



**CITIZENS
GUIDE TO
THE MEDIA**

INTRODUCTION

Working with the press and generating media attention for your project, activity, or event can be both an asset in ensuring the success of your proposal and a great learning experience.

Good media coverage is an excellent way to gain support for a proposal before a local government power center because of its ability to draw public attention to your issue and proposed solution. Good press coverage of your proposal will often encourage your local officials to respond, hopefully favorably, as they will often be asked to comment on local initiatives.

Depending on your activities, members of the press may contact you directly for comments and opinions on stories that are already in progress. However, it is often the case that many civic-related projects occur on a scale wherein members of the press do not learn of their happenings. It is therefore necessary to proactively pursue media attention by several different means, most of which are explained throughout this guide. Opinion writing, holding press conferences, and creating informational publications are all means of disseminating information to the general public and adding to the potential success of your projects and programs.

This guide provides some general suggestions for utilizing the different methods and means of media involvement available to citizens to support their civic engagement activities.

The following topics are covered in this handbook:

- Creating a Media Strategy
- Organizing a Press Conference
- Media Advisories and Releases
- Opinion Writing: Letters to the Editor, Editorials, and Op-Eds
- The Art of Good Interviews
- Writing for the Web

References to press and media in this handbook include, print media, such as newspapers, journals, magazines, weekly and monthly publications; online news sites, such as hyperlocal community news sites and web-based publications; television; and radio.

CREATING A MEDIA STRATEGY

Good media relations and coverage are the result of a comprehensive and well-planned media strategy. Before contacting the media and launching a publicity campaign, you will want to create a media plan that takes into account the following considerations:

For what purpose do you wish to gain media attention, i.e. what is your goal?

Your media goal may be synonymous with your organization's mission statement or may simply be complimentary to the specific project on which you are working. This objective should be clear, concise, and action oriented. For example, your goal in contacting the press may be "to raise public awareness about an environmental issue in my town" or to "announce a citywide garage sale to benefit the local food bank."

What are the goals and desired outcomes of media coverage?

You will want to determine how important media attention is to the effectiveness and success of your project. This will determine the extensiveness of your media campaign and help to shape the different roles and responsibilities for which each member of the project team or organization is accountable. If your activities are focused on disseminating information to the public through educational and outreach initiatives, you will want to allocate much more time towards publicity than if your activities are mainly service based and you mainly wish to increase public awareness of services offered. The desired outcomes of your media strategy should be proportional, or preferably greater

greater than, the amount of resources and inputs needed to carry out the strategy. Having clear expected outcomes will help to create a more efficient and effective media campaign.

Who is your target audience?

How you present your information will depend mainly on who your main audience is and whom you wish to reach. For instance, you may wish to highlight different aspects of your initiative for a youth audience than you would for an older audience; dissimilar demographic groups will find it easier to relate to different information or aspects of a project or event.

How will you present your message?

This question will take into account both the voice or image you wish to place on your organization or project, as well as which media outlets you will seek coverage from. The media market, readership, and reputation of a media outlet may all play a part in how your message will be relayed to the public. It is therefore important to research media outlets before submitting press announcements and releases to fully understand how others will view your event or organization, based on the abovementioned factors.

What resources are available to you?

The answer to this question will often shape the answers to the above questions. Your media and publicity strategy will often depend on what resources are available to effectively carry out your plan. Important resources to consider include time, manpower, funding, method of disseminating information, and relationships with press contacts.

When designing your press plan, it may be to your benefit to draw up a “resource budget,” which looks like a financial budget but takes into account only the inputs and outputs available and needed to launch a successful publicity campaign. This sheet may also take into account both current and projected resources upon which a small publicity campaign may expand based on the success of past and expected media coverage.

ORGANIZING A PRESS CONFERENCE

A press conference is a gathering, usually brief (between 15-30 minutes), of members of the press to present newsworthy information for release to the general public through media outlets.

Media conferences are especially helpful for:

- ✓ Announcing a proposal, initiative, campaign, or project
- ✓ Releasing the results of study supporting your advocacy activities
- ✓ Reporting significant community, political, or governmental support for your issue or activity
- ✓ Informing the public about major developments concerning your initiative, such as the adoption of your proposal by a local government center.

To organize a successful press conference, we recommend following the step-by-step checklist below.

2-3 weeks in advance

Choose the date, time, and location of the press conference

Confirm all of the logistical details for the press conference, including which members of your project or organization will be present and/or giving comments during the conference. The more organized and concrete the details of your press conference, the more professional your event will be.

3-4 days in advance

Draft a media advisory to be distributed to local media outlets

Media advisories and releases are explained in greater detail in the next section. This is the first point of formal contact to be made with members of the press. Your advisory should be sent to the members of the press invited to the conference no later than 2-3 business days before the scheduled press conference.

2-3 days in advance

Contact the community reporter for the media outlets you wish to invite

Make sure the reporter you contact covers the relevant geographic area of the conference's subject. For instance, if the subject of your press conference pertains to your hometown, make sure the reporter or press representative covers your community's news. This will increase the likelihood that he or she will be interested in covering your story and attending the press conference.

Prepare talking points

In preparation for the press conference, talking points should be prepared for each person who will be speaking with the press. Talking points help to remind an interviewee of the topics they wish to cover and the responses they wish to give to particular questions that may be asked during an interview.

1 day in advance

Meet with project/organization members to “prep” for the conference

A “mock conference” is a good way to prepare for the actual press conference, giving participants time to fine tune their responses and think about how they wish to present information to the general public. Be sure to think about speaking order, seating arrangements, dress, and how to open and close the conference in addition to simulating the conference with questions and topics you foresee arising during the press conference.

Prepare handouts for the press

To ensure factual representation of your activity and/or organization in the printed, audio, visual, or internet materials that may result from the press conference, you may wish to prepare materials to give to members of the press upon their arrival at the conference.

Some recommendations include:

- ✓ Any printed materials that will be published in connection with the activity or event, including reports, flyers, advertisements, books or journals, etc.
- ✓ The names (with correct spelling) and titles of each person from your organization or additional collaborators that will be participating in the press conference.

Immediately after the press conference

Submit a media release to the general public

After the press conference, send your press release to members of the media who did not attend. Some reporters may still be interested in covering the story or event *ex post facto*.

MEDIA ADVISORIES AND RELEASES

Media advisories and releases are printed announcements distributed to print, radio, television, or web media to generate publicity for a company or organization's events and activities.

A **Media Advisory** is used primarily used to announce a press conference or as an invitation to members of the press for events and activities. This document tells at least 4 of the 5 "W's" of a good story - *who, what, where, when*, and sometimes *why* - in brief form and can also be printed as an invitation or event listing for the public. Media advisories are especially useful if members of the press are expected to attend the event and will have the opportunity to get more detailed information at that time, including interviews with key players and attendees. A media advisory is also good for posting on community boards, websites and forums, and event listings in daily and weekly newspapers.

A **Media Release** is a more descriptive document, written in the style of a news article, to attract the attention or encourage the attendance of members of the press to an event or activity. It is used to summarize activities at which the press is not normally present or as a document which, with minor amendments, may be changed into an article for print media. Media releases are particularly appropriate for distribution to print media outlets or for organizational publications and newsletters.

For the most part, media releases are not exercises in creative writing – there is a standard form that members of the press prefer to receive. Using the customary

elements of a media release will better ensure the publication of your announcement.

Both media advisories and releases should include the following information:

- ✓ The name of the organization, group, or entity submitting the media release
- ✓ An eye-catching, descriptive title that explains the activity being promoted
- ✓ Date of the release
- ✓ Name and contact of a person that will take additional requests for information
- ✓ Event details including venue, time, date, admission costs, etc.

In addition to the above items, a media release should include the following:

- ✓ A brief explanation or background on the group or organization hosting the event
- ✓ Quotes from persons directly involved in the project on why the activity or event is being held
- ✓ Quotes from people affected by or expected to participate in the event on why this event is significant

OPINION WRITING: LETTERS TO THE EDITORS, EDITORIALS, AND OP-EDS

Opinion writing is an important form of civic exercise, particularly in the advocacy of specific issues and policies. While the reporting of news and facts is at the heart of any journalistic publication, many media outlets offer space for guest columns, blogs, and letters to the editor. Most publications, whether in print or online, offer opinion pages that accept public submissions.

An **editorial** is an article giving opinions or perspectives, usually authored and endorsed by the publication's editorial staff. These editorials often represent the official stance of the publication on current events and issues.

An **op-ed** is an opinion piece written by a reader on a topic that is relevant to the newspaper's audience. Although opinion pieces do not have the same impact as editorials, they are an excellent way to reach community members and offer the public additional insight into an issue or event. Op-eds usually have a limit of approximately 500—800 words depending on the publication.

A letter to the editor is a response piece written by one of the publication's readers. These letters are often in response to an article having previously appeared in an earlier edition of the publication and often defend or oppose the arguments made in the article. Letters to the editor may also consist of general commentary by members of the public who wish to share their views with their fellow readers. Generally, letters to the editor should be no more than 200 words.

Tips for submitting letters and opinion pieces, we recommend taking the following steps to maximize your success and impact:

- ✓ Check with the publications to find out the requirements and guidelines for submissions, including word limits, submission deadlines, where and how to submit letters and op-eds.
- ✓ Read the publication's editorial and opinion pages to get a sense of the form, style, and structure of an op-ed, as well as what kind of opinion pieces the publication tends to publish.
- ✓ Make your argument accessible to a broad cross-section of the publication's audience, particularly if you are advocating an issue for which you wish to gain additional support. Avoid taking too academic or too negative a tone with your opinion piece, as these pitfalls may mask the argument you wish to make.
- ✓ Dedicate a portion of your piece to the scope of the publication's audience. For instance, if you are writing for a local paper, make sure your piece has some relevance to the local community, even if you are writing on issues of national or state concern.
- ✓ Conduct a follow-up call to the opinion page editor. This will increase the likelihood that your piece will be published.

THE ART OF GOOD INTERVIEWS

A good interview is largely a function of preparation, both on the part of the interviewer and the subject of the interview. You can do your part to ensure the smoothness of the interview by following some basic guidelines, as listed below.

The Do's and Don'ts of a Good Interview

DO get the details

Make sure you receive specific information from the reporter or media outlet for which you are being interviewed on the nature, purpose and motivation for the piece in which you will be quoted. This will both help you decide if you want to do the interview, as well as enable you to frame your responses to questions you may expect as a result of the advance information you receive.

DO prepare a “cheat sheet”

Plan out what points you wish to make and responses to questions and arguments in advance of being interviewed. Be sure to distinguish which information is opinion and which are facts. You may also want to include any research you have in connection with the topic, as well as any statistics, facts, anecdotes you plan to employ during the interview.

DO be as open and honest as possible

Keep in mind that your comments during an interview will be instrumental in shaping others' opinions, not only of you, but also on the subject on which you are speaking, whether it be your organization or an issue of general interest. Be candid with journalists and do not try to mislead them on any subject.

DO be well prepared and informed

You will want to be as informed as possible, particularly with regards to the subject on which you are speaking. This does not require that you have expert knowledge on all aspects of the topic – rather it is a suggestion to speak confidently only on those matters on which you are secure in your knowledge. Be careful to distinguish when your comments are based on opinion or fact, as making factually erroneous statements may generally discredit your opinions. If you are unsure about something, be prepared to say “I don’t know.”

DO specify which comments are to be made public knowledge

Generally, comments made during an interview are considered to be “on the record” or “on background i.e., fair game to be used as quotes *unless specified by you*. At any point in time during an interview, you may specify that a comment is “off the record” or “on background” meaning that the subsequent comment will not be used for publication. “Not for attribution” generally means the reporter can use your quote, but not site your name. As a precaution and a matter of good reporting however, make sure you discuss with the interviewer *before the start of the interview* the ground rules for “off the record” and “on background.”

DO ask when the article is going to be published and request to receive a copy

You may wish to use the article or piece for your own marketing and publicity needs once it is published. The interviewer will often be able to provide you with multiple copies you may distribute for this purpose at little or no cost. You will also want to verify that your comments and opinions have been portrayed as agreed upon during the interview.

DON'T negatively criticize your opponents or competitors unnecessarily

Always remember to use the “No Blame Approach,” especially when dealing with the press. Try to remain as positive as possible in your comments, especially about those in your field or directly involved with the subject on which you are speaking. One good technique to employ when commenting on a potentially negative situation is to “wrap” criticisms between a positive statement and an optimistic one.

For example, a citizen concerned with the litter in their town might say: “While the city has devoted a good amount of resources to improving the quality of trash collection in the city, there are still a lot of areas in which the service can be improved. We are looking forward to beginning a dialogue with the City Council to determine how more citizens can get involved in improving the situation.”

DON'T use inappropriate or offensive language

While this recommendation seems to be common sense, some interviews may cause emotions to rise to the surface and cloud one's judgment. Be respectful of both the journalist, the publication's readership, and your colleagues by maintaining professional conduct throughout the interview and refrain from resorting to colorful or derogatory language.

The Steps for a Good Interview

Aside from interviews you may schedule or be asked to give to members of the press in relation to your activities, it may be necessary to interview others as well. For instance, you may be a citizen journalist or community blogger interested in interviewing local government officials or community members for a story you are going to publish. Maintaining professional interviewing techniques will increase the likelihood the person will allow you to interview them again. Interviews may also be useful for organizational publications such as newsletters, magazines, journals, reports, etc. Lastly, knowing how to conduct a good interview can also increase your skills and response when others are interviewing you.

Preparing for the interview

- ✓ **Do your research:** Research both the individual you are interviewing and the organization, company, or office with which they are affiliated before you contact them for an interview. This will give you an idea of whether the individual is a good choice to compliment the topic, tone, and audience of your article or report.
- ✓ **Let the individual know the topic and nature of the interview:** When calling to schedule the interview, be sure to give the individual as many details as possible on the subject, purpose, and scope of the interview. This will help them to begin thinking about the interview and how they want to represent themselves, hopefully resulting in more informative and detailed answers to your inquiries.

- ✓ **Prepare a list of topics you want to cover during the interview:** Be prepared to stick to the subject of the interview by making a list of key points you wish to cover during the interview.

During the interview

- ✓ **Be professional and courteous:** Your interviewee is doing you a service by granting this interview so treat them with the respect you would show all colleagues. Remember, that professionalism starts with being prompt so don't keep them waiting!
- ✓ **Be honest and cordial:** Part of the secret of conducting a good interview is being able to establish a rapport with the person you are interviewing, particularly if you wish to gain their future cooperation. Maintaining a positive, friendly vibe with the interviewee will enable them to provide open, thoughtful responses to your questions.
- ✓ **Avoid asking "yes or no" questions:** These types of inquiries don't encourage the respondent to provide detailed answers and make it more difficult to get the information you are seeking.
- ✓ **Request information, don't ask questions:** Rather than beginning your inquiries with "who, what, where, when, why", start by saying "Tell me about..." or "Describe your reason for..." This will encourage the respondent to provide lengthier, more detailed answers, including background information that will help you better understand their point of view.

- ✓ **Listen intently:** Listening is much more than just waiting for your turn to speak. You have to show an active interest in what is being said. Active listening could possibly lead the speaker to disclose more information.
- ✓ **Ask for permission to record:** One way to ensure you accurately report your interview is to record it. It is important that the interviewee knows that the interview is being recorded and gives permission. Just to protect yourself, you should record their verbal permission, make them say their name and title when starting. If you plan on posting the audio or video recording on a public forum like online or on the radio, you need to make sure the interviewee knows and gives permission.

Interview follow-up

- ✓ **Send a Thank You note:** Let the individual know when the story will be featured, aired, or printed. If you show your appreciation for time and information given now, it could potentially benefit you in the future.
- ✓ **Proofread your article:** Make sure you have accurately recorded the information the interviewee has given, including making sure all names and spellings are correct, as well as any affiliations or activities they have shared with you. In the same vein, make sure that you have accurately represented the information the individual has shared with you.

WRITING FOR THE WEB

With the proliferation of hyperlocal news sites and free online blog platforms like WordPress and BlogSpot, anyone can be a news publisher. Creating an online news site is a great way to keep the community informed or promote the work of your group. But if you want to maintain your credibility and build an audience, there are some important rules to follow when writing news articles.

- ☑ **Be Accurate:** Make sure you get your facts straight! Obtain copies of public records, use an audio recorder when interviewing officials, always proofread and check your facts.
- ☑ **Be Thorough:** Interview all the community stakeholders, including elected officials, community leaders, business leaders. Having more viewpoints will help your article be well-rounded.
- ☑ **Be Fair:** Don't play favorites with elected officials, especially during campaign season. If there are competing groups on opposing sides of a proposal, give both groups an opportunity to share their viewpoint.
- ☑ **Be Independent:** Leave your partisanship at the door and don't report on yourself in the third person. If you have an opinion to share, publish it as an editorial, letter to the editor, or op-ed.
- ☑ **Be Objective:** Stick with the hard facts. Be fact-based, neutral, and unbiased. Leave your own thoughts to the opinion pages.

Tips for getting started as a citizen journalist

- ✓ **Pick your beat!** What is your passion, what are you interested in? This could be municipal government, school board meetings, local non-profits, boards & commissions, local businesses, local restaurants, or maybe a site dedicated to all things in your neighborhood or community.
- ✓ **Stick with it!** Once you pick your beat, stick with it. If it's a government entity, make a commitment to yourself to regularly attend public meetings or at a minimum review each agenda to see if there are important issues to be discussed.
- ✓ **Get Published!** Many local online news sites (i.e. hyperlocal) accept user-generated content. Visit www.njonlinenewsresourcegroup.org to find a list of local online news sites. Don't see your town? Consider starting your own blog on Blogger or WordPress. Both are simple and free.
- ✓ **Be Consistent!** If you want to build and keep an audience you need to be consistent in your coverage, both in frequency and where you publish. You can post daily, weekly, or even monthly, whichever you decide stick with it!
- ✓ **Get Social!** Use social networking tools like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to share your stories and build an audience.

HOW TO START A BLOG

STEP 1. Choose a blogging platform.

There are a several user-friendly options for you to get publishing. If you are not very tech savvy, we suggest using Google Blogs (<http://www.blogger.com>). If you are tech-literate, WordPress.com or TypePad are two popular platforms that enable more customization.

STEP 2. Pick your blog name.

The first step is picking your name, this could be as simple as your name, your town, or your beat. You have the option of having a free website address (URL) like, thecitizenscampaign.blogspot.com or you can pay an annual fee to register and host a custom web address, like www.thecitizenscampaign.com.

STEP 3. Pick a template.

Most website builder provide free templates for your blog, you can customize the pictures and colors.

STEP 4. Add buttons. Buttons or “widgets” can add content to your site and make your site more engaging.

STEP 5. Public or Private. Most blog sites offer the ability to password-protect your blog so only those who you approve of can view what you've written. This can be good if you want to limit the audience to those you know, but it is important to note that this will severely limit the readership.

STEP 6. Write a Post. Write an introductory blog post explaining why your starting this blog and what you hope to cover. Not only will this help inform readers about who you are and what you will be writing about, but it is a good exercise to make sure you like your design template.

GO SOCIAL

1. Start a Facebook Page or Group.

A Facebook page is open to anyone and is a great way to promote what you are doing. Facebook groups must be joined and messages are shared. Facebook “pages” are public and anyone can view and “like” your content. A Facebook “group” can be made private and require administrative approval to join.

TIP: Download the “Networked Blogs” App to integrate your blog and facebook. This app allows you to simultaneously publish on your blog and Facebook.

2. Start a Twitter Account.

Twitter is another great way to promote your blog. Once you register for twitter, start following other accounts. Helpful to start following news outlets, non-profits, and government entities that are relevant to what you are writing about.

TIP: “HootSuite” is a free app you can download and it allows you to integrate your Facebook, Twitter, & Blog accounts.

3. Start a YouTube Account.

YouTube should be your third step in creating a social media presence. With the proliferation of smart phones with video recording capabilities, it is very easy to create video’s and post online. You can also find other videos and share them on your site as “favorites.”



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