

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

The media (newspapers, TV, radio) is a very important means of informing the community about community initiatives. Media coverage is a vital information, marketing and promotional opportunity which no community project can afford to ignore. Effective use of the media is a skill which needs to be developed.

General Principles

- Decide who will deal with the media. Whether you use one person or a group to deal with publicity, it is essential that reporters know who to contact for a clear, mandated comment or statement. Channel all communications with the media through one spokesperson and ensure all your members know who this is.
- Be careful not to raise local expectations beyond what you can deliver. This will quickly lose your credibility with the community and it will take a long time to get it back.
- Be proactive - seek the media out. Do not wait for the media to chase you. Make a list of local newspapers, radio and TV contacts, including local newsletters. Identify specialist publications who may be interested in your initiatives.
- Establish relationships. Get to know local reporters, correspondents and editors. Find out about their deadlines and the issues they are interested in. But do not waste their time.
- Do not play favourites with the local media. Alternate the times you give out stories and press releases so you do not favour one paper or radio station.
- Be open and reliable - give accurate information. Stick to the facts. If you are giving an opinion make sure you state it is your opinion. Provide honest answers to questions and do not be afraid to say that you do not know something. If you are phoned by a reporter to comment on something, feel free to ask for 10 minutes to collect your thoughts, but make sure you phone back.
- Invite media representatives to your meetings. Send them minutes (always with a prepared media statement summarising the key points you wish to convey), give them early notice of important events. Always provide an after hours phone number at the end of any press statement or after an interview and return calls promptly. Go out of your way to report progress.
- Be helpful - most media organisations are short of time and resources. The more you can help them without being asked the better. Put particular effort into writing media press releases (see below). Journalists are usually too busy to spend a lot of time rewriting press releases. Attach photos.

Make sure it's news

The media look for news that is new, unusual and which in their opinion will interest their readers, listeners or viewers. Do not bombard them with endless press releases. You will soon develop a bad reputation.

As a general rule, the more local the media outlet (local newspapers, community radio) the greater their feeling of obligation and willingness be to report events and issues of interest or benefit to the local community.

Make sure your news is fresh and allow time for reporters to meet their deadlines.

Arrange photographic or video opportunities or provide good quality photographs (most media prefer to take their own).

Ways of conveying news to the media

- Media press releases
- Phone calls/alerts
- Invitations
- Media conferences
- Radio phone-in shows
- Circulation of documents
- Letters to the Editor

Press Releases

A press release (media release or press statement) is one of the most efficient ways of informing the media or making an announcement. It saves your group and media outlets time, helps get the facts correct and enables your group to inform a range of media outlets at the same time. It is simply a statement that tells "the WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, HOW, and WHY" concisely.

A press release must create a positive image in the critical eyes of the media. Poorly drafted press releases usually end up in the rubbish bin and reduce the credibility of your group.

To enhance the effectiveness of your press releases, note the following:

- Use a media release letterhead which reflects your group's identity - keep the design uncluttered and avoid using small typeface.
- Make sure you grab the reader's attention in the headline and the first sentence.
- Place the most important facts at the top and then arrange your material in descending order of importance. Do not attempt to get everything into the first (lead) paragraph, which should consist of no more than 30 words.
- Ensure material is accurate. Check all facts, especially spelling of people's names and titles.
- Keep it short, preferably a single page, two pages at the most. (Keep to 400 words or fewer).

- Ensure it is dated and contains a contact name and phone numbers/email address. Make sure the contact person and telephone number are obtainable when journalists are likely to call as many journalists work at night or early in the morning.
- Know the copy deadlines of your target media outlets.
- Make sure you issue your release on the best day for maximum coverage. Generally a release issued on a Monday or Tuesday will get better coverage than one released on a Friday.
- State the timing for release if not for immediate use i.e. embargoed until date and/or time.
- Attach any visual material, photographs, logos, maps, diagrams

In terms of media release writing style, note the following:

- Use simple language and sentence construction. Avoid the use of jargon and clichés.
- Use positive words and phrases.
- Use short paragraphs - often one sentence is enough. Limit sentences to 25-30 words.
- Write names of people and organisations in full the first time they appear in the text. Add abbreviations in brackets afterwards.
- Use quotes to make it more interesting.
- Write in the third person, eg, 'he said' or 'she said', not 'I said' or 'I was'.
- Do not use underlining - underlining is an editor's instruction to print those words in italics.
- Spell out numbers from one to nine, except for dates, times, prices, weights and measures, then use figures until they become unwieldy thousands of millions.
- Do not use the % sign, spell out "per cent" as two words.