



Basic Press Outreach for Mission-Based Organizations

Before you delve into these tips, know that I fiercely believe in dealing honestly with the press, and these tips are based in that philosophy. I treat the press the way I want to be treated. Reporters are my customers, and I'm going to do the best I can by them.

Many agencies are appalled at this philosophy -- they believe that truth is something to hide as much as possible from the public. If you represent such an agency, then this tip sheet is not for you. Honesty will not get you into trouble with the media -- lies will. The moment the press decides you aren't telling them the truth, they will deliver a public relations nightmare to you. That doesn't mean going out and telling the press every bad thing happening at your organization, but does mean answering press questions to the BEST of your abilities -- and that can include "I won't comment on that."

The Basics

Like fund raising, press relations is an ongoing cultivation process. Your agency strategy for press coverage needs to go beyond trying to land one big story -- you want the press to know that you are THE agency to contact whenever they are doing a story on a subject that relates to your mission.

Therefore, don't think that every press release is going to result in a story -- it's not. But sustaining regular press contact will build recognition of your agency among reporters, and result in ongoing payoffs down the road. As stories and listings for your agency do appear, you won't just be reaching new audiences -- you will also be reaching current volunteers, supporters and clients, reminding them of what your agency is doing and what they have chosen to be a part of.

- First off: who the heck is your agency, anyway? Is your mission statement the perfect brief description of your organization? If not, revise it before you approach the press. If you don't write a good, brief description of your organization and have it displayed prominently on your Web page and letterhead, in press releases and brochures, etc., the press will make up one themselves - and it may or may not be accurate.
- As a followup to step one: everyone at your agency should be able to recite that mission statement from memory. If it's too long for staff and board members to easily remember, it's too long for the press to remember as well.
- Media relations needs to be fully supported by your agency, and you need policies and procedures around your agency's press relations. Answering these questions is a start:

- Who is responsible for press relations at your agency (writing press releases, answering calls from the press, inviting press to events, etc.)? Does the person who answers the phone know to refer ALL calls from the press to that person?
- Do all staff members and volunteers (including board members) know what to do if they are contacted by a press representative? (do they talk with that person and then let the agency's public relations director know they have done so, or, do they refer the reporter to the public relations director FIRST before any interviews take place? Decide a strategy and make sure it is communicated to everyone).
- Who at your agency needs to know that a photographer or camera crew is showing up at your agency or event? If the agency feels an event is inappropriate for a camera crew (for instance, a dress rehearsal for a play the night before opening), what alternative can you give the crew?

And, finally: ALWAYS notify people they are going to be (or might be) photographed or filmed BEFORE it happens! You don't want someone throwing a fit for the evening news.

- The person who answers your phone, or anyone who signs anyone up for an activity at your agency (volunteers, donors, people who attend events, etc.), should ask these people who call how they heard about your agency or activity. This will help you see how effective your outreach activities are, and help you plan strategically for the future.
- Identify all area media outlets. You want the names, postal addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers and e-mail address of all local daily and weekly newspapers, all TV stations, all radio stations, all organizations and editors that maintain event calendars (this will include the chamber of commerce and tourism board), and all TV programs, radio programs and specific beat reporters that would be interested in your organization in particular. If you are in a rural area, you want to also identify the major media outlets for the nearest metropolitan area.

Most major metropolitan areas have a media guide, published by a local professional association (Women in Communications, Public Relations Association of America, etc.) or even a civic group (Junior League). Call other organizations, the nearest United Way, or a press person to find out if such a guide is published in your area. You can also use the phone book and Google or Yahoo to compile this information.

You don't necessarily have to have people's names -- sending something to "Attention Calendar Editor" at your local paper will get to the right person as quickly as putting that person's name on it. And given the high turnover in media, it's certainly easier to maintain your database this way.

- Look for reporters at national media outlets who cover your specific geographic area or cover a topic that is closely aligned with your mission. Regularly monitor free online news sources, such as Yahoo, to find such reporters.
- Do NOT contact ALL media outlets EVERY TIME you send a press release or have an event. If you do, you will overwhelm the organization, and reporters and editors will stop reading your materials. Also, some publications are highly-focused: a weekly neighborhood or community paper may only be interested in activities that DIRECTLY and OBVIOUSLY involve their particular community or population served. Therefore, you may have to tailor press releases to these publications to illustrate this connection.
- Who gets what? The following is a general overview, but you will need to tailor this for your own organization's events and resources, as well as per your goals for media

outreach. For instance, I directed public relations activities for a professional association in Austin, Texas for two years; this organization had a limited space for its monthly meetings. My first efforts more than filled the room -- much to everyone's discomfort. The organization did not want to move to a bigger space and could not provide microphones for speakers. So I scaled back these efforts, generating enough attendance just to fill the room and meet the annual membership goals.

Working with other staff members, develop an outreach calendar. What are the dates of events your agency will sponsor in the next 6 - 12 months? What about events that will involve your Executive Director or other key staff (a high-profile speaking engagement, for instance)? What about the launch of a new program or service? The launch of your annual fund raising campaign?

Once you've developed this calendar of events, you can set your dates to contact the media. Your press release "send" schedule should follow this basic model:

- Calendar editors (including those that manage online calendars) get press releases that announce events, workshops, etc. These should be sent two - three weeks in advance for daily and weekly publications; they should be sent six-eight weeks in advance for monthly publications.
- Assignment editors at TV stations get press releases that announce events you think would provide good video for the nightly news. Remember that TV stations are looking for lively visuals -- faces and movement. You should also fax the assignment editor 12-24 hours before such an event -- a one page fax with just the who, what, why, where, when, how, a contact name and why this event is particularly "filmable."
- Beat reporters (people who are assigned to a particular subject or issue area, such as education, entertainment, senior issues, sports, etc.) should get press releases ONLY for events, workshops or services that relate to their particular area of focus. Send these two - four weeks in advance. For announcements of a major event, you may want to send a "Save the Date" press release several weeks or months in advance.
- Press releases can also be sent out on an as-needed basis, such as the departure of an Executive Director, a major grant received, an award to your organization, etc.
- As is mentioned earlier, some publications are highly-focused: a weekly neighborhood or community paper may only be interested in activities that DIRECTLY and OBVIOUSLY involve their particular community or population served; you may have to tailor press releases to these publications to illustrate this connection.
- Most radio stations have a music format, and have very limited time for public service announcements. Send your press releases to only those radio stations that feature regular news times, audio event calendars and public affair shows, following the guidelines above. For other radio stations, consider event partnerships; are you hosting an event, such as a "fun run" fund raiser, that would be a good place for a radio station to set up a live broadcast? Or are you trying to target a particular community or population that also makes up most of an audience of a particular radio station (for instance, if an agency is hosting a conflict resolution workshop for youth, perhaps the radio station teenagers listen to most in the area would be willing to sponsor this event and promote it on their station)?
- Non-press organizations and people should also get your agency press releases (as appropriate); this is how you will build a public reputation and become associated with public policy issues that might affect your agency's target population. These folks may also start directing calls from the press to you when they get them, as appropriate:

- city (mayor, council people), county, state (legislators) and federal officials (congresspeople and senators) that represent your area
 - chambers of commerce (most areas are served by more than one -- there's the main one, but there is also might be a Black chamber, a women's chamber, etc.), tourist association, arts council, etc.
 - United Way (even if you are NOT a United Way agency)
 - Nonprofit development or support centers that serve your area
 - Nonprofit and public sector agencies with a similar focus
 - Professional associations and civic groups
 - University departments that have studies that focus on the same areas served by your mission; for instance, if you serve children and youth, send information to the teacher-training school within a university
- Make sure the press see your executive director and other key staff and board members as accessible. For instance, the head of your organization should have lunch or dinner, one-on-one, occasionally with key local reporters, not necessarily to pitch stories or do an interview, but just to network and cultivate a relationship. However, staff members should NOT consider these meetings off the record; they need to watch what they say and conduct themselves as representatives of the agency.

Those are the basics -- they will get you started on the road to building a reputation with the press and getting media coverage.

Remember to **evaluate your efforts** every few months: Are stories being generated? Are press people attending your events? Are more people attending your events or calling your agency? (Remember -- you should ask ANYONE who calls your organization how they heard about your event or services).

Also, make sure other staff members know the results of your efforts:

- Distribute copies of all articles that appear about your organization, positive or negative, to all staff and board members. As resources allow and as appropriate, also send copies of stories to volunteers, donors and customers/clients.
- Find space in a public area at your organization or a place that staff frequent (the break room or a hallway) for a "brag board," where you will post articles about your organization that are published. (NOTE: I once got a raise because the Executive Director stood in front of the brag board and was stunned that so much press had been generated; he'd seen the articles as they had come out, but seeing three months of positive newspaper articles posted on a wall made a BIG impression).
- Also watch the "Letters to the Editor" column for things that might relate to your organization, and distribute them appropriately. If your Executive Director or other staff member writes a letter on behalf of your organization (with approval, ofcourse), make sure all staff and board members get copies (and, as appropriate, make copies for volunteers, donors and clients, particularly if it is rebutting a negative article).
- A notice should go out to all staff and board members if a TV or radio program is going to do a feature on your organization (more than just a mention of the dates and times of an event).
- A notice should go out to all staff, board members, volunteers, donors and customers/clients if there is a partnership with a particular media outlet for an event your agency is sponsoring (see above, re: a "fun run").

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Small Business Public Relations

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Wyoming - Small business public relations is a pathway to business success. Publicity through press and news releases is a kind of publicity that costs you nothing, IT'S FREE. Regardless of what kind of business you are operating, you want as much free publicity for your business as you can get. Your publicity should be well thought out and planned for best results.

The first step for getting publicity is through the press or news release. This is usually a one page story about your business. The release is generally faxed or emailed to the media, chambers, etc. in your area or state. Your headline and your story must sell the person receiving your release on the benefits of your business. Unless it does this, your release will not be used. The person you send your release to must be able to quickly understand how your business will benefit the public. With hundreds of releases going across their desk, they only have time for so many. Your release must stand out in some way. The release must fit in with the information the media wants to pass along. Regardless of your business, you must build your release around an interest to the reader. Make it interesting to the readers and the media you want to run your release. Without this special ingredient, you are lost before you get started. **For a sample Press Kit go to <http://www.onlinewbc.gov/docs/market/index.html> and look at Effective Media Relations.**

Businesses that create and capitalize on public relations opportunities such as press and news releases are on the pathway to business success. For more information, <http://www.sba.gov/ny> or call SBA at 307-261-6500.