

COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA

NOTES

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NOTES



Contacts and Websites

Ask the Right Questions


Get the Right Answers


Three Fundamental Questions to Launching a Successful Media Strategy


Asking the right questions is key to developing a successful media strategy. Too often not-for-profit organizations with little or no media experience make fundamental mistakes. They assume too much knowledge on the part of their target audience which includes reporters, or conversely, they flood their audiences with too much detail – the ‘manifesto on a pinhead’ pitfall.

There are three fundamental questions. Make sure the key decision makers in your organization are involved in this first critical stage of analysis.

KEY QUESTIONS

 What do you want to communicate

 Who do you want to reach

 How do you send the message

What do you want to communicate?

Every advocacy organization attempts to become experts in their particular field, often with a great deal of passion, commitment and voluntary time. Media analysis requires stepping back from that in depth knowledge and stepping into the target audience. Remember: the decision to ‘go to the media’ is usually because the message is not being delivered to a broad enough audience. Advocacy organizations are usually formed to shift public opinion and public policy and the media’s influential role is well recognized. The challenge is that ‘business’ issues dominate the media; those involved in social issue advocacy have greater difficulty obtaining media coverage.

The Message

What are the simple facts you need to communicate to influence your audience? Are there facts or issues familiar to your audience that you can use to your advantage? For example, health and nutrition are increasingly making headlines as are the dangers of contaminants. Environmental organizations have successfully combined scientific analysis with visual images and built on heightened consumer awareness of food additives to challenge the safety of farm salmon.

Test your message if possible – create a focus group of those less familiar with the issue. Do certain words inform or inflame?

Don't assume your audience has been following your issue in the papers. The majority of the population do not read a daily paper! On the other hand, if your target audience is business or politicians, they regularly devour newspapers but, are they reading about your issue. Think about it: you read the articles you are interested in or headlines – so you read about agriculture or health; others watch the entertainment pages and glance at the front page.

Who do you want to reach?

Knowing your goal is critical. Whether it is a fundraising endeavour or an effort to raise awareness about your organization's issues so as to secure government action, this is the point where you have to merge your message with the media's need to satisfy its readership.

If the message is about rural agriculture and the target is government, then the message must 'connect' with city dwellers for a major city paper to decide to cover the story. If the message is about raising construction safety standards then it can't be aimed only at construction companies or regulatory building code bureaucrats. The message has to be understood and aimed at say, home owners or apartment dwellers – a broad media audience -- for the media to cover it.

Stop and Analyze for News Content

- Soft news/hard news: Most often soft news is where you have to seek out the media; hard news is when the media comes to your organization. For example several years ago raising awareness for a national childcare program was soft news, the catastrophe of Walkerton, Ontario, water contamination was hard news. Soft news requires considerable strategic planning to capture the media's attention.
- What's new about your news? Will it warrant further investigation or coverage?
- Is your message self-promotion? News is not the classifieds.
- Is your message timely? With 'soft news' timing is especially critical to getting it covered. Is there an event coming up that gives more 'weight' to your story? Is there an election or other major event that could affect the newsworthiness of your issue?
- Is your message interesting?
- Have you done the necessary research, assembled the facts, and are ready for the 'sound bite'?
- If your story is controversial, the media will seek out the opposition. Are you prepared??
- Remember, unlike advertising, you are not guaranteed coverage and you cannot control content.
- National stories often require 'local flavour' or a 'local contact' to get good coverage. If the press conference or your headquarters is in Toronto, do you have a local spokesperson in Winnipeg to assist with a local view point.

How Do You Send the Message: Delivering the News

If you are the medial relations contact for your organization you need to become known as a ‘straight shooter’ not a ‘spin doctor’.

Media relations is not about ‘managing the media’, it’s about developing integrity in a relationship with the media. **Reporters** – the front line staff – have a difficult job as they constantly have to stay on top of current issues and absorb the salient points of new issues. They will challenge your spokespersons and your ‘facts’ – it’s their job. Assignment editors generally read releases and assign reporters to cover the story. Editors review and edit the stories reporters file and ultimately decide what will ‘make the news’. Reporters do not write headlines; others are assigned to that task.

Timing: if your issue is affected by the budget, the week prior to and following the release are important. If not, don’t try to get coverage at this time!



“**Off the Record**” is a well known phrase. There is no such thing as ‘off the record’. Assume all of your comments to the media (and ones that can be heard by the media) are on the record.

The preparation of source material or the media kit can assist the reporter greatly in double-checking facts and getting the story filed on time. If the reporter doesn’t need to call you back to recheck facts, it is a tremendous time-saver for you and the reporter.

Ready to Go Public

Are you really ready? A checklist before issuing a press release:

Media List

Develop a list of key newspaper, magazine, TV, Radio and Newswire reporters and editors. Note which reporters have covered your issue before now if possible. . Assemble street addresses, day and night phone numbers, email and website addresses. Note press deadlines in each case. Review the list annually to make sure phone numbers, email addresses are current.

1. Newspaper Contact: editors of smaller papers or sections (i.e. business editor) of larger papers, reporters who have previously covered your issue.
2. Magazine Contact: editors
3. TV Contact: assignment editors, talk show hosts, reporters connected with your issue. Note where their station is located –the farther they have to send reporters, the more time they must allocate to your story.
4. Radio Contact: news or assignment editors, producers of particular programs.
5. Newswires: (Canadian Press, Broadcast News, Associated Press, Reuters, Bloomberg, Dow Jones, etc) The more specialized business newswires will also watch Canadian Press wire stories. They are focused primarily on fast-breaking and/or national stories but many papers pick up CP stories and edit them.

Media Kit

1. News release.
2. Fact sheets/ short backgrounders about issue and your organization.
3. Participants (if press conference) including titles, contact info.
4. Photos: make sure your have written permission of all those individuals in the photo to use for this purpose. Only use high quality photos – they may not use it but it could help promote the news worthiness of your issue to an editor. Make sure they are labelled and that you have copyright permission if it is a professional work. With new technology, there is the danger that a well-wishing member has sent you an excellent photograph but it has been altered or 'doctored'. A candidate in the 2004 Federal Election left the race because of such an incident.
5. Video footage, if it is broadcast quality can, for a fee, be distributed via satellite as B-footage...background shots but most media prefer to take their own footage if possible or get feed from another media source.
6. Sheet for media contact of your organization including web and email address.



Press Conference

The decision about whether or not to hold a press conference revolves around several considerations. Is your issue strong enough to warrant the news media taking the time to attend? Is your venue close by? For TV, will there be strong visuals (i.e. an environmental problem, or a meeting)? If you are going to offer a “photo op” for the press to enter a meeting, make sure you have the permission of the participants.

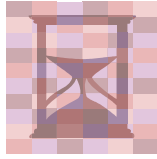
Make sure you visit your venue:

Does it have enough room for print reports and cameras?

Does it have a lighting problem (large windows) for cameras?

Do you have audio microphones and preferably (but not necessary) a feed box for clean audio feed? If you are not familiar with this type of equipment make sure you have a technician to assist. If it is a national story you may want a phone hook-up through a polycom set up so that reporters from across the country can listen to the press conference and ask questions. Large urban centre hotels can assist with arrangements that must be done well in advance.

Are your spokespersons relaxed, articulate, and prepared for ‘facing’ the media in this way? Make sure you don’t have too many spokespersons or the message will be lost. See also the section on the ‘press interview’ below.

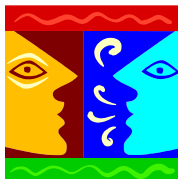


Timing

If you have decided your issue is newsworthy then the specific decision of am or pm release, which day of the week must take in the availability of your spokespersons for 'day of' event and follow-up, deadlines, and what else might be happening that day that could bump your news item. Avoid the TGIF blues if possible or choose Friday morning. Reporters may be finishing up stories for Saturday features etc. Avoid weekends if possible – skeleton crews.

Phone follow-up to the media after releasing the press release is a judgement call – some appreciate it, some don't. It might give you an idea if there is any interest in your story.

If it is an event or press conference in the future the release should be issued either one or two days before the event to allow assignment desks to schedule staff. If the release goes out on a Friday for a Monday event, send out a reminder early Monday morning.



It's All in the Message and the Messenger

With all communication, **credibility** is important. Make sure your spokespersons are well acquainted with the issue. Watch for 'danger words' that can undermine the credibility of your message: 'smallest, largest, millions', etc. Avoid jargon. Manipulate at your peril – the "calling wolf" scenario where predictions are made that just don't fit the facts.

The Press Release:

The sample below is from a 'hard' news story. All releases should have a 'hook' – an angle that grabs attention. Releases must contain the 5W's: who, what, when, why and where in the first paragraph. The following paragraphs give additional information and quotes. Stay within one to one and one-half pages. Always use the third person.

The release is to attract attention of the media. The headline will not be used by the media but the quotes may be used if they deem the source of the release to be very reliable. The release is meant to trigger the assignment of a reporter to the story.

Sample:

For Immediate Release

LOGO

May 28, 2004

CAW and Air Canada Still Far Apart

Headline

Dateline and Lead

(Toronto) After an intense day following Air Canada's early morning "final offer", the CAW and the company are still talking at Toronto's Hilton Hotel but they remain far apart. The CAW is maintaining that it only owes \$18 million to live up to the contract that was signed last year at this time. The company insists that at least \$45 million in concessions must be obtained.

Buzz Hargrove, CAW president along with Sari Sairanen, CAW Local 2002 president and Gary Fane, CAW Transport Director emerged from meetings with the company late today to reaffirm their commitment to stay at the talks.

Hargrove said, "We're not meeting some number that someone has pulled out of the air...there has to be some logic...Air Canada will fly next week...we believe our numbers are fair and accurate and we're working hard to convince the company. We're not going to accept that our members have to give up \$10,000 for this airline to fly."

In spite of the gap between the CAW and the company, the company has agreed to meet the union again this evening.

-30-

Signifies end of story

Contact: Jane Armstrong, CAW Communications 416.409.0106

Media Advisory or Alert:

This is used when a story is unfolding or to alert the media about an event or a photo opportunity.

Media Advisory for CAW National Distribution

May 19, 2004

CAW/ Air Canada Media Update

(Toronto) The CAW will brief the media on the latest development in the talks with Air Canada at 3 pm EST in the Dockside II room of the Westin Harbour Castle Hotel in Toronto.

-30-

Contact: Jane Armstrong 416.409.0106

Website:

Be sure to post press releases on your website for your own membership as well as for media. As soon as possible add any materials that are in your media kit. Remember to have your website address on all information including press releases.

The Day Of...

- Media relations person should arrive at venue if it is a press conference an hour before the scheduled time to check set-up, audio system and to introduce themselves to the media.
- Keep media informed if you anticipate a delay in the start time of the press conference.

- Don't forget the common courtesy of providing some refreshments for media
- If it is a press conference or event allow sufficient time for one-on-one interviews following the press conference.
- Make sure you are ready for phone follow-up from the media. Respond to calls within an hour according to deadline times but take note of the relative importance – national vs local -- if time is tight.

The Press Interview:

- **Prepare ahead of time and remember the myth of 'off the record'.**
- Have all reference materials on hand.
- Credibility comes from conveying a sense of sincerity and commitment. Avoid 'no comment' responses. If the spokesperson is well prepared there will be no surprises and the tough questions will have been anticipated.
- Listen carefully to the question. Often reporters will ask the same question in a different way. Responses should be factual and delivered without exaggeration and in an appropriate tone – as relaxed as the situation calls for.
- Speak slowly, for TV especially remember to have a slight pause every sentence or two.
- Clothing should be appropriate for the event. If TV is present don't wear bright white or strong patterns such as stripes. The focus will shift from the message to the messenger!
- Don't worry – if you make a factual error you can correct it, but don't tell the media how to write their story or what not to report.

Crisis Management

It is too late if the crisis – for example, mismanagement of funds or theft – descends and you don't have a plan.

Try to imagine a 'worst case' scenario and develop a plan – hopefully you'll not need it .

-know who will be in charge of the communications

-get the facts, develop the response, organize the method of delivery and issue the response as quickly as possible. Expect the media to ask probing questions of how could this situation occur and what is your organization going to do immediately to deal with the crisis.

Media Monitoring and Evaluation

If the coverage warrants the cost agencies such as Bowdens Media Monitoring can obtain both copies of newspaper articles and television clips for your organization if you request them immediately following your event. You may want to contact them ahead of time to set up an account and understand what they can provide.

You'll want to note which media carried your story, note the differences in coverage, what "sound bites" and visuals were used, evaluate the chaos if any in returning media calls, and check with your membership or members of your target audience to evaluate how the message was received.

DESIGN CUSTOMIZATION

