

MEDIA ADVOCAY TIPS

Media advocacy is often an important component in campaigns to protect charitable assets in conversions. Follow these steps to ensure that you use a media strategy to advance your policy goals, rather than the other way around. Remember -- without a clearly drafted conversion law on your side, and without big money for lobbying, the news media may sometimes be the best tool in your campaign.

- Review your policy objectives
- Set specific media objectives to pursue those policy objectives. Being the local expert visible in the media reinforces your credibility on the issue. This may be its own objective.
- Re-assess the impact of your media work during the course of the campaign.

After you've assessed ways in which media advocacy could assist your campaign, take the following steps to build the foundation for your media advocacy:

Identify your target audience(s)

Before writing a press release, holding a press conference or giving an interview, consider who you are trying to reach.

- Are you trying to educate reporters who regularly cover your issues ("heat" reporters) so they will be interested in the story in the first place or be better prepared for future stories on the issue?
- Are you trying to influence stakeholders who may be sympathetic?
- Are you trying to encourage media editorials promoting your policies, which in turn influence the policy-makers?
- Are you trying to encourage an Attorney General to take an action?
- Are you trying to educate the public and mobilize them?
- Are you trying to influence the context in which a Legislature may vote?

Also consider the natural audience of each type of media -- the local public radio talk show has a different audience than the hot-talk station; evening TV news has a different audience than the morning paper, etc,

Identify the Media

- Monitor the media. Become familiar with styles of and topics covered.
- Develop a media list: identify key reporters, editors, producers, assignment editors, beat reporters, editorial writers in your area.
- Make a list, preferably in a computer database, and update it frequently. Include name, title, beat, phone number, fax, address.
- Make sure to seek contacts at the following media outlets: major daily newspapers; TV network affiliates; cable TV stations, local public access stations; radio news programs and interview shows; trade and specialty press (health, business); neighborhood press; alternative weekly newspapers, who often do in-depth investigative pieces.

Cultivate relationships: be friendly and helpful; be a good source of reliable information; follow-up with promised material; offer accurate referrals.

Identify the news in your campaign. Look for it, or make it happen.

Is there a controversy? Injustice? Milestone or "first-ever"? Legal action? Official response? A report released? Other documents newly available? A new campaign to announce? Celebrity involvement?

One or more of the above may be in play at any given time. One of these (virtually) **MUST** be in existence for news coverage. A statement is not news. A statement containing or responding to one of the above **MAY** be news.

In conversion media work, controversy has sometimes swirled around the involvement of public officials or the stock transactions and "golden parachutes" offered to some board members. These controversies often change the debate.

Make sure to localize & personalize.

Identify the Messages -- in your campaign, and in each item of news.

Shape the news identified above into three or four concise, key messages, keeping your target audience(s) in mind.

Ask yourself what you would like to see a headline say for the story you are trying to pitch. What is the one, very simple statement that you want readers/listeners/viewers to learn and remember?

Know this message and repeat it throughout all press releases, interviews and comments made.

Promote the News.

What's the best way to advance your news and messages and reach your audience through the media? Standard methods include the following: press releases, press conferences, staged events, direct pitches to targeted media, editorials in key papers, letters to the editor and op-eds.

Press Releases

Press releases are good ways to get news out to a number of different types of media at once. They are very useful in getting out the word for breaking news.

- Press releases include the who, what, when, where, and why of the news you've already identified. One or two pages at most.
- In addition to the five Ws," press releases must include quotes that are QUOTABLE. (You may say something that is completely accurate, but absolutely not quotable. Be accurate AND quotable.)
- Summarize the issues and write the press release just as if it were going to be printed directly in a newspaper. It won't be printed verbatim, but a well-written press release assists reporters with the basics.
- Be factual, but summarize, Put things into a context, but do not recount every piece of history. Remember--you need to interest a reporter or assignment editor before the news in your press release ever reaches the public.
- Send the press release by fax to a targeted media list.
- If more than one organization is involved in a campaign, make sure to coordinate.

Press Conferences

For releasing a report, kicking-off a project or campaign, or having a public official make an announcement, a press conference may be the best method for getting out your message.

- Schedule press conferences for around 10 or 11 a.m., early or mid-week (Tuesday/Wednesday). Avoid Monday, Friday and the weekend.
- To alert the media before the press conference, send a one-page media advisory that briefly highlights the core who, what, when, where, why so that reporters and editors may identify the newsworthiness of the event. Fax these to your media list, including "daybooks" at the Associated Press and United Press International, several days in advance, so that a reporter may be assigned.
- The press conference location should be large enough for reporters, cameras, microphones and participants.
- Hand out press kits that include fact sheets on your group, the issue or campaign, a press release, news clips, statements from allied organizations.
- Keep a log of media who attend, with fax numbers. This helps build your list.
- Press conference speakers should be articulate, telegenic people who are best qualified to speak on the issue; include authorities from other groups who support *your* stand (other health groups, community groups, respected civic groups, academics, public officials, etc.) Consider your audience when choosing speakers. The credibility of a diverse and broad coalition may help make the media take your issues seriously.
- The opening speaker should present news and key messages immediately for reporters on tight deadlines.
- Identify speakers: include list of speakers and their titles in the press kit
- Keep statements *very* brief. Five minutes MAXIMUM.
- Give lots of quotable sound bites (or at least a handful).
- Repeat your main messages -- cameras sometimes arrive late.
- Use visual aids, such as charts, maps, but don't let them dominate the event
- Follow-up with reporters who attend the press conference Try to help shape the coverage of the event, See if they need anything else and what they thought of the facts presented. Make sure they understand the issues and clarify anything that may have been vague.
- Also contact reporters who didn't show up. Send press kits to no-shows as well. Call radio talk shows producers and encourage them to use your news as a topic of debate.

Staged events

Depending on the issue, a public event may be a more appropriate method to move a story. Perhaps a demonstration, a candlelight vigil or a town-hall meeting might help bring the public into the debate.

These are often more interesting for the media to cover than repetitive press conferences or the "same old" talking heads.

- These take more work than a press release, and more than a press conference because they offer lots of room for error. One "off-message" spontaneous comment or action could alter the tone of the event and the way the media reports the story. These need lots of pre-planning and vigilance to keep the event geared toward your policy objectives.
- Have a microphone for speakers and an area where press can set up. Stage the photo opportunity with visuals in mind. What would look good in a photo in the newspaper? On television?
- In one state, labor unions organized a rally outside a hotel where a board vote was taking place, with state legislators inside speaking to the board. Rally participants stuffed Monopoly money into a ballot box as part of the event. It drew widespread media coverage.

Direct pitches

Perhaps the news you're announcing might not be of general interest to many reporters, but you know one who is or might be interested. Consider "pitching" it to that one key reporter, and hope that "pack journalism" (the tendency of media to cover what other media have covered) works in your favor.

- Know what the journalist has written about the issue
- Respect deadlines and schedules -- don't call a reporter a half-hour before his/her daily deadline to talk about a new idea or an event a week away
- Be brief and to the point -- and don't be surprised by a curt response. That doesn't necessarily mean the reporter is not interested, just busy.
- A good pitch contains news; may have a human interest angle; is timely, relevant; has a local angle; a credible, well-spoken spokesperson is available; visuals are available for broadcast media.
- A direct pitch to one or a few key reporters is the tactic you should usually use to first interest reporters in a story. For conversion stories, business reporters may initially see just another corporate transaction. While this experience is lessening as more transactions create national news, *you* need to make sure reporters have the information about how important this story has been in other areas of the country.

Editorials

When you're trying to influence policy makers, editorials in key papers are an important tool. The editorial page staff of a newspaper is frequently very separate from the reporters. This means you need to approach the editorial page directly, even if you've established a relationship with the reporter covering your issue. If you're seeking an editorial about your issue, you can do it by phone/fax or in a meeting with the editorial board.

Put together a good package of materials on your issue, including fact sheets, background materials, news clips and press releases. Write a letter to the editorial page editor, and fax or send the materials to the paper. A day or two later, call the editor to see if they received the materials and if he/she is interested in the issue. Depending on the complexity of the issue, the editor may seek a meeting between the paper's editorial writers and you and several other parties. Prepare for such a meeting seriously, and remember that editorial writers will generally ask tougher, more in-depth questions than some reporters on a tight deadline looking for one quote to fill-in-a-blank. Prepare to rebut the toughest critiques from the opposition. If you have a meeting, have a small committee of people who know the complexities of the issue. Bring an allied regulator, if you have one.

Consider what "the perfect editorial" might say, and make sure your materials can support that editorial.

Letters to the Editor

This is a (sometimes) quick and easy method of getting an opinion in the paper. Put all your thoughts into 200 words, then send it to the paper. Letters must be relevant to stories that appear in the paper, and should be sent soon after a story appears. Encourage allied organizations and individuals to write letters, too. Distribute sample letters to help letter writers

Op-eds

Do you have an issue that isn't generating media coverage? Or do you wish that news stories on an issue dug deeper or broadened the debate? Consider an op-ed. These are the articles written by people who don't work for the newspaper--people like you. Op -eds are frequently written by "experts," organizational leaders and concerned citizens. The topic must be timely, and the article must be of general interest to the newspaper's readership. It allows you to offer your ideas and opinions in a fuller way than most other media opportunities. Call the newspaper and speak to the op-ed editor about your idea to see if he/she is interested. Ask for the general guidelines (word-count, style) and write away.

Interview Tips

In using many of the above methods to get your message out, your spokespeople will be interviewed. Here are some helpful hints.

- Use the KISS principle: Keep it simple, (stupid). Use language that someone unfamiliar with the issues can understand. Don't use legal or health jargon, or abbreviations.
- Stay on message -- keep coming back to your three or four key messages, even if the questions meander onto different topics.
- Practice communicating in 20-second segments. This will force you to be very clear and simple. The average TV soundbite is 15 seconds, and frequently shorted. This is especially helpful for TV and radio, so your comments can be edited and inserted into the story.
- Know exactly what you are going to say before you are interviewed. Regardless of the questions asked, return to your key messages. Prepare talking points to remind yourself of your key messages, especially if you are new to dealing with the media.
- Make your main point in the first ten seconds of every interview. Have it memorized before you speak with the reporter.
- Use simple, clear statistics that are easy to explain. Don't use more than one statistic per sentence. Statistics can be helpful and illustrative, or deadly boring.
- If you don't know an answer, say so. Never "wing it" with facts because it will hurt your credibility. Tell the reporter where he/she can find the answer or have someone else call back.
- Don't make "off the record" remarks. And don't say "no comment" -- unless you're negotiating a hostage crisis, this is just not acceptable to media.
- Avoid getting baited by opponents into getting angry or making personal attacks.
- On TV, how you look is key. Do you seem comfortable, friendly, confident, trustworthy? Dress to be comfortable, authoritative, and confident. Avoid loud patterns or jewelry which will distract viewers. Keep in mind your audience, and the message your image sends.
- Don't let reporters put words in your mouth. Most reporters will not do this, but some may be hostile or attempt to manipulate your message.
- Don't repeat negative phrasing when asked questions with which you disagree. Instead, frame a response in a positive manner. Remember, you don't need to answer every question as it is posed. Respond to the question to advance your message. Find a bridge from the reporter's question to your message.
- Prepare talking points to respond to your adversaries' key points. Don't be caught off guard.
- Caution: if a story becomes controversial and several different news outlets are competing to cover it, everything you say or do may become a story. For example, a reporter may call you up simply to get a quote about something that happened, and then your quote becomes the story. Make sure you say only what you want to see printed in the paper the next day.

Some information in this section is adapted from the following publications: "Strategic Communications for Nonprofits: Media Advocacy-Reframing Public Debate," published by the Benton Foundation; "Media Advocacy" workshop materials, Advocacy Institute West, Milken Educators Conference; "Interview Guidelines," prepared by Abernathy Anderson; and "Media Advocacy Tips," prepared by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.