



# Media Relations Guide: Tips for Advocates

from Families USA

## Handling Media Requests

A news release or statement is often only the first step in a media process that can continue for some time. Often, reporters or editors will call to ask the source to elaborate on the information provided in the news release.

These contacts may take a few minutes or, on some big stories pursued by numerous media, several hours. Some reporters understand the subject matter and are excellent interviewers; others are generalists and may require significantly more background information to report accurately.

Media interviews can be enjoyable and rewarding, but they can also be trying and time-consuming. Ultimately, however, the goal is to publicize your work and enhance your expert's reputation and that of your organization. Remember, a young reporter from a small newspaper could one day be a senior editor at The New York Times.

Respond promptly to media requests, even if it is to decline or to refer the caller to another organization or expert. Reporters are usually under extremely tight deadlines, and a delay of a day, or even an hour, can mean the difference between favorable coverage and a lost opportunity—and a reporter disinclined to turn to your organization for help in the future.

## General Guidelines for Handling Media Calls

- All incoming calls should be handled by a communications specialist. If your organization does not have a communications department, establish some guidelines on how to handle media calls so there is no confusion.
- A good way to record incoming calls and requests is through Media Call Sheets.
- Process for handling incoming calls: Fill out a Media Call Sheet and discuss the subject of the story with the reporter, possible angles, and his or her deadline. Ask what type of story the reporter is pursuing, the context in which your organization's expert will be quoted, and the reporter's background or knowledge of the issue. Assess who is the best person to answer the reporter's questions and pass the Media Call Sheet to the appropriate staff person.
- Provide talking points to your experts/spokesperson whenever possible and, at a minimum, go over key points that should be covered.
- After talking to reporters, Media Call Sheets can be entered into a media call database. This type of database allows your organization to reference press calls.

## Prepping Staff for Interviews

Determine who your primary and secondary spokespeople are and what issues they can comfortably discuss with reporters. Primary spokespeople should have some understanding of the media and your organization's message goals.

- It's a good idea to sit down with staff before they speak to reporters to go over potential questions and how to insert your message into the story. Many times, staff members are so involved in the details of the issue that they lose sight of the bigger picture. It is helpful to discuss the three main points or arguments that should be used during the call.
- Staff should be given Media Call Sheets and briefed on what the angle of the story is, who the reporter is, what information he or she is looking for, and a reminder of how the story relates to your message.
- If the interview is on the record, you should really spend the extra time talking through potential questions and provide staff with talking points on the issue. If appropriate, create exact sound bites and quotes for the staff person to memorize.
- When prepping someone for a challenging on-camera debate or interview, it's always a good idea to have a policy person in the room to help with substance and the facts to support his or her arguments.
- Monitor major interviews. Note any factual errors made by the staff person and correct them immediately after the interview is completed.

## General Tips for Interviewees

**Before the Interview:** Develop concise answers to a few key questions:

- What is the purpose of your comment? Why is it important?
- Who will benefit from the information and how?
- What is your main objective? If you could make only two points with this story, what would they be?
- Have you gathered all the printed materials and data you need, including talking points?

### During the Interview

- Repeat your main points at least twice.
- Keep your statements clear and concise. Try to provide plain-language interpretations and metaphors.
- Speak slowly and spell difficult words or names.
- Assume everything you say will be quoted. If you feel that commenting is inappropriate or outside your area of expertise, politely decline. Beware of going "off the record."
- Don't limit yourself to answering questions. Raise points you think are important.
- While answering questions, be attuned to opportunities to promote your messages.
- Don't hesitate to correct the reporter if he or she makes an incorrect statement.

- Don't let reporters put words in your mouth.
- Never repeat inaccurate or damaging information spoken within a reporter's question. It can be used as your sound bite. Instead, state the information in a positive manner within your answer.

## Television and Radio Interviews

The same general rules apply to broadcast news interviews, but television and radio have their own rules and limitations. Preparation is still the key to presenting your ideas in a concise way.

### General Tips for TV and Radio Interviews

- Speak in conversational tones. Don't use technical language or jargon. Assume the listener/viewer is completely unfamiliar with the topic and its relevance to his or her life. Use anecdotes and metaphors that help simplify the concepts involved.
- For television interviews, don't create visual distractions with your clothes or appearance. Dress conservatively, as if you were going on a job interview. Check your hair just before going on camera. If seated, don't rock or swivel. If standing, stand still. Animation and enthusiasm are fine if confined to voice and facial expressions. Maintain eye contact with the interviewer. Don't look at the camera. Use small, decisive gestures to make points, not big, sweeping motions.
- Don't show anger in your voice or appearance at an unexpected or hostile question. Simply say you are not prepared to answer the question at this time. Avoid the phrase "no comment"—it has become synonymous with guilt.
- Use every opportunity to restate your main points. Remember, however, that few sound bites are more than 20 seconds long.
- When appropriate, mention your organization in the sound bite to ensure that your affiliation with your organization is not edited out of the story.
- Do not refer to the reporter by name during your answers, as the reporter may not be part of the final broadcast story.

### After the Interview

- Don't expect to see the story before publication; most reporters do not let sources review stories.
- Feel free to call the reporter back with further information or clarification, especially if the interview left you feeling uneasy.
- Obtain any information you promised to supply.
- Provide written background information, and be available to the reporter for follow-up questions.
- If the story is publicized with inaccuracies, call the reporter and politely point out the errors.

## Media Lists

A media list is a crucial tool for any outreach effort. A media list contains contact information for media outlets and reporters who cover different beats, including health care and politics. Lists are used in many ways: to pitch stories; send press releases, media advisories, op-eds, and letters to the editor; and to invite reporters to events.

It is important to update your list regularly, since reporters may change jobs.

It's a good idea to create several lists with different types of media outlets. When your organization decides to embark on a campaign targeting a specific audience, you will be prepared to act quickly. You may also want to consider creating a "frequent call list." These are the media contacts you know well and that often call your organization for information.

Here are some suggestions for useful media lists:

- By outlet type: radio (state network, talk show), television (affiliate, access cable), print (daily newspaper, community newspaper, senior newspaper) and wire service (AP, Reuters).
- By contact type: health care (reporters, editors), editorial board (editors, writers), columnists, state house and D.C. correspondents, etc.
- By coverage area: local outlets (county, city, and state), regional outlets (neighboring states, entire region), national outlets (major television and radio networks with bureaus in your state, newspapers and wire services with bureaus or correspondents in your state).

## Media Policies

All organizations should have clearly written media policies that spell out who in the organization responds to media inquiries and what kinds of information can or should be released to reporters. Policies help everyone in your organization understand how certain things are to be handled.

General definitions of exclusives and embargos:

**Exclusive:** Report or data given in advance to *one* reporter or media outlet based on a prior agreement with the reporter, with a commitment that a story will be published on the morning of the release.

**Embargo:** Report or data given in advance to reporters with the understanding that it should not be printed or broadcast before a specific date and time.

**Embargo with an exclusive:** Report or data given in advance to reporters with the understanding that it should not be printed or broadcast before a specific date and time. In addition, the information will be shared with *one* reporter or media outlet based on a prior agreement with the reporter, with a commitment that a story will be published on the morning of the release.

You might want to make sure that no individual staff member shares exclusive or embargoed information with reporters without prior agreement or approval of your communications specialist and executive director.

## Release of Media Reports

- When releasing reports, send out an embargoed copy of the report to key media contacts, or give it to one reporter as an exclusive.
- An ideal release strategy always involves scheduling taped radio interviews for the day before the release. These pre-recorded interviews are broadcast during drive time the day of the release of the report. You might also want to schedule live radio interviews for the morning of the release and throughout the day. Target radio talk shows and state radio networks.
- In addition to print and radio, work closely with television producers well in advance, and offer them a real-life example to help illustrate the report.

## Talking Points

Developing a general set of talking points on issues is a good way to ensure that the staff at your organization is in sync with the messages you want to emphasize.

- Every media campaign, report release, and outreach effort must be framed by an overall message and talking points.
- Talking points can be distributed to staff, especially prior to any media calls or interviews.

## Written Press Materials<sup>1</sup>

**Statements:** Statements are released to respond to legislative activity, administration activity, etc. They convey an organization's official position on the issue at hand. It is important that the statement be released within the same news cycle of the action or activity you are responding to. Therefore, you must follow up with calls to key reporters and set up interviews with your expert/spokesperson on the topic.

**Press Releases:** Press releases are the most often used written material in the media industry. They are used to announce an event, the release of a report, news about an organization, to state an organization's official position, and to support or denounce legislation, to mention just a few.

**Advisories:** Media advisories are used to provide information about an event ahead of time. They include the who, what, when, and where of the event.

**Backgrounder:** Background pieces, or "backgrounders," provide additional information to complement the shorter news release. They are longer and more general in content than the news release and are meant to assist a journalist in writing the story. The subject matter determines their length and style.

**Fact Sheets:** Fact sheets are short documents that compactly profile an organization. They generally support the information in press releases and backgrounders. Editors find fact sheets helpful as a quick source of resource material for articles.

**Media Availabilities:** Media availabilities are a one-page document used to inform reporters that someone in your organization has an area of expertise that may be helpful to them, and that the person in your organization is available to provide the media with information or quotes.

**Bios:** Bios recount pertinent facts about a particular individual in your organization. A bio lists factual information in a straightforward fashion in descending order of importance, with organization-oriented facts preceding more personal details.

## Clipping and Tracking Coverage<sup>2</sup>

Monitoring the media coverage of your organization is one of the most important elements of a well-executed media strategy. You'll want to track your media coverage to show those clips off to funders, potential members, and key players in your organization.

Probably the simplest, cheapest way to track online coverage of your organization or your issues is to run regular searches online for your organization's name. You should do this anyway, just to monitor who is writing about your organization and what is being said.

## Media Outreach

Effective communications is a key component of a successful social change campaign. It has value just like fundraising, grassroots organizing, and lobbying. To communicate effectively with target audiences, hire strong communications counsel, either in-house or out-of-house. This doesn't necessarily mean hiring a firm with a big retainer. Find a board member, a friend, or somebody who looks at issues from a marketing and communications perspective, and get their advice.

Communications experts can help bridge the gap between policy details and public motivation.

## Creating an Online Newsroom<sup>3</sup>

Journalists often rely on the Internet to look for information that will help them write a story. Think about incorporating a user-friendly section in your organization's Web site dedicated exclusively to journalists. You can call this section "Newsroom" or "Media Center." Organizations that provide the right information can maximize their relationships with journalists, resulting in better coverage and more efficient use of resources.

This section of your Web site should have the following resources:

- **Press Releases:** The latest press releases written by your organization, along with an archive of past releases.
- **Media Contact:** Tell reporters who is the right person to call. Include your media contact's name, title, phone number, and e-mail address.
- **General Information:** Include the organization's mission, list of board members, key facts and figures, funding sources, and executive biographies—information that will help gain insight into the organization and its management.

## How to Communicate with Journalists<sup>4</sup>

There are 101 excuses for not writing or calling the media when you see unfair, biased, or inaccurate news coverage: “I don’t know enough”; “I’m too busy”; “My computer crashed.”

Communicating with journalists makes a difference. It does not have to be perfect; not all letters to journalists need to be for publication. Even a one-sentence, handwritten note to a reporter can be helpful. If you take the time to type a substantive letter, send copies of it to two or three places within the media outlet—perhaps to the reporter, his or her editor, as well as to the letters-to-the editor department.

If media outlets get letters from a dozen people raising the same issue, they will most likely publish one or two of them. So even if your letter doesn’t get into print, it may help another group with a similar point of view get published. Surveys of newspaper readers show that the letters page is among the most closely read parts of the paper. It’s also the page policy makers look to as a barometer of public opinion.

When you write to journalists, be factual, not rhetorical. Do not personally attack them; that’s more likely to convince them that they’re in the right. Address them in the language that most journalists are trained to understand: Call on them to be responsible, professional, balanced, and inclusive of diverse sources and viewpoints.

## How to Write a Letter to the Editor

Letters that are intended for publication should usually be drafted more carefully. Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Make one point (or at most two) in your letter or fax. State the point clearly, ideally in the first sentence.
- Make your letter timely. If you are not addressing a specific article, editorial, or letter that recently appeared in the paper you are writing to, then try to tie the issue you want to write about to a recent event.
- Familiarize yourself with the coverage and editorial position of the paper to which you are writing. Refute or support specific statements, address relevant facts that are ignored, but avoid blanket attacks on the media in general or the newspaper in particular.
- Check the letter specifications of the newspaper to which you are writing. Length and format requirements vary from paper to paper. (Generally, roughly two short paragraphs are ideal.) You also must include your name, signature, address, and phone number.
- Look at the letters that appear in your paper. Is a certain type of letter usually printed?
- Support your facts. If the topic you address is controversial, consider sending documentation along with your letter. But don't overload the editors with too much information.
- Keep your letter brief. Type it whenever possible.
- Find others to write letters when possible. This will show that other individuals in the community are concerned about the issue. If your letter doesn't get published, perhaps someone else's will.

- Monitor the paper for your letter. If your letter has not appeared within a week or two, follow up with a call to the editorial department of the newspaper.
- Write to different sections of the paper when appropriate. Sometimes the issue you want to address is relevant to the lifestyle, book review, or other section of the paper.
- An increasing number of broadcast news programs (*60 Minutes*, *All Things Considered*, etc.) also solicit and broadcast “letters to the editor.” Don’t forget these outlets.
- Please sign your letters as an individual or representative of a community group, not as a member of a particular organization.

Nationwide letter to the editor information, including letter specifications and contact information, is available online at [www.scrapthecode.com/volunteer/LetterInfo.htm](http://www.scrapthecode.com/volunteer/LetterInfo.htm).

## How to Write an Op-Ed

Op-eds are longer than letters to the editor, and there is more competition for space. You may want to call the paper for length requirements (usually 600-800 words).

Try to write on a controversial issue being covered at that time. If you can use a professional title that suggests authority, do so. If you work for an organization, get permission to sign the op-ed as a representative of that organization.

Feel free to send it to papers far from where you live, but avoid sending it to two newspapers in the same “market.” (Sending to the San Francisco Examiner and the Seattle Times is okay, but not to the Examiner and the San Francisco Chronicle.) “National” newspapers like The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Christian Science Monitor, and USA Today generally do not accept op-eds that are also being offered to other papers. But you can easily submit the same piece to five or 10 local dailies in different regions, greatly increasing your chances of being published.

Assure the op-ed editor in your cover letter that the piece has not been submitted to any other paper in their market. If, on the other hand, you sent it to only one paper, let that paper know you are offering them an exclusive.

When writing op-eds, avoid excessive rhetoric. State the subject under controversy clearly. You are trying to persuade a middle-of-the-road readership.

Try to think of a catchy title. If you don’t, the paper will be more likely to run its own—which may not emphasize your central message. (Even if you do write your own headline, don’t be surprised if it appears under a different one.)

Be prepared to shorten and re-submit your article as a letter to the editor in case it does not get accepted as an op-ed.

## Meeting with Journalists

### ■ **Build a Coalition**

Pull together several people who represent various constituencies in your community, heads of various organizations or coalitions who can speak for the broadest possible constituency. You might want to let media representatives know how many people you represent. Media outlets are businesses; the number of media consumers you represent is part of your power. Whether you are requesting that a station air a particular program to provide balance or demanding that a newspaper use more neutral terminology, the key is demonstrating community support for your position.

### ■ **Set up the Meeting**

Write your local media outlet and ask for a meeting. If your complaint is about news, explain that you represent a broad constituency of people concerned with the issue and would like to meet with the editor/producer/news director. If you want a newspaper to take a particular editorial stand on an issue, contact the editorial board. A week or so after sending the letter, follow up with a phone call. Keep calling until you get through. Usually, someone will meet with you.

### ■ **Plan Your Presentation**

You will probably want to meet or strategize ahead of time to go over who will say what, what not to say, what statistics or documentation you would like to provide, who will provide them, etc. First impressions are key. What do you want to communicate in the first minute?

### ■ **Present Your Case**

Be clear about what your goals are before you go into the meeting. Be polite but firm. Be persistent, but do not lose your temper. Stick to what you can prove. Conclude your meeting with specific requests for improvements in coverage, the inclusion of views that are being excluded to provide balance, providing context or history on a specific issue, terminology changes, etc.

### ■ **Follow Up**

Send a letter outlining agreements reached to everyone who attended the meeting. If you see good coverage that might be a response to your concerns, promptly contact the highest level media representative present at the meeting and acknowledge the effort to respond to your concerns. If you see continued poor coverage, write or call to object. Unless you make it clear you are monitoring coverage on an ongoing basis, you will not be likely to influence news media.

## Editorial Board Meetings

Every daily newspaper has an editorial board, which can comprise anywhere from one to a dozen members. The editorial board meets on a regular basis to discuss the news and choose topics and opinions for editorials. The editorial board also can endorse candidates for public office, take a stand on a variety of issues, and urge voters to take a certain position.

As a citizen in the community, you can contact the editorial board to attempt to persuade it to take a position on a certain issue.

### How to Schedule and Conduct an Editorial Board Meeting

Begin by calling your local newspaper and ask to speak to someone regarding scheduling a meeting with the editorial board. The person you talk with will want to find out the purpose and rationale for having an editorial board meeting on the topic you are suggesting.

If you are unable to secure a meeting, ask if they would accept an op-ed piece on the particular issue/topic, written by you or in collaboration with other supporters.

For your presentation to the editorial board, bring other supporters (i.e. members of the public, policymakers, advocates, etc.) with different backgrounds and expertise to demonstrate the wide support or opposition to the issue at hand, as well as to be better prepared to answer questions on a variety of issues.

The amount of time for your presentation may only be 10-15 minutes, so be prepared to present your case quickly and succinctly.

At the end of your presentation, ask the editorial board if they have any questions or concerns.

Write a short follow-up note or e-mail thanking them for hosting your visit. If an editorial does run, encourage advocates and beneficiaries in your community (when appropriate) to write letters to the editor in support of the editorial.

## Media Campaigns

### Must-Haves for Any Successful Campaign:

1. Clear, measurable goals
2. Extensive knowledge of whom you are trying to reach and what moves them
3. Compelling messages that connect with your target audience

### How Do You Ensure These Three Core Components Are at the Center of the Campaign?<sup>5</sup>

- Start with systematic planning that is reviewed and then revised.
- Specify what people must do, how to do it, and why.
- Make the case for why action is needed now.
- Match strategy and tactics to your target audience.
- Budget for success.
- Rely on experts when needed.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Fraser P. Seitel, *The Practice of Public Relations*, Prentice Hall, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Strategic Press Information Network, available online at [www.spinproject.org](http://www.spinproject.org).

<sup>3</sup> All About Public Relations, available online at [www.aboutpublicrelations.net](http://www.aboutpublicrelations.net).

<sup>4</sup> From FAIR, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.

<sup>5</sup> Fenton Communications, *Now Hear This: The Nine Laws of Successful Advocacy Communications*, 2001.

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## For more information

Brad Fitch, *Media Relations Handbook for Agencies, Associations, Nonprofits and Congress*, The Capitol Net, 2004.

Strategic Press Information Network at [www.spinproject.org](http://www.spinproject.org).



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