



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Working With the Media

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COUNCIL *on* FOUNDATIONS

Working With the Media



Working with the media should be part of your overall communications plan. Even if you don't have a written communications plan, you still need to focus some attention toward the media. Working with the media—that is, public relations—establishes a strong public presence and image for your foundation. This helps the public understand your foundation and its value in the community. You also shape public opinion and, ideally, influence the actions of donors, grantees, and community leaders.

Access to the media means access to the public. Mass media can convey your message to a large number of people very quickly. The media will provide a third-party view of your organization, which is in contrast to your own promotional publications.

What are the challenges of working with the media?

When a third party is involved, it's sometimes challenging to get your message across in a clear, accurate, and compelling way. That is why it's important to be thoughtful and strategic about how you work with the media.

It takes persistence and planning to obtain media coverage, especially in large metropolitan areas. Like fundraising, cultivating the media is an ongoing process. Your strategy for press coverage needs to go beyond trying to land one big story. Instead, you want the press to know that you are the community source to contact whenever they are doing a story that relates to your mission.

How do we prepare to work with the media?

The following tasks will get you ready:

- **Determine your foundation's "key messages" to use with the media.** Make sure these are tied to your communications plan and that they are brief and quotable.
- **Develop a targeted media list.** Identify media and reporters who are important to your foundation and your audiences, and who have written about philanthropy or charitable activities.
- **Build relationships with members of the media.** Offer to meet with them and provide them with news releases and information. Position yourself as a resource and expert.
- **Develop an information kit** for the media and for federal and state legislators. Council on Foundations' members can access sample press kits online at www.cof.org/creatingpresskits.
- **Pursue regular media outreach opportunities.** Pitch news stories when you have news. Invite reporters to foundation-sponsored events. Write op-ed pieces and letters to the editor.
- **Talk to members of your community.** Make speeches to local organizations. Develop (or encourage grantees to develop,) an op-ed column for the local newspaper highlighting foundation goals and achievements in relation to hot local issues.

- **Encourage grantees to share accomplishments with the media.** Provide grantees with a few foundation information kits. Support your grantees' media outreach.

Who at our foundation should work with the media?

News people like to have one contact within an organization that they can call for information, not only about the foundation itself but as a resource for other stories. You should identify one spokes-person (a communications staff member, the president/CEO, a veteran board member, etc.) who is experienced in working with the media and comfortable responding to inquiries. In smaller community foundations with fewer staff, you might use a volunteer who has media experience to serve as the foundation's media liaison.

Be sure that your spokesperson is knowledgeable about the foundation and familiar with the local media outlets: understanding what they want, what kind of stories they feature, their deadlines, and the best way to approach them. Provide your spokesperson with the key messages about your foundation that you would like included in the stories.

Make sure that everyone in your office knows who the spokesperson is and understands the importance of referring all media calls to this person. It is essential that your organization speaks with one voice—and this can best be accomplished when you are clear about who speaks for your organization. It helps to have a written policy that clearly lays out who speaks on behalf of the community foundation and how media inquiries should be handled.

How do we build relationships with members of the media?

It's important to have solid working contacts within the news media. The most successful media relations moments have come from gradually getting to know (and be known) by the local media as a resource, even when there's no immediate promise of a story. Here are some tips for cultivating relationships:

- Keep your eye on your local media for stories that relate to the sector (philanthropy, nonprofits, community issues—all of which you can establish yourself as an expert). Get to know who's reporting on what. Send them an email once in a while to compliment a story.
- Create a media list that includes outlets you've contacted or plan to contact, as well as those who have contacted you. These lists should cover all media: radio, television, web, and print (including small newspapers), and include the appropriate contact person for each outlet.
- If you get to know a reporter, become a good source. Send him information or background on things he seems to be interested in, even if there's no story in it for you.
- If you think you have a newsworthy idea or a new angle on a story you've seen, give the reporter a call to pitch your idea. Be ready to follow up right away with something in writing—a news release or other information you want made public.
- Be as prompt as possible in responding to a query from a reporter. They will remember your help.
- Be wary about non-media-relations staff or board members giving you advice on how newsworthy a story is. It's important not to do things that could damage your reputation or credibility with reporters.

- There's some debate about whether it's appropriate to take a reporter to lunch. At some media outlets, reporters don't have time for lunch. At others, they may be more flexible and open to the idea. Use your judgment. Most reporters will not accept an offer for you to treat. Perhaps start by asking the reporter if he or she has time to meet for coffee—and expect to go Dutch.

How do we get the media interested in our foundation?

Think like a journalist. The media will only be interested in you if you do newsworthy things.

- Do something new, unusual, or controversial.
- Tell an evocative human interest story.
- Host an interesting event or one with a news angle.
- Offer a vital service.
- Show how you made a compelling, “news-making” difference in your community.

MEETING THE MEDIA

“We try to position ourselves as a resource, and it works! We've had great success by arranging 15- to 20-minute meetings with media representatives one-on-one. We call this our 'Meet the Media' campaign. We come up with a few story ideas for that reporter beforehand (trends in the community, something a grantee is doing, etc.), even if it doesn't benefit us. Then we call and ask for a few minutes of their time, saying 'we'd like to know how we can help you and learn more about the types of stories you are looking for.' We make it about them, and most are receptive to this. At the meeting, we give them a packet with our fact sheet, annual report, etc. and give them a brief overview of what we do.”

—The Denver Foundation

- Show that a large number of people are affected by your work.
- Link your local event to a breaking national story.
- Be experts on philanthropy and other charitable issues.

That last bullet is important. Community foundations are often seen as a neutral source when it comes to charitable issues in the community. What expertise from your staff and volunteers can you offer the media?

If you have any kind of breaking news or a great photo opportunity, call the newsroom of the paper and let them know about it. Television stations especially like to know about these opportunities and appreciate hearing about news that can be told visually. **Note:** In community foundations, news conferences are rare. Reserve news conferences for major breaking news that you want to reach many media outlets at once.

What makes the news?

Answer the following questions to help you determine the newsworthiness about a topic you might pitch:

- What is the local angle?
- Is it timely or relevant to current events? Can you link your local story to national news?
- Do you have an expert spokesperson on the topic?
- Is there human interest?
- What is new about your topic?
- Is there a significant prediction or finding (research results, economic forecast)?
- Is there humor?
- Does it have visual potential?
- Can you say what your story is in 20 to 30 seconds? (Reporters think in quotes and sound bites.)

How do we pitch stories?

The media want to hear about people: how your agency is helping them, the results of your efforts on your clients' behalf, how people are affected by what you do (or don't do). If you have a good story to tell, don't be afraid to contact a reporter and "pitch" the story to him or her. "Pitching" news stories is nothing more than packaging what it is you want to communicate in a way that will spark a reporter or editor's interest.

If you're holding an event to raise funds for your organization, tell the story of why the public should support what you're doing. Find out who covers particular beats at the paper (e.g., arts, health and human services, education) and give them a call. If nothing else, they'll know that you can be a good resource. Television stations are always looking for stories with a strong visual component so keep that in mind when pitching a story.

There are three easy steps to pitching a story:

Step One: Prepare a news release

News releases must be about real news. If you send news releases on every move your foundation makes, you will quickly lose the attention of the media.

In general, reporters look for news about (1) people, (2) the environment, (3) location, (4) money, and (5) data or reports (such as survey results). Send your news releases to those reporters with whom you have a relationship or those on your media contact list. Always deliver your release to an outlet in the form they want to receive it—fax, email, or post.

Tip: Don't forget about small papers as a market for your message. Even in large or mid-sized areas, there are often many smaller papers that would often be *more than happy* to print what you send them in a news release.

Many media professionals report that they rarely read news releases. Even so, releases serve an important purpose: leading you to Step Two.

Step Two: Follow up

After you send out your news release, always follow up with a phone call to make sure the media outlets received it and if they need additional information. This phone call is the most important part of pitching the story—it is when you "sell" the idea. Think like a reporter: Why should his readers care about the story? Explain the idea, answer questions, and offer alternative angles if the reporter does not bite on your original packaging.

Step Three: Be interviewed

Once a reporter has accepted your pitch, he will most likely set up an interview with a spokesperson for your community foundation and/or a relevant secondary source (such as a professional advisor or a grantee). Be prepared with three or four key talking points and a few good quotes. Whenever you are talking with a reporter, consider your statements always "on the record." Provide the reporter with an information kit and suggest photo or video opportunities.

Caution: Never pitch the same story angle to competing media outlets, unless you are issuing a broad release. For example, if you have two daily newspapers with overlapping circulations, talk to one about Story A and the other about Story B. You can put a deadline on your offer: "I have a story idea for you, but can you let me know by 11 a.m. this Thursday if you want it? Otherwise, I will pitch it elsewhere, but I wanted to give you first dibs." Reporters understand this.

What should a news release include?

News releases alert the media to upcoming events they may want to cover and offer the basis for a later news story (e.g., coverage of the good works of your organization or the announcement of new management personnel). Because news releases conform to an established format, they are easy to write. Once you learn the format, all you have to do is fill in the blanks. It's important, however, to always follow the format. Otherwise, the outlet receiving your release won't take it seriously, let alone publish it.

There are six basic elements that every news release should have in terms of content and how it appears. All news releases must:

- be on foundation letterhead or a standard form with contact information, including a name and telephone number
- include "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" written in all caps at the top
- have a compelling HEADLINE written in bold and all caps
- include the date and city
- describe the who, what, when, where and why in the body of the copy
- be double-spaced, single-sided, pages numbered, and end with the symbols ###

PITCHING A STORY

"When sending a press release and follow-up, I always include a short one-paragraph 'pitch' with the email that will grab the reporter's attention. Reporters are busy and you need something to get them right off the bat. A well-written pitch can accomplish this, especially if the story can be framed in the experience of a real human being in the community."

— The Greater Tacoma Community Foundation

Keep news releases as concise as possible—ideally no more than one or two pages. With such little space to explain your news, you'll have to make every word count. Be sure to write releases in everyday language (no jargon) with a message that is clear. Place the most important information at the beginning, and use a catchy heading that will hook the reader. Of course, check the spelling and grammar before you send it out. You don't want to let a simple typo damage your credibility.

Tip: Never send an attachment in a cold email to reporters. Many news outlets have filters that strip attachments from emails. Only attach a file once you have the reporter's permission. If you send a news release by email, include it in the body of the email.

How can we prepare for a media interview?

Meeting with reporters is important and exciting. Relax, but be prepared. Plan out a few key points and reiterate them. Stick to your plan and you will get your message across. Here is a list of Do's and Don'ts for talking with the news media:

DOs:

- Be proactive. Instead of waiting for the media to contact you, call them with the information.
- Write down two or three points you want to make and use them early in the exchange.
- Tell the truth.
- Watch your body language and maintain eye contact.
- If you cannot answer a question, say "I don't know" and promise to get back to the reporter within a short time period (one hour or one day, for example). Ask when the reporter's deadline is and meet it.
- Keep answers brief and focused. Stay on message.
- Repeat, repeat, repeat. Convey your message over and over again.

- Speak in clear, everyday language and take time answering questions.
- Spell out names when talking to a reporter.
- Remain calm even if hostile questions are asked.

DON'Ts:

- Don't speculate. Stick to the facts.
- Don't be long-winded. Try to find the shortest possible way to answer a question.
- Don't say "no comment." It implies guilt.
- Don't become emotional or defensive.
- Don't say anything "off the record." Even if reporters tell you they are collecting background information, be aware that everything you say could still be used as a direct quote.
- Don't annoy reporters. They have the last word.

Source: Grantmakers' Public Affairs Resource Kit, Council on Foundations.

What goes in a press kit?

A press kit is a package you assemble for the media and others to help them understand what you do and to assist them in covering a specific event. Press kits are living, changing documents that should be continuously updated with important background information, statistics, news, fact sheets, publications, and any other pertinent materials. The press kit can be sent in advance to targeted media or handed out as they arrive to an event.

Press kits usually include the following:

- a statement of the foundation's mission and vision
- a fact sheet about the foundation
- a pertinent news release
- the most recent newsletter
- a brochure or handout outlining the message platform
- a brief statement on the foundation's background and history
- bios of the CEO/president and/or other key staff
- relevant charts, graphs, or figures
- photos, if possible
- recent press clips about the foundation
- contact information, including the foundation's website address

Resources

Communications Handbook: A Basic Publicity Guide. Council of Michigan Foundations, 1994. www.cmif.org

Council on Foundations Newsroom. Guidelines, tips, and suggestions for working with the media. www.cof.org/newsroom.

Insider's Guide to Strategic Media Relations. Valerie Denney Communications, 2001. www.vdcom.com

Salzman, Jason. *Making the News: A Guide for Nonprofits and Activists.* Westview Press, 1998.

Smart Chart 2.0: An Interactive Tool to Help Nonprofits Make Smart Communications Choices. <http://www.smartchart.org>

The Jossey-Bass Guide to Strategic Communications for Nonprofits: A Step-by-Step Guide to Working with the Media. Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999. <http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA>

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