



Getting Your Message Out

Media Relations for
Public Interest Advocacy

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Our goal is to assist not-for-profit organizations and community groups to
get their message out through the effective use of media.

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Introduction

Media relations is an important part of your organization's overall communications and public relations plan. Often referred to as 'earned media', news or editorial coverage provides invaluable credibility to your organization or issue. While it is easy to think of this coverage as 'free' it is important to remember that it takes planning, skills and follow-through to get your message out successfully and repeated accurately. Effective media relations specialists spend many hours cultivating relationships with media outlets, writing materials and discovering the best strategies for their markets.

Important Points to Remember

- The media is not your audience.
- Earned media gives you credibility.
- Getting your message out requires planning.

Understanding How the Media Works

Deadlines

- Deadlines matter!
- No matter how good your story is you must understand when the media needs it.

Trends

- News is business (read public opinion polls)
- What types of stories are being covered?

Story Meetings

- Happen in the morning
- Decisions are made by editors, assignment editors and news directors

Newsworthiness

- *"Tell me something new about something I care about."*
Barbara Frum

Three Types of Journalism

Opinion

- Columnists
- Talk show hosts
- Editorial page
- Opinion / opposite the editorial
- Cartoons

News

- Reporters
- Breaking news
- Newswires

Features

- Reporters
- Columnists
- Series
- Current events
- In-depth

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Getting started

Here are a few questions to ask before you get started.

Is it newsworthy?

- Is it a new story?
- Does it offer a new perspective on an ongoing story?
- Is my organization doing something different?
- Are there developments about my issue?
- Is the timing right?

Will our audience be interested?

- Will it be compelling to our audience?
- Will it be interesting to them?
- Do we have the right messenger or spokesperson?

Are we prepared?

- Do we need to develop fact sheets or backgrounders? (most of the time – YES!)
- Is our spokesperson prepared and available for interviews?
- Is the timing right?

How to Reach the Media

Media Advisory

A media advisory tells reporters and editors about a newsworthy event or activity that has *not* happened yet. The advisory should give enough information about the event or release to pique interest but so much that a story could be written.

Media advisories are sent out several days in advance of media conferences, media events, the release of important information (studies, surveys, etc). It is advisable to also send out the advisory again early on the day of the event.

Here is an example of a media advisory that generated significant media coverage.



Media Advisory

Attention: Assignment editors – photo opportunity

October 18, 2006

What happens to the homeless during an extreme weather occurrence?

Members of the media are cordially invited to attend an informational session during Homelessness Awareness Week. This is an excellent photo opportunity.

**When: Thursday, October 19th
9:30 to 11:00 am**

**Where: First Baptist Church
969 Burrard St
Vancouver**

The Extreme Weather Response is an emergency response to prevent harm to homeless people resulting from extreme winter weather. It provides extra shelter spaces for homeless people during periods of extreme winter weather (as defined by each community).

The Greater Vancouver Cold/Wet Weather Strategy (CWWS) is a regional network of organizations working to meet local shelter needs during the winter, from October to April. The CWWS initiated the Extreme Weather Response in 2002, following two years of developing a suitable model for extreme weather response.

Funding for the Extreme Weather Response Spaces comes from:

- BC Housing
- National Homelessness Initiative in partnership with the Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, and the Aboriginal Homelessness Steering Committee
- Other, including municipalities, health authorities, and substantial gifts in kind through volunteerism

The Extreme Weather Response Shelter program is a crisis response, not intended as a substitute for year-round and Cold/Wet Weather shelters or for long-term affordable housing.

Through this response, it is anticipated approximately 400 additional shelter spaces from seven EWR plans will be in place covering 11 Greater Vancouver municipalities.

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For more information please call XXX at XXX

Media or News Release

A media release is a written document that provides details about the story you think is newsworthy. Media releases are formula writing that follow a specific format. Each paragraph is designed to deliver different information. (see example).

A few things you should consider about media releases.

Timing

- News releases must be sent early in the day (between 8:00 – 9:00 AM) to ensure your event or issue is on the assignment editor’s schedule. Remember – timing is important!

Distribution

- You can hire a media distribution service to ensure your release is faxing and e-mailed to the right organizations. Many services will allow you to customize the list to target the type of journalist you are trying to reach (e.g.: business, citynews, health, national etc.) Even if you use a distribution service you will still need to cultivate your own list to follow-up. Distribution services will not give you their lists.
- Many organizations develop their own customized media list. If not you can purchase lists although they are often expensive.
- Media release can be e-mailed and faxed. A tip about sending media releases electronically: always include the text in the body of the e-mail – never send it as an attachment. Most media outlets have a policy to not open attachments unless the document has been requested.
- Don’t assume that reporters will see your release. Always follow up with a phone call to ensure your release has been read. If you already have a relationship with a reporter, contact that person directly.

Writing Style

- Use active sentence structure (noun before verb)
- Make sure your headline captures the story
- Make the lede compelling
- Imagine your release being read verbatim on the news (it happens!) and write in plain language avoiding jargon and complex sentence structures.

Here is a media release template.

Media Release

Headline Here: Think of this as a one sentence synopsis of your story.

For Immediate Release

Date Here

(City Location Here) – The Lede: This first paragraph should describe the who, what, why and when of your story. This is the paragraph that hooks the reporter/editor. If you interest them here, they'll keep reading.

Second Paragraph – In this paragraph you can provide interesting facts or context for your story. In this case facts about homelessness in your area would be appropriate.

Third Paragraph – This paragraph often contains a quote from one of your spokespeople. The quote is a good way to communicate your key message. The quote should be very clear and not likely to be misinterpreted or taken out of context. Example: “The increase in homelessness has become a crisis – it’s important that we all work together to end homelessness.” commented Ms. Brown, Chair of the local task force.

Fourth and Fifth Paragraphs – You can convey more detail or background information. In the case of an event make sure to give all the important information.

You can also include website addresses to direct journalists to reports or more information.

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Closing – For additional information or interview please contact:

Always provide contact information including phone and cell numbers.

(Note: your contact person must be available throughout the day for reporters to call.)

Backgrounders

Backgrounders are documents that accompany media releases that give the journalist context about your organization or issue. Backgrounders can be written in a narrative style or point form.

For example, the Canadian Cancer Society provides backgrounders to each of their issue areas (breast cancer, smoking etc.) In this instance the Cancer Society uses point form.

Backgrounders should be provided about organizations, report findings, or the history of an area or problem.

Pitching or Media Calls

Pitching (or a media call) is a call to ensure that editors and journalists have received your release and to interest them in your story. Think of a ‘pitch’ as a negotiation where you want them to say yes!

Your goal is to be an asset to the editor or journalist. This is where your initial research comes into play. What does this outlet care about? Are they focused on environmental or health stories? Can you tie your story into their interest? What other stories are they working on?

Tips

- Be thick-skinned – particularly with assignment editors – they get hundreds of releases every day!
- Think strategically about how to make them care about your story.
- Ask if you can provide additional information.

Media Kits and Media Rooms

A media kit is an important tool in media relations. A media room is a place on your website where you post the same information contained in your media kit. As a rule, a media kit should include:

- Current media releases
- Backgrounder
- Biographies of speakers or spokespeople
- Other relevant materials i.e.: studies, reports, important (public) documents
- Photos (digital is preferred) of speakers or background interest

Other items to consider:

- Timelines
- Organizational profile
- Video B-roll

Providing this information to journalists makes their job easier and increases the chances that your message will get out.

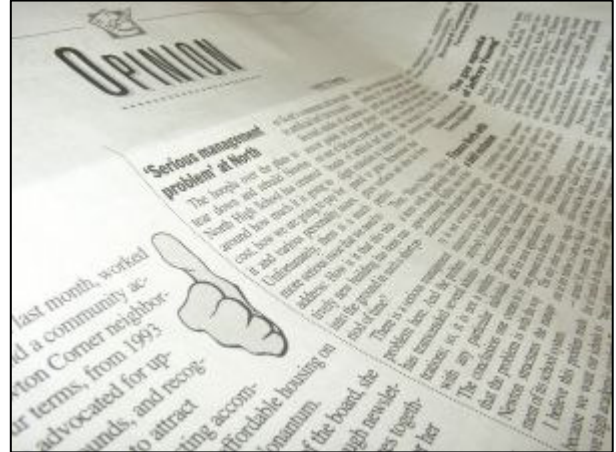
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About Op Eds

The term “op ed” is short for ‘opposite the editorial’ or ‘opinion editorial’. It is an opinion or commentary article that is published opposite the editorial page in most newspapers. Anyone can submit an op ed to a newspaper.

Tips

- Call in advance and speak to the editorial page editor ask to reserve space for an op ed. Editors like to publish op eds that comment on current, newsworthy issues.
- Generally, op eds are 600 to 800 words in length. Some can be as little as 200 or 300 words. Check with the editor when you call to ask for space. Make sure your article is within the word count required – you don’t want to give the editor a reason to edit your piece.
- Op eds are usually signed by someone who has credibility or name recognition in relation to the particular issue. They are frequently ghost written.
- Op eds, like press releases, often use a formula writing approach. As a rule, your op ed should cover the following points:
 - Identify the problem – you can do this through a story or facts. We find that a story is the best way to capture people’s interest.
 - Connect the problem to a larger trend (if appropriate)
 - Provide local detail – statistics and facts.
 - Describe solutions – tell people about what will solve the problem.
 - Consider including a call to action – ask readers to support something that will help solve the problem.
 - End on a personal note. Consider going back to the first paragraph and wrapping up your story.
- Other writing tips: avoid jargon and use active sentence structure.



Interview Strategies

Tips

- Be prepared. Most interviews are not long so decide on your top 3 to 5 messages and make sure to use them.
- Think of the questions you are most afraid to be asked and rehearse your response.
- Practice ‘bridging’ techniques in advance: answer the reporter’s question by ‘bridging’ back to your message. Example: “That’s an interesting question but I think we really need to look at the issue from an XYZ perspective.”
- Before you begin, ask the reporter if they have previously covered your issue. The answer may give you a sense of what type of questions you’ll be asked.
- Remember, the media is not your audience. The public is your audience. Think about what you want the public to understand about the issue.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms – both jargon and acronyms mean almost nothing to the general public and can be off-putting.
- If you are asked a negative sounding question by a reporter, avoid repeating the question in your answer. Begin your answer with a complete sentence that conveys *your* message about the issue.
- Reporters from various media outlets have different needs. Radio interviews for news are often short so get to your important points quickly. TV reporters like to have interesting visual backgrounds so think about where you would like to be interviewed. Again, TV interviews are often quick – get to the point.
- Talk in short sentences and don’t rush. Pausing between statements helps the interviewer edit the story later and reduces the chance of your statements being taken out of context.
- Be compelling and concise.
- Focus on solutions rather than just identifying the problem.
- Never guess or make up an answer. If you don’t know the answer, say so, or refer the reporter to someone who does.



- Sometimes it is possible to retake an answer if you are unhappy with your comment. If you are not 'live' on the air you can ask the reporter if you can answer the question again.
- At the end of the interview, thank the reporter and ask if you can provide more information. Offer your business card and ask for theirs.

Letters to the Editor

Organizing your supporters to write letters to the editor can be an effective way to get your message out. It also demonstrates that the public (your letter writers) care about your issue or topic. This demonstration of interest may lead the newspaper to cover your issue in greater detail.

Tips

- Let supporters know about key dates in advance so they can be prepared to respond to news or editorial stories.
- Remember that editors select letters that respond to something that was in their paper. Generally, editors do not publish letters that pertain to personal disagreements or to items that did not appear in the paper.
- Remind letter writers to keep their letters to the maximum word count allowed. Editors will not publish longer letters or will edit them to fit. Each paper has a different policy so do your research.

Editorial Meetings

An editorial board meeting is a meeting you request to present information about your organization or issue to senior editorial staff at a newspaper or other media outlet. In the television and radio world you would ask to meet with news directors.

This meeting is an opportunity for you to educate senior staff about the importance of your organization, issue or message in a direct fashion. You may want to convene a meeting of this type if you feel your organization or issue has been misrepresented or ignored.

In most instances the news outlet will ask you to provide an agenda and list of participants (3 to 5). Often, it takes weeks before this meeting occurs so think ahead with respect to your overall media relations strategy.

Be prepared with materials to leave and chose speakers prepared to address a specific area.

Media Events

An event designed to get media attention – often TV media. Media events can be protests, rallies, or events with costumes.

Media events can be helpful to draw attention to ‘soft stories’; stories that are not breaking news. For example, a hospital might hold a media event when opening a new facility or program. An environmental group may generate coverage by dressing up as wildlife to promote a new initiative.

Media events are almost always designed to include visuals as visuals are what TV cameras and print photographers are looking for. Make sure you target the right media for the right event. In entertainment promotion, ‘about town’ columnists will usually show up at events and want photos of the glamorous and famous participants. Media events are a one way to capitalize on celebrity champions.

Depending on your issue, the media often want personal stories when they attend events.

Tips

- Identify who will speak on behalf of your committee or organization in advance and direct reporters to those people.
- Designate someone to meet and greet reporters and to give guidance about who is available for interviews.

Public Service Announcements

PSAs as they are also known are free scripted advertising you create and then offer to radio, television stations and newspapers. You often hear PSAs about health related issues. TV and radio PSAs can also be posted to websites and places like U-tube.

In some instances you can provide text to the outlet and they will use their own people to make your announcement. In other cases you may want to record the PSA yourself and give it to TV and radio stations. The one downside to this free advertising is that you do not have control about when or how often the PSAs are broadcast.

Examples:

To listen to the **radio** PSAs that were created for Homelessness Awareness Week, go to www.stophomelessness.com

To see the **television** PSAs that were created for the Make Poverty History Campaign, visit: www.makepovertyhistory.org and watch the ‘Click’ PSAs.

Here is an example of a **print** PSA that appeared on the CBC website:

Art Gallery of Greater Victoria

Baroque Masterworks from the National Gallery of Canada
December 15, 2006 to February 25, 2007

This exhibition provides a unique opportunity for Canadians to see 12 precious Baroque masterwork paintings from the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada by the likes of Peter Paul Rubens, Rembrandt van Rijn, and Nicholas Poussin. Baroque Masterworks from the National Gallery of Canada features Italian, French, Spanish, Dutch and Flemish paintings dating from 1600 to 1750 arising from different social, political and religious climates.

Media Monitoring

Monitoring your media coverage is an important follow-up to a campaign and an on-going activity for any organization. There are a number of media monitoring organizations that can track the coverage of your issue and organization.

Here are a few popular organizations:

Infomart

“FPinfomart.ca is Canada's largest provider of media monitoring and corporate information, including more than 275 news sources from coast to coast, plus the authoritative company data for which the Financial Post DataGroup is renowned.”

<http://www.fpinformart.ca/>

Bowdens

“Whether you wish to track your media coverage, analyze your competition, or follow trends that affect your industry, Bowdens simply is the fastest and most comprehensive monitoring choice around. While you can opt to have your coverage delivered by mail, you can now also conveniently receive all of your media exposure each day right onto your desktop via the Media Monitoring Module.”

<http://www.bowdens.com/monitor/monitorcoverage.htm>

CNW Group - MediaVantage

“MediaVantage Media Monitoring automatically and continuously scans thousands of news sources, performs media-wide keyword searches and delivers concise, relevant results to a single interface in a uniform format. The information is easily integrated and is easy to organize.”

<http://www.newswire.ca/en/content/basic/93.cgi#monitor1>

CCNMatthews

CCNMatthews' monitoring services help you learn what's being said about your organization, industry or competitors.

- * Follow industry trends
- * Gauge investor sentiment
- * Track the competition
- * Receive news releases as they break

<http://www.ccnmatthews.com/news/releases/monitoring.jsp>

Google News

“Google News gathers stories from more than 4,500 English-language news sources worldwide, and automatically arranges them to present the most relevant news first. Topics are updated every 15 minutes, so you're likely to see new stories each time you check the page. Pick the item that interests you and you'll go directly to the site which published that story.” <http://news.google.ca/news?ned=ca>

BC's Print Media Market

Here are recent (2006) statistics on print readership in BC. Ratings are generated from 'most read' in the previous three days.

