

Media ABC's

Making the news

By Andy Robinson

You've just built a hundred homes for the homeless, and saved a free-flowing river. Okay, I exaggerate. You haven't solved these problems yet, but you're making progress. So why can't you get any news coverage?

If you want the media to pay attention, you must learn to think like a journalist. Study the newspaper, the television news and your local news radio. Why are some stories given prominence while others are ignored altogether? Here are a few keys.



Credit: Impact Visuals

1. Conflict and controversy. Conflict equals struggle, sparks, juicy quotes. Much of our daily news fare is selected on the principle that most people are drawn to a good fight. The better you define the conflicts and controversies inherent in your work, the more media attention you will attract.

2. Timeliness. If your work is perceived to be out of date, journalists won't be interested. On the other hand, if you can "piggyback" on, or react to, a breaking news event, you create a compelling media "handle".

3. Human interest. An alternate approach is the human interest story focusing on people overcoming adversity, quirks of human behavior, or a "local citizen gets national recognition.

Playing the human interest angle means highlighting anyone with a unique story that relates to the work of your group — and incorporating them into your media outreach.

4. News you can use. Over the past twenty years, mainstream journalism has broadened its scope to include features on consumer issues, health, family life, and personal finance. If your group generates information or provide services that

people can use in their daily lives, you should pursue a "news you can use" feature about your organization.

In short, your job is to create handles for the news media to grab. With several media handles, you are more likely to get coverage.

Making friends with the news media

Reporters face the same obstacles as activists: multiple deadlines, inadequate staffing, poor pay. Make life easy for them and you will receive provocative, positive coverage.

1. Before approaching the news media, sit down and write your ideal news article. Show drafts to your colleagues and revise. Use the language of this "ideal article" to sharpen your news releases and interviews. In fact, it's useful to write down your agenda before being interviewed. Prepare answers to likely questions. This will help you control the content of the story.
2. When writing a press release, use quotes. Some will find their way into the news.
3. Build your story around current news items. React to a controversial issue or show how your organization's programs address a current community need.
4. If possible, string your story out over several days to maximize the coverage. Encourage your supporters to write letters to the editor, commenting upon the published article(s) to extend the life of your story.
5. Earn credibility by being accurate and reliable.
6. Respect journalists' time. Know their deadlines; for example, don't call a television anchor an hour before the broadcast. If you need time to present the story, call when it's likely to be slow or request an appointment for a later time.
7. There is no such thing as bad publicity. Even negative stories bring attention to your work. But unless the writer misses the entire point of your organization or project, keep any criticisms over accuracy to yourself.
8. If you must complain, deal directly with the reporter. Don't go to the editor until you've exhausted all opportunities to discuss your concerns with the reporter one-on-one.

9. Thank journalists for their effort with a note or a phone call.

How to write a news release

News or press releases are the raw ingredients of the news. It has been estimated that up to 80% of the stories in a typical daily newspaper are “planted:” usually through a news release. An effective release may be reprinted in the paper word for word.

Press releases divide into two categories: “hard news” describing the group’s program or activities (your goal: a detailed feature story), and “calendar” items promoting an upcoming event (goal: a feature story and/or calendar coverage).

Concentrate on the journalist’s five Ws: who, what, when, where, and why. If you can squeeze it in, make room for how, too. The basic format should include:

1. Contact name(s) and phone number(s) in the upper right corner. Give them someone to call for more information.
2. Release date. Usually, you will mark it “For Immediate Release” on the left side, with the date on the right. If the information is confidential and you don’t want it used until a future date, you can indicate this by stating “Hold until release date,” but be aware that journalists will not always respect your wishes.
3. Title: short, snappy, and to the point. 4. First paragraph: the basic information in a simple, clear, and logical way. Put the date, time, and place of events up front. For a hard news release, summarize the information in the first few sentences to grab the reader’s attention.
5. The body: relevant details. If you’re staging a rally, say why. For hard news or a human interest story provide at least one good quote from a relevant authority. Include a one-paragraph description of your group and its goals.
6. Last paragraph: restate relevant details and phone numbers they can call for more information. It is customary to end the release with either “-30-” or “# # #”.

Most news releases should be limited to one page, double-spaced. If you have a hard news release with lots of interesting details, extra pages are alright. Put “(more)” on the bottom of each page and restate your title, with a page number, on the upper right-hand corner of each succeeding page.

When preparing your distribution list, include multiple reporters and editors at major papers and television stations.

Don’t forget the “alternative” media: weekly/suburban/rural newspapers, church bulletins, newsletters, alumni magazines, community radio stations, community access cable TV, professional and specialty journals, etc. The smaller news outlets are always looking for copy. If you choose carefully, you can use them to effectively reach your best audience.

If available, include black and white glossy photos (3” x 5” or larger) for newspapers; color slides for magazines. Good photos will always improve your coverage.

Always be aware of deadlines. Some monthly or quarterly magazines want press releases 4-6 months in advance. Most weeklies require copy ten days to two weeks in advance. Radio stations need public service announcements at least two weeks before the first air date, which should be 3-4 weeks before your event. Many groups now distribute their news releases by fax or e-mail, which is handy for late-breaking stories.

To improve your odds of coverage, send two rounds of news releases: the first batch 3-4 weeks before deadline, the second a week before. Follow the first round with as many phone calls as you can make. Ask: Did you receive our news release? Do you plan to run a story? When? Would you like to schedule an interview? Do you need a photo? These follow-up calls make a critical difference, so budget the time to make them.

Andy Robinson is a trainer and consultant in Tucson, Arizona. His book, *Grassroots Grants: An Activist’s Guide to Proposal Writing*, is available from Western States Center; see *Catalyst insert*.

