make sure to finish strong, summarizing your argument in the last sentence.

Before writing an op-ed, make sure to check the submission requirements for the newspaper to which you are submitting it, since word limits and other requirements vary. Just as for a letter to the editor, however, less is more. If you can make your point in fewer than the maximum number of words, do so - this will make acceptance more likely and decrease the chances of heavy editing.

Finally, if you succeed in getting an op-ed published, thank the news outlet for running it.

Editorials

Editorials are opinion pieces written by a member of the editorial board of a newspaper. They are typically unsigned, and represent the position of the newspaper on an issue. They are also used to communicate a newspaper's endorsement of a particular candidate or ballot item.

Editorials are widely read, and carry significant weight with a paper's readers. They are harder to get than a regular news article, but they are more valuable.

To get an editorial written about your issue, you will typically need to set up a meeting with the editorial board (at small newspapers, it may be with a single editor). The main exception is if you can convince one of the editors to advocate for your issue with the rest of the board - but scheduling a meeting to provide information and answer questions is still generally a good idea.

¹⁴ For more on pegs, see the subsection *The Peg* (in the section *What is News?* earlier in this guide).

¹⁵ See the section *The Importance of Telling Stories* for more information on emotion and the elements of narrative.

To find out whom to approach for a meeting, call the paper and ask. Be ready to make a strong pitch for why the editorial board should meet with you, and why they should do so now. If you do not get a meeting, don't give up; see if you can find a new angle on the story or peg it to a different hot news item, and try again.

Even if you succeed in getting a meeting it may not be for several weeks, so if the topic is time-sensitive (e.g. an endorsement of a referendum) make sure to call well in advance. Keep in mind that pre-election periods when local candidates are seeking endorsements are extremely busy for editorial boards.

When scheduling the meeting, ask how much time you will have. This will help you prepare a presentation that gets across your main points while allowing time for questions. However, be prepared to shorten your presentation if needed on the day of the meeting.

The meeting itself may be attended by the entire editorial board, or by only one or a few editors or writers responsible for the topics most related to your issue (it also may include non-editorial board members, such as beat reporters or even individuals who do not work for the newspaper). If the full editorial board is not present, you will need to convince those who are there to support your issue, and also give them what they need to convince the rest of the board later. A few days before the meeting, it is a good idea to call and ask who is likely to be at the meeting; this will help you prepare.

Prior to the meeting, do your homework. Research past positions that the editorial board has taken on related issues, especially any that align or conflict with the position you are asking them to take. Anticipate likely questions, and develop good responses. Select one or a few people from your organization to attend the meeting, and go over talking points and how to respond to questions together. It is a good idea for your group to meet beforehand to rehearse what you are going to say, and to role play your responses to potential questions.

Prepare a one-page fact sheet with basic information about your issue and outlining your main arguments, and make enough copies for everyone you expect to be at the meeting. Include contact information for someone whom the editorial board members can ask for additional details. If another newspaper has written an editorial or article in support of your issue and you think seeing this would have a positive influence on the board, bring copies of that too. However, don't bring a large number of materials with you, as the chance that they will be read is low.

On the day of the meeting, dress neatly. Read (or at least skim) that day's edition of the newspaper. At the meeting behave in a polite and professional manner. Be as persuasive as possible, but not pushy. Be friendly, but remember that everything you say is on the record and make sure to stay on message. Tell the editors that you would appreciate their support for your issue, and thank them for their time.

Several outcomes are possible following an editorial board meeting. Hopefully the board will write an editorial in support of your position. However, they may not write an editorial, or even decide to write one opposing your position. Even if no editorial is written, it is possible that a reporter will be assigned to write a news article based on your visit. If you do succeed in getting an editorial supporting your position, this can open up the door for additional editorials on different aspects of your issue in the future.

WORKING WITH BROADCAST MEDIA

Radio and television can allow you to reach a large number of people with your message. This section provides guidance for how to work with these types of media.

Getting an Interview

The first step to getting an interview on radio or television is to identify potential stations and shows. Do some research: find out what stations are in your area, what geographical regions they serve, and what shows they have that seem promising. Don't forget about community stations.

For each show that seems like a possibility, consider its style and content. Look for shows that focus on reporting or commenting on local news and political issues, and those that regularly feature interviews (e.g. talk shows, talk radio). You should also consider a show's demographics (e.g. age, ethnicity, political leanings) before seeking an interview. If you are not sure about the suitability of a particular show, watch or listen to it to get a feeling for its style and content.

Also, consider a show's hours. Television shows that air in the evening (6:00-11:00pm) usually attract the largest audiences, while radio talk shows at or near drive time (weekdays 6:00-10:00am and 4:00-7:00pm) tend to have the highest listenerships.

To make the task of identifying shows easier, you can ask for a list of shows from another advocacy organization that works on similar issues. Doing this, however, is not a substitute for doing your own research - it's your responsibility to learn about a show before asking for an interview.

Once you have identified a candidate show, you will need to convince them to grant an interview to one or more spokespeople from your organization.¹⁶ A good way to do this is through a pitch letter.¹⁷

¹⁶ For longer radio interviews, having two people participate can liven things up. They can play off of each other, and two voices provide more variety to the listening experience. However, if more than one person participates in an interview, it is important that they are on the same page and work well together (you do not want them to contradict each other on the air).

Sometimes a reporter or show may call you to schedule an interview. If this happens, make sure to return the call promptly - otherwise they may fill the spot with an interview from someone else.

Radio Interviews

Radio interviews may be either live or pre-recorded, and they may occur either in the studio or over the phone. When going on the radio, it is important to prepare. What this means will depend on the nature of the interview.

If a reporter calls you for a brief phone interview, you will not have much time to prepare. However, you can make sure you have some. First, ask her what the topic is and decide whether you are willing to do the interview. If so, tell her that you are in the middle of something and will call her back in 5-10 minutes. Jot down some notes, and when you are ready, call her back and do the interview.

If you have a scheduled interview on radio or television, you will have more preparation time - and you should use it. Identify the message you want to communicate, develop your argument, think of responses to likely questions, and craft good sound bites.¹⁸ Also try to think of compelling anecdotes about real people. Write these things down, practice them, and take them with you to the interview (one benefit of radio is that the audience can't see you looking at your notes). If more than one person from your organization will be involved in the interview, meet beforehand to make sure you are all on the same page, that you know who is responsible for communicating which parts of the message, and that you know how to respond to likely questions. Practicing what you plan to say using role plays is a good idea.

During the interview, be lively and interesting. This is what the producer wants (so she'll be more likely to invite you back) and also what the audience wants (so they'll be more likely to keep listening). Stay on message. Don't allow the host to sidetrack you, and redirect the conversation if it goes off into left field. Stay calm and polite at all times, and even if the host tries to antagonize you, don't get defensive - just respond with your message.¹⁹ Also, remember that radio listeners tend to tune in and out frequently, so make sure to repeat your key messages often (at least three times every fifteen minutes is a good rule).

Sound is just as important as substance during a radio interview; your audience will react to the quality of your voice, not just to the points you make. During the interview, speak clearly. Most

¹⁷ See the subsection *Pitch Letters* (in the section *Getting Your Story in the News*) for more information.

¹⁸ For guidance on developing sound bites, see the subsection *Developing Concise Messages* (in the earlier section *The Importance of Telling Stories*).

¹⁹ For tips on how to stay on your message during an interview, see the earlier section *Staying on Message*.

of us have a natural tendency to speed up when we are nervous, so make a conscious effort to relax and slow down. Also, everything sounds bigger on the radio, so don't yell into the microphone (or telephone if it's a phone interview); instead, treat it like the ear of someone close to you. And smile while you're talking! This makes you sound much more upbeat and friendly, so make sure to smile even if you are alone in your office doing the interview over the phone.

Interviews generally sound best when recorded in the studio, but often this is not possible and they are done over the phone. If you are doing a phone interview, use a land line (rather than a cell phone) if at all possible. Do not use the speaker phone, as this will make your voice sound disconnected and aloof. Try to choose a location with minimal background noise - remember, everything sounds bigger on the radio, including background noise. If you don't have an acceptable location at your disposal, ask another member of your organization if she has a home or office line you can use.

If your interview is on a radio show that takes calls from listeners, it is a good idea to line up some members of your organization to call in support of your position. This gives the impression of broad public support, and makes it less likely that hostile or off-topic callers will get through. Of course, if you are asking people to call in, make sure that they have a copy of your talking points to help them stay on message.

After your interview, go back and listen to it. This is very important for learning how to sound better on the radio. As you listen, notice what you did well ("I sound confident") and what could be improved ("I say 'um' a lot"). If you can't find a recording of the show on the station's website, ask if you can get a copy.

Calling in to Radio Shows

Even if you are not the one being interviewed on a radio talk show, you can still call in. Call-ins give an opportunity for listeners to respond to a topic, ask a question of a guest, or make a point. You can use call-ins to get your message across.

The first step is, of course, to identify the shows to which you would like to call in. If you decide to call in to a show that you do not normally listen to, it's a good idea to listen to it for a while first to get a feeling for the host's style and views and the topics covered.

When you make the call, do so from a quiet and safe location (not while driving!). Be prepared to wait a while - the more popular a show, the more callers are likely to be in line ahead of you. For popular shows, calling near the start of the show is a good idea, as this will make it more likely that you will get on air before the show ends. If the line is busy, keep dialing until you get through.

Have your comments ready before going on the air. It is a good idea to jot them down on a piece of paper and have that in front of you. You should also have more general talking points

in front of you, in case you are asked a question or want to make a point in response to something that is said.

Before you go on the show, you will talk to a screener. Tell her why you are calling in one short sentence. The screener is looking for people who are articulate and succinct, so spending some time composing this sentence will help you get past her. Also, if you volunteer an answer or explanation to a previous caller, you may be able to get on the air more quickly.

While you are on hold, listen to the radio show over the telephone, not the radio. Turn your radio off to reduce background noise and confusion (since the timing of what is coming over the radio and through the telephone is likely to be different). The screener may or may not let you know when you are about to go on the air, so listen carefully to the host so you don't miss your turn.

When the host speaks to you, communicate your message concisely and clearly. It is a good idea to first say hello to her by name, and then to immediately make your point. Don't rush, but don't go on longer than you need to (if you do, you'll probably get cut off).

Relate what you say to what is being discussed on the show. If the conversation has moved on since you prepared your comments, see if there is a way to tie them in to what is being said at the moment. You can also say something like "I'd like to comment on what you were discussing a little while ago..." so you don't sound to the audience like you are coming out of left field (remember, many of them weren't tuned in 10 or 20 minutes ago).

If the host interrupts you, firmly but politely say "please let me finish my point." If she tries to antagonize you, stay calm and don't get defensive. If she asks you a pointed personal question, say something like "my personal life is not relevant here, the real issue is..."

To make an impact using talk radio call-ins, you may want to consider assembling a team of callers. If you want to keep up a steady stream of calls, ask different people to call in to different shows on different days. If you want to make a larger impact over a shorter period of time (such as right before an election), you can ask many people to all call in to the same show on the same day. To make sure that everyone is on the same page, distribute talking points to all callers beforehand, and help them understand the reason for the calls and how to make them effectively.

Television Interviews

In general, you can think of television as a short-form medium, while radio is long-form. This means that you have less time to make your point. Also, television is visual, so you need to think not only about what you say but also about how you appear.

Just as for radio, it is important to prepare your comments carefully for a television interview.²⁰ The main difference is that sound bites are even more important in television than in radio, so focus on crafting good ones, and practicing them until you have them down pat.

For the interview, dress in something that looks neat and is not distracting. Try to pick something with lines that will lead viewers' eyes to your face (such as a shirt with the collar gently open and a contrasting jacket over it).

When the camera is being set up, ask that it be brought to your eye level. This will make you look more confident and accessible to the audience. If you are sitting in front of the camera, give your legs a little half-twist so that your face is still facing the camera, but your legs are at an angle. This is slimming and also makes the shot more interesting. Also, ask where the cut is (i.e. where the area being recorded stops). Knowing this will help you present yourself well to the camera.

Before the interview begins, take a few moments to become comfortable in front of the camera. Media trainer Joel Silberman recommends establishing a relationship with the camera ("make it a good friend, or even better, someone you want to sleep with that night").²¹ If you feel nervous, relabel it in your mind as feeling excited - this will help you use that energy in a positive way.

When conducting the interview look at the camera, unless the interviewer asks you to look at her instead. If you are asked to look at the interviewer, you can still occasionally cast thoughtful glances at the camera (though not too often or you will look shifty-eyed).

Television makes everything bigger, so the way you should move on camera is different from how you move in everyday life. When on camera you should reduce unnecessary body movements. When listening, don't nod or shake your head like you would in an everyday conversation - just keep your head steady and smile (if the topic is sad or serious, use a half-smile). Avoid looking up or to the side as you think - most of us naturally do this, but on camera it will make you look shifty-eyed and untrustworthy. Instead, pretend that the answer you are looking for is written on the camera lens (or in the air behind the interviewer). If you must use your hands to gesture, do so with small motions kept near your body. Remember, stillness is your friend when you're on camera.

Television also magnifies all issues we have with ourselves. When you're on camera, think about the message you are conveying, not about yourself. If you think negative thoughts (e.g. "I'm too fat," "I must look nervous," "my hair looks terrible today"), the audience will pick up on

²⁰ See the discussion on how to prepare for a radio interview in the subsection *Radio Interviews* earlier in this section.

²¹ Thanks to Joel Silberman for many of the tips included in this subsection.

them. You wouldn't want to wear a sign saying those things on camera, so don't paint them across your face either.

When speaking on camera, use simple, clear language and short, declarative sentences. Be comfortable with periods of silence, and avoid "um"s, "uh"s and other meaningless silence fillers.

After the interview is finished, watch a recording of it. If you cannot find a clip on the station's website, ask for a copy. Notice what went well, what could have gone better, and learn from it. To learn even more, watch clips of the masters (e.g. Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan) and try to incorporate aspects of what you see them doing into your own technique.

Public Service Announcements

Public service announcements (or *PSAs*) are short noncommercial messages (10-60 seconds) that radio and television stations air during commercial breaks. Most stations use PSAs as a way of meeting the Federal Communications Commission's requirement that they serve "in the public interest," and so air them regularly. PSAs are often used by nonprofit organizations to send a message (e.g. "quit smoking") or to announce an upcoming event (e.g. a blood drive).²² PSAs are typically delivered to stations as ready-to-use audio or visual files, though some radio stations (especially community and public stations) prefer a script that their announcers can read on the air.

The benefit of PSAs is that the airtime is donated, so the only costs for the organization creating the PSA are writing and production - and these things can typically be done inexpensively. Even if you don't spend much money creating a PSA, however, you should make sure to do a good job. A poorly crafted PSA that bores or irritates your audience can damage your public image, and so is worse than no PSA at all.

The downside of using PSAs is that there is often stiff competition for available PSA spots. It is usually much easier to get a PSA onto the radio than onto television.

To get started, first select the stations in which you are interested. Next call each station, and identify the person responsible for handling PSAs. If possible, establish a personal relationship with this person, since she has control not only over *whether* your PSA will run, but also over *when* it will run (it is easier to ask for favors, such as airing at a particular time of day, if you know this person). Set up a time to talk to her; a phone call will work, but a personal meeting is better. Ask her about the length, format and other submission requirements for that station.

²² Some newspapers and local news websites maintain community calendars with announcements about upcoming community events. These announcements are also called PSAs, but are different in format from what we are discussing here. To find out whether such PSAs are accepted in your area (and the requirements for submission), call local newspapers and ask. You can also try asking another local advocacy organization for information on community calendars.

Requirements vary over stations, and you should make sure you understand them before going to the trouble of writing or producing a PSA.

DEALING WITH UNFAVORABLE MEDIA COVERAGE

As you get media coverage, chances are good that sooner or later you will receive some that you don't like. This may be due to a simple mistake (e.g. if a reporter misquotes you) or because the coverage itself is critical of you or of your issue.

If this happens to you and you think that the problem is a mistake, your response should depend on its severity. If it is a minor error (e.g. a misquote that doesn't affect your message), don't worry about it - this is media, and minor mistakes happen all the time. If it is a moderate error (e.g. a misspelling of your name), call the reporter (or blogger, etc.), say that you noticed a small mistake, and let her know that you are bringing it to her attention so that she can avoid repeating it in the future (this also lets her know that you are paying attention). In this situation you do not need to ask for a formal correction (though she may offer to fix it in the online version of the article, if there is one). If the mistake is severe (e.g. a misstatement of your organization's position), you should ask for a formal correction. A formal correction is an official admission of error on the part of the news outlet, and helps protect you against adversaries using the mistake to their own advantage in the future. If the reporter is not willing to accommodate your request, you may need to approach her editor. In some cases you will be told to submit a letter to the editor in place of a correction, but this is less powerful, so only do this if you are not able to secure a formal correction from the news outlet.

If the problem is critical or even hostile coverage, don't panic, and don't become defensive. Assess the situation calmly and figure out whether to respond. Not everything needs a response; sometimes it is best to just ignore the problem and let it go away. This is especially true if the bad coverage appears someplace where few people are likely to see it (e.g. a low-profile blog), since responding may just cause more people to pay attention to it. If you do decide to respond, do so with a strong, clear statement. Use facts and common sense to refute the claims made by your opponent (but try not to be nitpicky, as this can just add fuel to the fire). Return to the fundamental issue, and stress why that is what is important. No matter how hostile your opponent is, always behave like an adult. If you engage in personal attacks or name-calling, you are likely to lose the respect of your audience (and remember, they are the ones that really matter).

Finally, a quick note about comments on online news stories: don't freak out about them. The comments section on news sites is often inhabited by the most childish, critical and partisan people out there, and it is not read by most visitors to the site. If someone attacks you in the comments, it is fine to post something in response to correct the record, but don't waste your time by getting into a long back-and-forth.

CONCLUSION

Media coverage can help you educate the public, sway public opinion, pressure decision makers to do the right thing, and win your campaigns. It is our hope that the materials in this guide will help you learn how to work with the media and achieve your goals.

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