



## **Media Outreach Toolkit**

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### ***Introduction: Media Relations in a Changing World***

Advocates often tell us that their goal is to generate media attention about their work or their issue. But not all press is good press, and even good press can be ineffective if it doesn't reach the people who can make the policy or behavioral changes you are trying to create.

Dealing successfully with the news media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is more complex and more challenging than it has ever been:

- Traditional newspapers and magazines – once the cornerstones of the American media – still play an influential role, but they are declining in readership. Local television stations remain Americans' favorite way to get their news, but the number of people getting their information from online sources recently surpassed traditional newspapers for the first time. Every week sees the launch of new outlets – from news aggregators like Huffington Post and online-only publications like The Daily Beast and Slate to specialty blogs that focus on local politics and other narrow interests.
- The 24-hour news cycle online and on cable TV means that breaking stories can hit the airwaves at any time of the day or night – and can be superseded by the next story a moment later. Newsroom staffs are shrinking daily, with the remaining reporters and editors expected to do more and more with less and less.
- At the same time, the arrival of more media outlets that target specific audience segments offer more ways of getting your message to the people who matter to you. And with RSS feeds, SMS (mobile communications), email and social media, making sure your key supporters and stakeholders see press coverage of your issues is easier than ever.

What does this mean for you? It means that now more than ever it is important to do your homework, learn everything you can about the media outlets and reporters you will be working with, and choose your tactics and messages wisely. Above all, you must base your media outreach on a clear strategy and a carefully crafted plan.

This toolkit is designed to be your introduction to navigating the modern media, securing coverage and getting your messages out to your audiences as efficiently and effectively as possible.

# Building an Effective Media Outreach Plan

## Step One: Strategy first

While media coverage can often be extremely useful and even essential to achieving your advocacy goals, it is a means to reach a targeted goal, rather than an end in itself.

Before you start planning a media outreach campaign, you should already know the answers to the following basic strategic questions<sup>1</sup>:

- 1) What is my **objective**? In other words, what measurable change in public policy or people's behavior am I trying to achieve? Do you want to pass a bill, change consumer behavior or decrease the cost of immunization shots? Is my objective SMART (strategic, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound)?
- 2) Who are my **decision makers**? Who can make my objective a reality? Depending on your objective, decision makers may be the city council, high school students, or grocery store owners.
- 3) Who is my **target audience**? If the decision maker is the city council, they may also be your audience. But the city council is also responsive to the city's electorate and businesses, so they should be among the audiences you consider targeting.
- 4) What is my **message**? What story does my target audience need to see, read or hear to inspire them to action?

You also should have thoroughly considered how reaching out to the news media fits into your overall communications strategy. Have you considered all the *other* tactics you could use to reach your target audiences? Tactics can include meetings, Web sites, newsletters, letters, phone calls, paid advertising or other means for getting your message out to your audience. The best communications efforts use the most direct tactics possible.

With your strategic communications framework in hand, you are ready to assemble your Media Outreach Plan.

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## Step Two: Fine tune your message

Do you know what you need to say in order to persuade your audiences of your position or inspire them to take action? Before you get to sound bites, you need messages. Messages can share knowledge, build will or reinforce action and include four main points:

- **Value:** This message point taps the target audience's existing values and establishes common ground.
- **Barrier:** This message point seeks to overcome existing barriers to the action we want the target audience to take.
- **Ask:** This message point asks the target audience to take a specific, doable action.

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<sup>1</sup> If you don't have the answers to these questions yet, the Smart Chart™ can help you gather the information you need to develop a targeted, successful, strategic communications plan. The online version at [www.SmartChart.org](http://www.SmartChart.org) will walk you through the process step by step.

- **Vision:** This message point explains the benefit of doing what we ask and connects that benefit to something the target audience wants (linked to the value tapped in the value message point).

Each of these main points can be bolstered by additional supporting points – carefully chosen facts or statistics, compelling stories or examples or other information that strengthens the message.

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### **Step Three: Assess the newsworthiness of your story – *Is this really news?***

Before you pitch a story to a reporter or send out a press release, it pays to honestly assess the newsworthiness of your idea. Your resources are not infinite, so you want to use them wisely on your best opportunities to garner media coverage. Busy reporters get hundreds of pitches and releases each day – yours will stand out only if it has real news potential. Also, wasting a reporter’s time with stories that are not newsworthy is the best way to ensure that the reporter will ignore your calls and emails in the future.

So what makes a story newsworthy? There’s no single answer. Decisions about what makes it into the newspaper or onto the evening news are based on a number of factors – timing, novelty, human interest, controversy, importance to the community – and can be quite complicated. See the the **Media Planning Checklist** for a list of criteria to help you assess whether you have news.

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### **Step Four: Pick the right outlets and reporters - *Where should your story appear to best reach your audience?***

Now that you have finalized the message you want to share, you need to identify the outlets that best reach your target audience. Is it important that national policymakers know your story? If so, then *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* may be appropriate. However, if it is most important that you reach parents in a particular school district, then it may be more helpful to have your story appear in the local community newspaper.

When considering outlets, it is important not to put all your eggs in one basket. In almost every situation there are many outlets available to reach your target audience such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, online publications and blogs. And even among outlets there are options such as national, regional, local, community, trade, religious and niche (i.e. ethnic, LGBT, senior, etc.). If you are unsure of the best outlets for reaching your audience, consider asking members of your target audience. Another option is to research the demographical information of the outlets you are considering to be sure it is reaching your audience; this information is often available on an outlet’s website or by contacting the outlet’s advertising department.

Once you have identified your target outlets, it is important to become familiar enough with them so you know where your story would best fit. If you’ve discovered that an outlet has one particular reporter who often covers the subject of your story, then you are on the right track. In addition, you should not limit your options to one particular section of an outlet. For example, while you might initially think your coverage is best for the national section, it could also be adjusted for another section such as metro or business. If you are unable to identify a particular reporter to pitch a story to, you can target an editor.

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## **Step Five: Pick your moment - *Is this the best time for media outreach?***

In media relations, as in so many things, timing can be a crucial ingredient of success. Three important calendars will affect the timing of your media relations activities.

First, you will want to consider your own calendar. When will your organization's new report be ready? When does your fundraising campaign begin?

Next, think about the external calendar. Are there regularly scheduled events – public holidays, congressional debates, tax deadlines, anniversaries of important news events or seasonal changes in weather or behavior – that you need to factor in? Stories about ocean pollution might attract more attention at the start of beach-going season than in the dead of winter, for example, and education stories can gain traction at the start of a school year.

Finally, it pays to know as much as you can about the editorial calendar of the outlets you will be targeting. Think about how much lead time you will need to get your story placed. Print reporters need time to research, conduct interviews and write and edit their stories before they appear. For a daily newspaper, this may all happen in a few hours, but for a monthly magazine, stories are often planned months in advance, so you may need to contact them in January if you want a story to appear in the June issue. In addition, many magazines and newspapers periodically run special sections focusing on the environment, health or education. Knowing when those are scheduled to appear will let you contact the reporters and editors far enough in advance to let them incorporate your ideas into their plans. Similarly, local TV and radio stations often run special features or themes – environmental features around Earth Day in April, for example, or special programs for Women's History Month in March.

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## **Step Six: Choose the right tactics – *How can you get your message out?***

Tactics are the ways in which you get your messages out, such as advertising, community meetings, direct mail pieces, Web sites, media outreach, etc. The list of tactics that you use can be as long and creative as you like. The difficulty is in selecting the tactics that will be most effective in reaching your target audience(s).

For each tactic you are considering, think about whether it will reach your target audience and whether it supports your goal. Also keep in mind that your tactics should result in both outputs and outcomes. Media outputs are news articles, radio interviews or television news stories, etc., that carry your key message in outlets that reach your target audience. Outcomes are the changes that occur due to the outputs – for example, a teacher who sees your news coverage and starts a mentoring program for ninth grade students to help them stay in school.

The root of news is NEW. If you are pursuing media coverage you need to be able to come up with lots of NEW – new information, new angles, new spokespeople, new stories and new ways to package your story. The two questions all reporters want answered are *What's new?* and *Why now?* Make certain that you have compelling answers to those questions before considering a media strategy. If you've completed your planning process and you know that a media strategy is the way to get your message out, you're ready to start evaluating the most appropriate media tactics to deliver these messages. Some possibilities include:

**Pitching a news story.** Sometimes your best bet will be to call a reporter directly and pitch a news story to him or her. It's a good idea to do some research on the reporter's work before you pitch – the easiest way to do that is to read the newspaper (and the paper's Web site), listen to the radio or watch the television station for which the reporter works. You can pitch by phone or email, as a follow-up to a press release or without sending a release. When pitching a reporter, you should focus on what's new or interesting about your story. For television, keep in mind that you need to tell the reporter about the visual angle. See **Tip sheet: Make the news - Pitch a story to a reporter** in this toolkit for tips to help you pitch successfully.

**Press release.** Press releases can be excellent tools for transmitting your messages to the media. They are generally used to announce something new or noteworthy – report findings, the start of a new program or a key victory, for example. It's important to keep in mind that reporters receive literally hundreds of e-mails each day, so the challenge is to make sure your press release stands out from the crowd. Good press releases are short and to the point; include the date, an attention-getting headline and compelling quotes from key spokespeople; and have contact information in case a reporter has questions or wants to set up an interview. Send your press release by faxing or pasting it into the body of an email. It's imperative to call reporters to follow up after you've sent a press release to make sure it was received; if they don't have you on their contact list already, your release most likely landed in their junk mail or was ignored. See **Tip sheet: Write an effective press release** in this toolkit for help writing a great release.

**Desk-side.** You may not have a strong news story to pitch right now, but you can build relationships with reporters by having desk-side meetings or by simply grabbing a cup of coffee with a reporter. During these informal meetings, you can share background information and find out a reporter's interests. This kind of advance legwork will increase your chances of success when you pitch a story or send a press release later.

**Editorial board meeting.** If you want to share information with the writers and editors responsible for editorials at your local paper in hopes of persuading them to adopt your position or editorialize more frequently about your issue, you can request an editorial board meeting. During the meeting, you will usually meet with several writers and editors at the paper. You may have the opportunity to speak briefly on your issues, as well as to respond to their questions. It's a good idea to develop talking points from your core messages and plan to make no more than three key points.

**Public affairs or talk shows.** Many television and radio stations air weekly public affairs shows that focus on community news. Depending on your target audience, these shows can be terrific opportunities to get your messages to community leaders, policy makers and others. When pitching these shows, you often don't need as strong a news hook as when you are pitching a news story. Instead, focus your pitch on the impact that your issue has on the community and the special expertise or unique perspective that you can offer their listeners or viewers. You can pitch the producer to do a one-on-one conversation or a panel discussion that involves multiple spokespeople with different perspectives on the issue. Local news/talk radio stations may have similar interview opportunities on community-focused talk shows that air throughout the week.

**Letter to the editor.** When you want to respond to an article or editorial that was published in the paper, you can write a letter to the editor. Policy makers and their staff frequently read the letters page to gain insights into the concerns of their constituents. When writing a letter to the editor, timeliness and brevity are key. Ideally, you should

submit a letter no later than one day after the story that you are responding to was published. Your letter should not be more than 250 words. Consider also who will be the most effective signer – there are many options, such as the leader of a community group, a teacher, an average citizen, etc. An important variation on this theme is the online comments areas on news Web sites, where readers can post short commentaries that appear on the same page with a news article or other item. Done well, online comments offer the opportunity to shape readers’ reaction to news stories in real time, but be prepared: on controversial subjects, online comments can turn into a free-for-all with supporters on both sides of an issue trying to out-shout each other.

**Op-ed.** An op-ed is an opinion piece or commentary that is published “opposite the editorial page” in a newspaper. Op-eds are usually written in response to news events to offer new information or a new angle, but are rarely written to respond to a specific article. (Then it would be a letter to the editor.) An op-ed should make one key point, supported with some well-chosen facts and statistics and even a story, in about 650 words. Read the op-eds that a newspaper publishes to get ideas on style and format, and make sure you follow any rules the newspaper has for op-ed submissions (these are often readily available on the paper’s Web site).

**Press conference or other media event.** Before deciding to hold a media event, you should carefully consider whether your news rises to the level that warrants an event. Press conferences are an overused tactic, and it may be more effective to pitch specific reporters or have desk-side meetings. If you are considering a media event, think about whether the event will really attract the media you have targeted. Is your announcement likely to be seen by reporters as truly earth-shattering? Will you be able to secure any big-name or unlikely spokespeople? Are there likely to be other events competing for reporters’ attention on the day of your event? Also, think beyond a traditional press conference. Sometimes your needs may be better served by holding a town hall meeting or other event. See **Tip sheet: Hold a successful news conference** in this toolkit for help planning a media event.

**Pulling it all together.** All of the above tactics can be used alone or in combination as part of your media strategy.

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## **Step Seven: Tracking your coverage - *How do you get from media clips to your goal?***

You’ve made your pitches, held your event, and followed up with your targeted reporters. Now what?

An effective media strategy will result in outputs – news stories, editorials, radio or television interviews and/or published op-eds or letters to the editor. If you’ve put this much effort into placing a story in the press, you’ll want to know as soon as it appears. Online news tracking services like Google News Alerts will automatically send you an email when a new story appears. Some newspapers’ Web sites can do the same. Make sure you’ve set those up in advance so you don’t miss a thing. These days, stories often appear online before they are published in a hard copy paper or air on the radio or TV, so be prepared to watch for alerts at all hours.

But outputs will only get you halfway to your goal. You need to make sure that your outputs lead to outcomes – people taking action as a result of the media coverage. In a perfect world, your target audience would be sure to see your media coverage. In the real world, that doesn't always happen, but you can increase the chances that your coverage is seen by looking for opportunities to magnify the reach and impact of your press coverage.

Keep copies of any letters or op-eds that are published and articles that are the result of your pitching. Record radio and television interviews; many stations also archive video and audio links on their Web sites, which makes it easy to share a link via e-mail with people who might be interested.

Think about secondary audiences – bloggers or community activists, for example – who might be inclined to share positive stories with your target audiences, and make sure they receive links to the stories you've generated.

Include hard copies of your best clips in your press kit, and use them as leave-behinds when you speak to community groups or decision makers.

Send copies of the coverage to policy makers, community groups and allies – again, e-mail makes it easy to send the text of a story and a link to the paper's Web site the moment it appears.

Also consider including links to recent coverage on your organization's Web site, and sharing coverage with your networks through social media like Twitter and Facebook. That way, you will maximize the results of your media strategy and increase your chances of making real progress toward achieving your objectives.

# Media Planning Checklist

Complete the following questions to build a basic media outreach plan that supports your communications strategy. See additional tip sheets in this toolkit for more details on each of these questions.

**What are the communications goals and objectives that will ground my media plan?**

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**Which audiences am I trying to reach through the media outreach plans?**

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**What are the main messages that I am using to appeal to my target audiences?**

Value message: \_\_\_\_\_  
Barrier message: \_\_\_\_\_  
Ask: \_\_\_\_\_  
Vision: \_\_\_\_\_

**What is the news? Is it new or does it offer a fresh twist? Does it affect many people, have a local angle, or contain other qualities that make it newsworthy?**

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**What is the optimal timing? Is there an existing news hook?**

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**Which media outlets should I target? Which news program/section? Does the news lend itself to an editorial or commentary piece?**

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**Which reporters cover this issue?**

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**What is the best way for me to deliver this pitch? Press conference, press release, editorial board meeting, etc.?**

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**How am I going to track media coverage?**

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## Tip Sheet: Assess the newsworthiness of your story

Before you pitch a story to a reporter or send out a press release, it pays to honestly assess the newsworthiness of your idea. Your resources are not infinite, so you want to use them wisely on your best opportunities to garner media coverage. Busy reporters get hundreds of pitches and releases each day – yours will stand out only if it has real news potential. Also, wasting a reporter’s time with stories that are not newsworthy is the best way to ensure that the reporter will ignore your calls and emails in the future.

So what makes a story newsworthy? There’s no single answer. Decisions about what makes it into the newspaper or onto the evening news are based on a number of factors – timing, novelty, human interest, controversy, importance to the community – and can be quite complicated. Use the following checklist to assess the newsworthiness of your story. Before you pitch a story, you need to be able to check off at least one box. However, the more boxes you can check off for your story, the more likely your pitch is to be successful.

### Newsworthiness Checklist

- Is my story brand new? Is this the first time this event/occurrence has ever happened in our community?
- Does my story contain an unusual or surprising twist?
- Does my story give a fresh local outlook on a national story?
- Does my story contain an interesting human interest angle?
- Is my story a *News You Can Use* item, with practical information of use to people in my community?
- Does my story fit into a story that the media automatically covers, such as a holiday observance, an annual event or a political issue?
- Does my story contain unusual or rich visuals (important for television)?
- Does my story offer a new voice or a celebrity voice on an issue?
- Does my story shed new light on a complex issue or provide a local angle on a statewide or national issue?

After you’ve completed the checklist, you can use it to help you craft your pitch or your press release. In both instances, you want to emphasize from the beginning what makes your story newsworthy in order to capture a reporter’s attention. For more information on pitching a reporter, see **Tip sheet: Make the news - Pitch a story to a reporter** in this toolkit. For more information on creating a press release, see **Tip sheet: Write an effective press release**.

## **Tip Sheet: Write an effective press release**

Reporters receive hundreds of e-mails each day. Your challenge is to make your press release stand out from the crowd so that it actually gets read. In a nutshell, a press release is a brief news story that gives reporters key details about a piece of news. These tips, along with the sample press release format on the following page, will help you craft a press release that will capture a reporter's attention.

**Make sure your release is newsworthy.** Only send out a press release when you have actual news to report. For example, a press release is appropriate to announce a newly installed officer of your organization, the release of a new report, the results of a successful program or event, etc. For more information, see **Tip sheet: Assess the newsworthiness of your story.**

**Grab their attention with a strong headline and/or e-mail subject line.** The headline is what a reporter reads first and determines if they will keep reading. The headline should give the most newsworthy angle of your story in no more than 12 words, mostly strong nouns and active verbs. Avoid the overused "X organization announces" headline – it's nearly a guarantee that a reporter will ignore the rest of the release.

**Don't forget the sub-headline.** Because the headline is so short, the sub-headline allows you the opportunity to offer another piece of information that will sell the reporter on your story. This is valuable real estate, so avoid repeating words from the headline. The sub-headline takes the form of one full sentence - no more than 15 words - without any ending punctuation.

**Tell the story in the lead.** The lead, or first paragraph of the release, needs to answer the questions, "What happened?" and "Why should I care?" in one to two sentences. Stick to factual statements that are not loaded with fluffy adjectives. This is where you get the reporter to commit to reading the rest of your release.

**Flesh out the body with key details.** The remaining paragraphs of your release will add the important details of your story. This is where you should address or expand on the who, what, when, where and why of your story, with an emphasis on its impact on the community. Keep paragraphs relatively short - two to three sentences - and try to keep your overall release to one page in length.

**Include quotes from key spokespeople.** Within the body of your release, include one to three quotes. People quoted may include the leader of your organization, a member or an outside validator (a prominent member of the community or the leader of another organization, for example). Reporters at smaller newspapers may use these quotes directly in a story. Make sure every quote carries one or more of your core messages, and ensure that the quotes sound natural – as if they were actually spoken – by saying them aloud.

**Use letterhead and boilerplate to identify your organization.** Consistent use of letterhead and boilerplate (two to three sentences at the bottom of a release that explain who your organization is) will help journalists to know the source of the release. They'll also save you from using valuable space in the body of the release to share that information.

**Always include contact information.** Near the top of the release, include a name and phone number of a person a reporter can easily contact for additional information. Including your cell phone number and e-mail address ensures that a busy reporter on deadline can reach you after hours.

## Sample press release

**\*\* LETTERHEAD \*\***

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Today's Date

**Contact:**

Your Name, XXX-XXX-XXXX or XXX-XXX-XXXX  
*[Include both office and after-hours phone numbers.]*

### **STRONG HEADLINES CAPTURE MEDIA ATTENTION**

*[The headline should be no more than 12 words. Use bold font, two to three points larger than body text.]*

#### **New research reveals reporters rely on deck for key information**

*[The sub-headline should be no more than 15 words. Use bold font, one point larger than body text.]*

Your City – The **first paragraph** is the lead or main news. This is what is happening and why it is important, in one to two sentences.

The **second paragraph** is everything important you could not fit in the first paragraph. After reading the lead and the second paragraph, a reporter should know the who, what, where, and when of your news, as well as the why.

“The third paragraph is a **passionate quote** from your best messenger,” said Jane Smith, [title] of [name of organization]. “It is usually two parts, and may state the problem and a solution or action.”

*[The first quote in a release is generally from the organization's lead spokesperson. Make sure it sounds natural, carries your core messages and adds value to the story.]*

In the **next two paragraphs**, you'll want to share details that flesh out your story. You can provide the larger context to this issue, including any relevant history. You may want to debunk myths or correct misinformation at this point. It all depends on the nature of your issue.

The goal of these two paragraphs is to give the reporter everything he or she needs to write the story. This is a good place for important facts, a key statistic or even a brief anecdote.

“If space permits, you may use **another quote** here,” the instructors said. “This will be important if you are working in a partnership or coalition.”

*[An additional quote in the release can come from allies, an event speaker, a member of your organization, etc. You can also include a second quote from your primary spokesperson.]*

From here on out, you can expand your story by including information that was not essential to grab the reporter's attention, but is critical to understanding your story. Ideally a release is one page, though it may extend to two if necessary.

**###**

*[These marks indicate that the press release has ended.]*

[Organization] was founded in XXXX. Our mission is to XXX. Learn more at [www.website.org](http://www.website.org).

*[This is called the boilerplate, and it is where you include standard information about your organization.]*

## ***Tip sheet: Write an effective media advisory***

A media advisory is a brief, one-page notice that alerts the media to an upcoming event. You can create and send out a media advisory before a press conference or public event – anything that you want reporters to have advance notice about and/or attend. These tips will help you to craft a media advisory that gets a reporter’s attention and gives them the information they need to know about your event. The sample format on the following page will assist you in putting it all together.

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**Press release rules for headlines and decks (sub-heads) apply.** Just as with a press release, a media advisory needs a strong, attention-grabbing headline and a sub-head (also called a deck) that offers additional information that will convince a reporter to attend your event. For more information on crafting your headline and deck, see ***Tip sheet: Write an effective press release.***

**Use the lead to introduce your event.** Immediately following the headline and deck, but before you give the nitty gritty event details, include a one or two sentence paragraph that introduces your event and explains why it is newsworthy. Is there a local or national celebrity involved? Are you launching a new or innovative program? Delivering a petition with 3,000 signatures to a policy maker? In the lead paragraph, highlight the most important feature of your event (the why). In doing this, you will also likely convey that your organization is behind the event (the who).

**Including a quote is optional.** If you choose, you can include a quote from your lead spokesperson. Do this only if it enhances the appeal of your event by sharing a key, newsworthy detail.

**Highlight the event details.** The rest of your advisory should clearly lay out the details of your event, including what is happening, when, and where. (Who and why will be covered in your lead paragraph and quote.) Follow the three Ws with a list of speakers and any other key details.

**Use letterhead and boilerplate to identify your organization.** Consistent use of letterhead and boilerplate (two or three sentences at the bottom of an advisory that explain who your organization is) will help journalists to know the source of the advisory. They’ll also save you from using valuable space in the body of the advisory to share that information.

**Always include contact information.** Near the top of the release, include a name and phone number of a person a reporter can easily contact for additional information.

**\*\* LETTERHEAD \*\***

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Today's Date

**Contact:**

Your Name, XXX-XXX-XXXX or XXX-XXX-XXXX

*[Include both office and after-hours phone numbers]*

**Media Advisory for Date, Time**

*[Let them know at the beginning the date and time of your event.]*

**STRONG HEADLINES CAPTURE MEDIA ATTENTION**

*[The headline should be no more than 12 words. Use bold font, two to three points larger than body text.]*

**New research reveals reporters rely on deck for key information**

*[The sub-headline should be no more than 15 words. Use bold font, one point larger than body text.]*

Your City – **The first paragraph is the lead.** In one to two sentences, introduce your event and highlight its most important feature to demonstrate why it is newsworthy. This is where you cover the who (your organization) and the why of your event.

“A quote here can further explain the purpose of your event,” said Jane Smith, [title] of [name of organization]. “It may also offer a preview of what will happen and needs to focus on adding key details that will sell the event to reporters.”

*[This quote is optional – include it only if it will help you convince a reporter to attend.]*

**What:** Name of your event  
Followed by a brief description if necessary

**When:** Date and time of your event

**Where:** Location  
Include directions, parking and public transit info here if needed

**Speakers:** Speaker name, Organization  
Speaker name, Organization  
Speaker name, Organization

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*[These marks indicate that the advisory has ended]*

[Organization] was founded in XXXX. Our mission is to XXX. Learn more at [www.website.org](http://www.website.org).

*[This is called the boilerplate, and it is where you include standard information about your organization.]*

## ***Tip Sheet: Make the news – Pitch a story to a reporter***

Proactive media outreach is critically important to a successful media relations strategy, but it can be a challenge. Perhaps you have been in this situation: you have a great idea for a news story, but the prospect of getting a reporter to write about it is daunting. The following tips will help you to identify pitching opportunities, select your pitching target, develop and deliver your pitch, and follow up successfully.

**Make sure it's newsworthy.** Reporters are busy, and nothing annoys them more than having their time wasted. Reporters do not want to cover the same old story that everyone else is covering or that they themselves have already covered. Track the work of the reporter you are targeting, gauge his or her interests, and note the stories he or she has done recently. Your story should either be something entirely new, or introduce a fresh angle on an existing issue.

**Know your audience.** Your pitch will only be successful if you deliver it to the right person. This depends on the medium, as well as the kind of story you are pitching.

**Television.** Television stations are interested in breaking news stories with a strong visual angle. Sometimes they will also do investigative features that expose an injustice. A breaking news story might be a town hall meeting or a courtroom development, while an investigative feature might share the stories of defendants that have been denied their right to counsel or public defenders struggling with enormous caseloads.

If your story is breaking news, pitch the assignment editor. If you know that news is going to break in the near future, pitch the futures editor. Providing the media with advance notice almost always increases your chance of getting coverage. These two editors at the television station assign the majority of news coverage to individual reporters.

For a feature story that doesn't involve breaking news, you need to identify the right reporter or producer who will be interested in your pitch. The easiest way to do this is to watch the news. Pay attention to the beats that reporters cover. Then you can pitch that reporter, or his or her producer, directly. A quick review of the station's Web site will often tell you who is likely to be your best target. In a pinch, you can always call the station and ask the receptionist or member of the news desk who is best to speak with regarding your story.

**Radio.** News coverage at NPR affiliates and local news/talk stations may be your first choice for groups that work on public interest issues. For a public radio station, you may want to target a specific reporter who covers the legal beat. Some stations may have an assignment editor, and you can always go to the news editor. If there is a particular show that you want to target, direct your pitch to the show's producer. Again, it's useful to listen to the program that you are pitching so that you have a good sense of the kinds of stories they do and what they've already covered.

News coverage during the day on radio stations that play music tends to be brief. If you have a breaking story, you can pitch the news director to include the story in the station's regular news briefs. Keep in mind that many of those music stations have weekend or late evening public affairs shows that take a closer look at the week's news and community issues. These shows, generally produced and often hosted by the news or public affairs director, are good targets for a pitch involving a more in-depth treatment of public defense

issues. For example, you could pitch a show segment in which a district attorney and a public defender talk about the need for reform and field questions from listeners.

Talk radio is also an option, but be sure to choose a show that provides the opportunity for a thoughtful discussion, not a screaming match. Consider whether the show reaches your target audience – many talk shows have deeply ideological listeners who are unlikely to be swayed by your most persuasive arguments.

**Newspaper.** Small newspapers tend to have small staffs. If the paper you are contacting is very small, the best person to receive your pitch may be the news editor or a general assignment reporter. At larger papers, you will want to find the reporter covering the appropriate beat for your story, or even consider a columnist. Again, the easiest way to do this is to read the paper and track the coverage – after a few days or weeks, it will be easy to identify who covers what stories. Beyond a single pitch or story, it's a good idea to know the reporters who are likely to cover your issues so that you can build a relationship with them.

**Online outlets.** In today's media world, almost every "traditional" media outlet is actually a multi-channel media outlet, with an online site that includes video feeds, audio stories, photo essays, online commentaries and Q&As, among many other sections. Other news sites like The Daily Beast or Huffington Post are online-only news sites that operate much like traditional media with paid reporters who specialize in certain subject matters (though the writing tends to be more opinionated) and editors for various sections. Still other sites feature mostly opinion pieces, and most reporters who do straight reporting are also expected to blog either on their news sites or elsewhere and may also communicate through vehicles like Facebook and Twitter. Just like reading a newspaper, you will want to spend time on an online outlet's website to track coverage and identify the appropriate reporter to target. You may also want to pitch a reporter to blog or Tweet about your issue, even if you do not have enough for a full story.

**Craft a creative pitch.** Reporters are constantly besieged by phone calls, e-mails and faxes from people trying to convince them to write stories. You need to stand out from the crowd. This means deciding on the best means of contact – almost always e-mail or phone – and developing a pitch that is attention-grabbing and brief.

**Phone.** If you're going to pitch by phone, plan what you will say in advance. Most reporters will give you 15 seconds – maybe 30 – to make your case. Make those seconds count. Avoid overwhelming them with jargon. Use a striking fact, or mention the name of a prominent person available for an interview. If they're interested, they'll keep listening. But if you can't capture their interest quickly, you'll lose them and the story.

**Email.** The same rules apply for an e-mail pitch – except that reporters can delete it without ever reading it. Create an interesting subject line and make sure the first few sentences of your e-mail are attention grabbing. And don't write a novel – one to three brief paragraphs will do it. Let the reporter know that you will call to follow up – don't leave it up to a reporter to contact you.

### **DO NOT SEND DOCUMENTS AS ATTACHMENTS.**

Many e-mail addresses are set up to block e-mails with attachments. Even if they do get through, many journalists won't open attachments from unknown e-mail addresses. Try to include anything that you need to communicate in the body of an e-mail. If you are

trying to share a lengthy document with a reporter, post the document online and provide the reporter with a Web address to view the piece. This is a good way to invite reporters to visit the media section of your Web site.

**Strong delivery will make or break your pitch.** Whether you're pitching the reporter by phone or following up on your e-mail pitch, consider your timing. Do not call a reporter in the late afternoon when he or she is likely to be on deadline. If you reach a reporter who sounds harried, ask when would be a better time for you to call back. Plan and practice your pitch and deliver it with confidence – but don't read it. Ask if the reporter is interested, and offer to share additional information. A reporter will rarely agree to do a story during your first call, so your goal should be to start the conversation. Be prepared to leave a brief, to-the-point voicemail (30 seconds or less) if you do not reach a live person. Always be polite.

**Follow up... but don't pester.** You've spoken to the reporter, shared additional resources and haven't heard anything. Place a call or send a follow-up e-mail. Ask if the reporter thinks he or she is going to do the story, or if he or she needs anything else to make a decision. If the reporter says no, ask if you can stay in touch as things develop. Your efforts now may pay dividends later. If the reporter says yes, offer to help in any way that you can (identifying spokespeople, providing background information, etc.). After the story runs, send an e-mail or note thanking the reporter for his or her efforts.

**A special note about embargoes and exclusives:**

Reporters deal in information. They are under tremendous pressure from their bosses (their editors) to get the news before other outlets, and to find angles and stories that no one else has reported.

When pitching them on a story, it may be helpful to offer an "exclusive" to your top target reporter. An exclusive arrangement is an agreement that only a single reporter gets the first chance to write about your story. Under an exclusive, you are agreeing not to share the information with other news outlets before the story is published in your chosen outlet. Be aware, though, that offering an exclusive to one reporter or outlet runs the risk of disappointing other reporters, so weigh the risks and rewards carefully.

If you don't want reporters to share your news with anyone before a certain time, make sure to tell them it is "embargoed" or barred from distribution. Under an embargo, reporters may still use the information (a copy of your new report, for example, or the details of a new project being announced the following day) to prepare their story in advance, but they agree not to publish it or tell others about it until your specified date and time.

## ***Tip Sheet: Hold a successful news conference***

When you have significant hard news to release and wish to convey that news to a broad group of reporters, it may be worthwhile to hold a press event. Press events can take place in person or via telephone and provide an opportunity for you to share your news with multiple reporters at the same time. Whether in person or on the phone, press events must be well organized and present information in a clear and concise manner to be effective. The following tips are designed to guide you in planning a successful press event.

### **In Person or By Phone?**

When considering a news event, the first thing you need to do is determine if your news actually rises to the level of holding an event. Try to step outside your current role and into the shoes of the busy reporter and ask: is it a good investment of my time to participate in this event? If your answer is yes, the next thing you must determine is the format of your press event. Does it make sense to invest the time and effort in an in-person event or would it be better to hold the event by phone?

Advocates are increasingly choosing to hold teleconferences – telephone press events – because they:

- **Require fewer resources.** Conference call services are typically less expensive than the costs of renting a location, audio-visual equipment, and catering for an in-person news conference.
- **Are easier for reporters to attend.** Reporters' time is stretched more thinly than ever, and calling into a teleconference takes up much less time than having to leave their desks to attend an event. As a result, while a hard news hook may be required to attend an off-site event, reporters may be willing to call into a teleconference that is relevant to their beat when the news hook is softer, such as the release of a report.
- **Allow multiple reporters and spokespeople from across the country to participate.** If you have national news to release, a teleconference will enable reporters from across the country to call in. In addition, you can have multiple spokespeople on the call without having to fly them to a central location.
- **Offer a better format for releasing reports.** Teleconferences allow for more in-depth discussion and questions from reporters on weighty and complex materials like reports. Releasing a report in advance will slash attendance for an in-person event, but a reporter is likely to still call into a teleconference after reading a report because they can get quotes from several spokespeople at once without leaving their desk.
- **Can be set up quickly.** While in-person press events typically require several weeks advance planning, a teleconference can be set up in a day or even a matter of hours if news is breaking and it makes sense to offer media the opportunity to hear from several expert spokespeople at once on the issue.

Teleconferences are generally a more time- and cost-effective option than in-person events and can garner just as much, if not more, coverage than an in-person event. However, there are certainly times when an in-person press event makes more sense and helps further propel your story:

- **Local issue.** When all of the reporters you need to reach are in the same city, an in-person event held in a convenient location can be a good opportunity to share news with them.
- **Visual elements.** If you can create a strong visual for your press event that will draw television coverage, an in-person event will be more effective than a teleconference as it offers the opportunity for camera crews to take footage. This is

also true for sound elements when seeking to attract radio outlets.

- **Location.** Similar to general visual elements, the location of your news event can drive attendance and help tell your story. For example, if you are trying to increase bike lanes, holding your press event near a busy intersection would provide reporters a far greater understanding of the issue than anything that could be said on a phone call (as well as a great opportunity for photos, video and sound recordings).
- **Major spokesperson.** Reporters are more likely to attend an in-person event with a big-name spokesperson; a former governor, well-known national figure or even a local celebrity can pique a reporter's interest.

## Tip sheet: Interview basics

It happens time and time and again: intelligent, informed, qualified spokespeople speak to a member of the press and suddenly find themselves talking “off message.” The reporter is in control of the conversation, rather than the spokesperson.

Media interviews are an important part of an overall communications outreach campaign. As a key spokesperson on this issue, you have the power to shape the public conversation that takes place. There is really only one overall tip for acing an interview: **PREPARE**.

**Journalists prepare and you must, too.** A journalist spends substantial time considering what type of story they are looking to write before ever speaking to anyone. When a journalist comes to you, be prepared. CEOs, politicians, celebrities – people with large communications staffs who constantly interact with the press – still end up going off message and saying things that are unclear, or worse, regrettable. Even as an expert, your preparation should include:

- **Familiarizing yourself with the journalist/media outlet before your interview.** Have they covered this story in the past? Do they tend to cover stories from a particular point of view? ***The checklist at the end of this document will help you to know the right questions to ask to make sure you are fully prepared for any interview.***
- **Knowing what you want to say in advance.** Your expertise might enable you to discuss endless aspects of your issue but only one, maybe two, points will make it into a story and even then a consumer of the story may only remember bits and pieces. Don't let an audience member or a journalist decide what the most important point is on this issue. Review your messages in advance and evaluate the topic on which you're speaking. Select one or two key points to make and make them well.

### ***Prepare for an Interview: Know Your Messages***

Use this space to refresh your core message points.

#### ***Value:***

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#### ***Barrier:***

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#### ***Ask:***

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#### ***Vision:***

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- **Anticipating the questions you might be asked and preparing *brief* responses that deliver your message.** There is a difference between answering a question and responding to one. You can respond to nearly any question in a way that incorporates your key messages.

**Prepare for an Interview: Anticipate Questions**

Use this space to brainstorm questions that you might be asked (especially difficult or inappropriate ones). Then practice responding by staying calm and on message.

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**During the interview.** You may be nervous, but the most important thing is to be calm and confident. Feel free to keep notes in front of you during a phone or radio interview. The following tips will help you deliver your messages effectively:

- **Collect your thoughts.** If a journalist calls and wants to conduct an on-the-spot interview, always ask if you can call him/her back in five minutes. Use that time to gather your thoughts and review your key points.
- **Keep it simple!** Use clear language and avoid jargon. You don't want to bore your audience or make them feel stupid.
- **Use numbers, but sparingly.** Memorize one or two precise statistics that will give weight to your messages and bring your information to life.
- **Be honest!** Don't stretch the truth. If you don't know the answer, say so and suggest an alternative source. Anything less than factual and honest answers can seriously damage your credibility as well as the credibility of your cause.
- **Provide other sources that will back you up.** Independent experts can help to provide support for your position.
- **Everything is on the record.** Don't give in to the temptation to tell the reporter something "off the record." If you say it aloud, or put it in an e-mail, assume that it will appear in the reporter's story.
- **Stay calm.** Getting flustered can convey a host of things – none positive! Prepare in advance, stick to your messages and you'll ace any interview.

## Interview Checklist

**Use this form to log interview requests and ensure that your spokesperson is well-prepared for the interview!**

Date of interview request \_\_\_\_\_ Deadline \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Outlet \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Spokesperson requested \_\_\_\_\_

What is the interview about? \_\_\_\_\_

How long will it last? \_\_\_\_\_

What's your organization's role in the piece? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you the focus of the interview, or are you being interviewed to provide support? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Who else are they interviewing? \_\_\_\_\_

### Information about the interview format:

- Phone or in person? \_\_\_\_\_
- Live or taped? \_\_\_\_\_
- If taped, will it be edited? \_\_\_\_\_
- One-on-one or are you part of a panel? Who are the other participants?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Will listeners or viewers call in with questions? \_\_\_\_\_

### Information about the outlet:

- What kind of outlet – print, Web-only, radio or television? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do they typically have an angle, political slant or a strong point of view? (e.g., conservative talk radio show, women's issues columnist for a daily newspaper, etc.)  
\_\_\_\_\_
- If print, do they need a photo? \_\_\_\_\_
- If broadcast, do they want to pre-interview the spokesperson? \_\_\_\_\_