

How to... Deliver a Message in the Media

#14 in a series of citizens' guides by the
Western Organization of Resource Councils

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Citizens' groups need newspaper, TV and radio coverage of their stories to be effective. A story at the top of the evening news or on the front page boosts morale and can help a group win on an issue its members care about. A negative story or a hostile editorial can undermine a campaign.

Why do you want media coverage?

Before you spend a lot of your organization's time and resources on a major media campaign, stop and think about why you want media coverage. You want:

- the public to know arguments and facts that support your position on an issue.
- people to hear about and join your group.
- to pressure the governor, a company or some other decision maker to act.
- to publicize upcoming events or a fundraiser.

There are also stories you *don't* want in the news:

- Stories on an issue on which your group has no position or is divided.
- Stories about conflicts within your group.
- Stories about your losses.
- You may not want stories about your internal strategy discussions.
- You may not want stories about sensitive negotiations with your opponents.

Media coverage is one *tool*, a part of your strategy to win on issues and build your group. It is *not* an end in itself. Citizens' groups have fewer resources for public relations campaigns than do many of their corporate and government opponents. If you focus only on media coverage, and neglect the other parts of running good issue campaigns and maintaining a strong organization, you're bound to lose in the end.

Who is the media?

Many citizens' groups spend most of their time and effort to get reporters to cover their stories in their local daily newspaper. Stories in the daily paper will be read by a lot of people in your town, probably including most opinion-makers and decision-makers, and your members. Newspaper clippings are useful to send out in mailings to donors and members to reinforce good feelings about your group.

Some other places to get your message into the daily paper are read just as much, or more, than the front page: editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor are obvious examples, but don't forget calendars, the business page, photos and cartoons.

The daily paper is not the only source of print news. In many rural communities, almost everyone reads weekly papers, usually run by overworked people looking for good material to fill space.

Specialty publications are important to the work of any citizens' group. For example, farmers and ranchers get a lot of their news from regional and national agricultural trade publications — as do farm and ranch reporters from daily newspapers. Many government regulators, business people and activists read publications like *Coal Week* or *Inside EPA*.

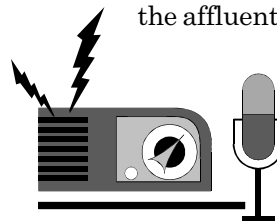
There is less news on the radio today than 10 or 20 years ago, but there are still a lot of opportunities to get your message on the airwaves. Noncommercial (public) radio is supported in part by state and federal funds, and has an obligation to provide news coverage. Much of the in-depth reporting is found on National Public Radio programs, but most public stations have some kind of local and regional coverage. The public radio audience is fairly small, but it includes decision makers, the well-educated and the affluent (so it's important if that's who you want to reach).

Many commercial radio stations today have just five minutes of news every couple of hours, if they have any at all, but other stations have all-news-and talk formats. Radio

talk shows are an important medium for citizens' groups. Local and regional shows need interesting

Ten tips to getting your story covered

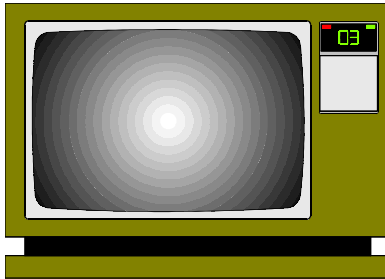
- Know the reporters.
- Know the media.
- Know your message & audience.
- Prepare with person who will deliver it.
- Make it easy for the reporter.
- Know what's newsworthy.
- Keep it simple; explain the story.
- Find the angle: pocketbook, etc.
- Be persistent.
- Make media strategy part of your campaign.



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guests and interesting topics. If you can't get your spokesperson on a radio talk show, members can call in with comments or questions.

Citizens' groups can get Public Service Announcements (PSA's) — free broadcast of a recorded or written message — on most commercial stations, especially if they concern an upcoming event, or an uncontroversial message. If you can't get free air time, radio is a relatively inexpensive place to buy advertising — compared to TV.



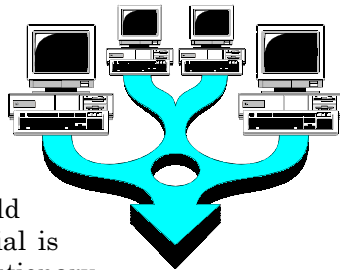
TV time is expensive because so many people are tuned in. We may think TV news is superficial, or complain about how hard it

is to get on TV news, but two-thirds of the news people get is through TV and radio (mostly TV). A typical nightly news cast has twelve minutes of news, after sports, weather, and advertising is accounted for, time for at most a dozen stories. But if you need to reach the general public, you need to get on TV.

There are opportunities besides the nightly news, although the audiences will be smaller: interviews on the noon news, special news talk shows (local versions of "Face the Nation"), TV PSA's, and community service announcements. There are opportunities on public TV, as well. And most cable systems have local access channels, which give your group an opportunity to have its own show.

Today, millions of people get all kinds of information through their computer, the Internet, and the World Wide Web. The potential is huge, but a couple of cautionary notes: it's almost impossible to make sure that any of the potential viewers, who are all over the world, will see the message you put out. If you need to reach people without computers and modems, the Internet isn't much help.

To get your message covered in the media, your strategy must be based on an understanding of whatever media sources you are targeting. Spend time



reading papers and magazines, listening to the radio stations and watching the TV shows you want to cover your story. What are the formats of the stories they run? What kinds of stories do they run? Who owns the media outlets in your community? Who are the reporters? If you can answer these questions, and build relationships with the people who report and package the news, you are ready to develop your strategy for getting heard in the media.

Newspapers, radio and TV stations are businesses. Reporters, editors, and news directors are all as busy as you are. They may get hundreds of press releases in a day. A good media strategy makes it easy for them to run your story, by providing credible, clear, newsworthy and professional material.

Planning a media strategy

The first step in developing a plan to work with the media is to be clear about your objectives. What is it you want? What is the goal of your issue campaign or your membership drive? Once that is clear, there are four basic parts to any sound media strategy: developing your message, defining your audience, deciding who will deliver your message, and deciding how they will deliver your message.

The message: Given your goal, what is the message you want to send? Do you want people to understand more about the problem your group is concerned about? Do you want them to understand what you want done about it? Do you want to undermine your opponent's credibility? Do you want people to support your position by signing a petition, making a call or signing a letter?

The audience: Who needs to see your message to make your campaign successful? We often assume we need to reach "the general public," but that's not always true. It takes a lot more time and resources to send a message to everyone (even everyone in your state) than to send a message to farmers in your state, or legislators, or the Director of the State Highway Department. If you *do* want to send a message to "the general public," is it everyone in the U.S., or in your state, or in your town? The better you can target your audience, the easier and more effective your media strategy will be.

The messenger & the medium: You have your message and audience; now you need to decide who will deliver it, and how. Who will be your most effec-

Developing a powerful message

Your message needs to be newsworthy and interesting. Think about it from the point of view of the audience and the reporters. Why should they care about it? Who is doing what to whom? Why is this issue different than everything else that happened today, and worthy of attention? What interesting things can you compare it to?

A good message needs an interesting *hook*. The hook is the first thing you say, the first line of a sound bite, or the lead in a press release. The hook is what interests the reporter in covering the story, or gets the audience to read, listen or watch.

The hook should make people think about how this issue affects them, or make them identify with the spokesperson.

A strong message uses illustrations, personal stories, or interesting analogies. Don't tell them how many cubic yards of waste your opponent wants to bury in the landfill; tell them how deep that waste would cover a football field. Don't say mining companies are not posting adequate reclamation bonds; say that you have to have insurance against any damage you might do in order to drive a car, so why shouldn't mining companies have insurance for damage they might do before digging up a mountain?

tive spokesperson? Most citizens' groups rely on their president or chairperson, or the head of a committee, to represent their group, because they have the most credibility with the audience and reporters.

You should also think about who is the most interesting spokesperson. If your message is about cleaning up air pollution, someone with health problems caused by poor air quality is a more interesting spokesperson. Hold a press conference above the town looking down on a hazy view, or in front of a medical facility that treats respiratory illnesses.

If you want to let lots of people know about several arguments and facts that support your position, the most effective strategy may be to get several members to write letters to the editor or call in on radio talk shows. Letters to the editor are among the most widely-read words in a newspaper, and more likely to reach your audience than half-a-dozen press releases.

Press releases should be attractively designed and professionally prepared, because reporters will have to pick it out from dozens of others. Think and write as much like a reporter as you can. Write in the third person; express opinions by quoting a spokesperson. Keep it short. Double-space it.

The most important part of a good press release is the follow-up. Call the reporter, find out if they got the press release, ask them if they need any other information. Make sure they understand what you think is newsworthy about your story.

A follow-up call will help you even if the reporter doesn't cover your story, because you can usually find out why. If the reporter says he can't use your release, don't hang up in a huff. Ask what would make it more interesting and newsworthy.



Every picture tells a story: In the mid-80's, groups working to reform banking laws to keep farmers on their land held press conferences to get out their message. They had facts, solutions, and credible spokespersons. But the most effective thing they did was plant crosses representing the farms lost each week to foreclosure. This picture, of crosses put in front of the state capitol in Helena, Montana, by the Northern Plains Resource Council, appeared in papers all over the state.

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Twelve Ways to Get Your Story Out

There's more than one way to tell a story. One under-used strategy is to break a story in your own newsletter. If a reporter picks up a story from your newsletter, you get your story covered and build the credibility of your newsletter at the same time. You make your newsletter a more exciting publication to read.

Some other ways to deliver your message in the media:

- * Hold a press conference or a media event.
- * Radio talk shows: members call in, or field calls as guests.
- * Write letters to the editor.
- * Meet with editorial boards, request a supporting editorial.
- * Submit guest editorials (long letter to the editor, with pictures).
- * Ask reporters to attend and cover a meeting, event or action.
- * Call newspapers, TV or radio and offer to be interviewed.
- * Provide background information, sources to a reporter (give them an exclusive).
- * Cultivate a reporter's interest in a feature story: a "human interest" piece, or more in-depth analysis of an interesting issue.
- * Prepare newsworthy quotes or sound bites to deliver at a public meeting, hearing or event organized by someone else.
- * Prepare a spokesperson for special TV or radio news programs.

For more on the Media:

Principles of Community Organizing, training sessions held twice each year by WORC.

How to Hold a Press Conference, #12 in this series of citizens' guides to community organizing and, **How to Speak in Public**, #13 in this series.

Media Means, a 42 page workbook, \$7.50 from the **Citizens Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste**, P.O. Box 6806, Falls Church, Virginia 22040.

Getting the Word Out in the Fight to Save the Earth, by Richard Beamish, \$24.95 from the publisher, the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1-800-537-5487.

Communication Workbook, Part I and Part II, Northern Rockies Action Group, 1976, \$4 each from WORC.

World Hunger Year Media Guide, World Hunger Year, 505 Eighth Avenue 21st Floor, New York, NY 10018. Phone: 212/629-8850. Fax: 212/465-9274. E-mail: whyria@aol.com; <http://www.iglou.com/why>.

More How To's:

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Let us know when you use these *How To's*. Give us suggestions for improving and updating them.

More about WORC:

The Western Organization of Resource Councils (WORC) is a association of six grass-roots organizations with 6,000 members and 39 community-based groups, united to advance the vision of a democratic, sustainable and just society through collective action. Find out more about WORC, and hear our award winning radio program, the High Plains News Service, on the World Wide Web: <http://www.worc.org>.

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