

Media Relations 101

**A Guide to Media Relations
for
the not-for-profit sector**

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to members of the Community Integration Network
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Introduction

Do you ever wonder why some organizations seem to get a lot of media attention? Why are reporters interviewing *their* volunteers, board members and clientele? Why are pictures of *their* events on the front page of the local newspaper? What do their staff know that you don't know?

They know what the media want and what the media need. (And they know it's not always the same thing!) They know who their target audiences are and how to craft key messages. They know how to pitch a story. Most importantly, they know how to research and think like a journalist to find those stories within their own organization.

So...What do the media want? What do they need?

The media want a good story. Actually, they want *a lot* of good stories. Don't forget: the media have hours of programming to produce and pages of newspaper to fill *every day*.

The media want good storytellers. Something new. Oh, and an exclusive would be nice, too.

You might be able to get through your day without listening to a newscast, or without reading a newspaper or checking the latest news online. But the folks who report on what is happening in your community, your country, your world, cannot get through the day without *stories*. And you can provide them with great stories.

The media need access to the people who will help them tell the stories we read, listen to or watch. They don't tell stories about events or issues. They tell stories about how those events or issues affect people.

How many times have you been introduced to a family in Some Suburbia, Your Province, Canada on the day the Federal Budget is tabled in the House of Commons? The media always seems to have a 'typical' Canadian family on tap: the stay-at-home parent, the public servant parent, the kids - maybe in primary school or heading off to university - all of whom will be affected in one way or another by what is in the federal budget. And that's how the media explain a complex story in terms we can all understand.

What else do the media need, in addition to the people that can help them tell the story? They need accurate information, reliable sources, compelling audio clips and visuals. They also need to meet their deadline. That's important to remember when dealing with the media. Many journalists are meeting multiple deadlines every day, especially those who work in radio or online.

The media: Who they are. How to keep track of them.

Now that you know what the media want and what they need, it's time to find out just who the media in your community are. Begin by becoming a savvy news consumer. Watch television news programs. Spin the dial when you are listening to the radio. Continue to read your newspaper of choice -- and any others you can get your hands on. Don't ignore the weekly newspapers.

What are the local television news programs? What time are they on air? What are the local radio stations -- and what are the local shows on those programs? What kind of stories do they cover? Reporters may be general assignment reporters who cover a wide range of stories, or specialists, working a particular beat: social issues, health, education, arts, or municipal affairs.

Take note of those who cover issues of concern to you or your organization. Remember that there is a difference between reporters who are paid to provide balanced coverage of an issue and columnists who are paid to give their opinion.

If you don't have a media list, either buy a list from a media list service or pull together one yourself. Companies like Cision (<http://ca.cision.com/>) provide a wide variety of services: from creating a media list to distributing your news releases to monitoring the news to see who covered your story. The services are not free, but when you consider the time it takes to compile a media list **and** maintain it, you might be able to justify the cost.

If you opt to create your own media list, make sure it contains the following information:

- Journalist's name and contact information
- Information about the show, magazine, newspaper, etc.
- Deadline
- Lead time needed

Update your media list regularly. It is a time-consuming, but worthwhile process. Keep a clippings file. It's a good way of keeping track of who is covering what.

Why do the media cover the stories they cover?

There are as many answers to this question as there are stories covered every day. Here are some of the reasons why the media cover the stories they do. It is breaking news. There is a sense of urgency to this story. Think: tsunamis; earthquakes; a gas main break downtown; an accident that closes a main thoroughfare; a homicide; a long-awaited decision on a high profile court case.

They may cover a story because it is sensational. Or because it is a story that directly affects their audience.

Maybe it helps put an issue in context. Their readers/viewers/listeners have a connection to the story, the people involved and / or the place. Perhaps the story is being told by a well known storyteller. If it is a television story or a story for the newspaper, sometimes just having good visuals is reason enough to cover the story. And, sometimes, a story makes it to print or on air because it is a slow news day!

One thing you should never ask a journalist

Would you publicize our event?

Journalists are not publicists. They will not *publicize* your event. If you have a good story for them, they may be interested. Ask them for publicity and they won't answer your email or take your call.

Go back to the first section: what the media want and what they need. Stories. A fundraising event is not necessarily a story. A new executive director doesn't usually make the newscast. But if you start thinking like a journalist, you will find the stories in your organization that will get media coverage.

Who are your target audiences?

Who is it you want to reach through a story in the media? Who do you want to talk to? Don't say 'the public'. That's a vast audience.

Be specific. Are you trying to reach politicians? Policy makers? Donors? Potential donors or fundraisers? Special interest groups? Clients? Community groups? Volunteers? Students? What do they care about? What would their interest be in the story you want to tell?

The media are not a target audience. They are the means by which you reach your target audiences. You speak through the media to those politicians, policy makers, potential donors, clients, volunteers, etc.

But remember: when it comes to the print media, the journalists have final say about what is published. If you tape a radio or television interview, you won't be asked which 'clips' you think should be used. That's why it's extremely important to prepare for an interview. Make sure you know who you are talking to and what you want to say.

Creating key messages

A story can have more than one target audience. And each target audience will have its own interest in or concern about the topic of the story. For example, you are on the board of a charitable organization that has created an ice hockey league for youth who, due to a disability, have been deemed ineligible to play on any other hockey team. You want to get the word out through the media about an upcoming golf tournament that will raise funds for the organization. A silent auction is also planned for the day of the tournament. Who are your target audiences?

- Golfers (*The more people who participate in the tournament, the more money you will raise.*)
- Individuals and organizations who will donate items to the silent auction
- Potential volunteers - coaches, etc.
- People who will donate money to your organization so you can rent ice time
- Sports stores, other hockey teams or young athletes who might be moved to donate equipment
- Parents who have difficulty explaining to their children why they can't join a hockey team, like their big brother or sister.
- Kids who just want to have fun!
- Current volunteers and members of the organization

Some basic elements of your key message might be the same for all of these target audiences, e.g., how the organization came to be, where the games are played, how many kids currently play hockey.

But the key message will be different, depending on what you want the audience to do: sign up for the golf tournament, donate items for the silent auction, become a volunteer, donate money or equipment, become an active member of the organization, as a parent or player. And don't forget the people who are currently involved as members of or volunteers with the organization - a media interview is the perfect time to thank them for their support.

Before you do the interview, make sure you identify the #1 thing you want people to remember once they have heard you interviewed or read about your event in the newspaper. And be sure to say it!

Thinking like a journalist

'*Why should I care?*' is the first question you should be prepared to answer. If the journalist you approach about a story doesn't ask you that, chances are the journalist's editor or producer will ask *them* that question.

So, these are the questions you should ask yourself - and be prepared to answer - about both the story you are trying to pitch to the media - and about the people who (hopefully) will eventually read or hear about it.

Is it relevant? Does this story have an impact on their life? Or on the lives of those close to them? Will it change what they believe or how they lead their lives? Will it inspire them to do something they wouldn't necessarily do?

Is it topical? Does the story you are trying to pitch tie in with a major story that is currently in the news?

Is it entertaining? Is it a human interest story? Will it move, surprise or excite the intended audience? Will it make them laugh or feel better about themselves? Will it make them smile...share in the emotion...remember a similar experience? Finally...is this a story that would catch *your* attention?

Answer those questions and think about how you can align the answers with your key messages.

Finding the storytellers in your organization

The media tell stories. They need good storytellers. They need good sound. They need good pictures.

Find the people within your organization who are passionate and articulate and enthusiastic. Here's a hint: the media want people closest to the story as possible. That may not be the executive director or the chairperson of the board of directors. It could be a front line staff person, a volunteer or even a client.

People who have a strong connection to an organization often have the most amazing stories to tell about why they were attracted to an organization and why they stay. The same is true for the people whom your organization supports. All of them can be compelling spokespersons for your organization and put a human face on an issue, whether it is lack of access to team sports for our disabled youth, hunger or homelessness in our community or the difficulties newcomers face when they first arrive in Canada.

All of us love a good story. And the best storytellers are the people in your organization. Start asking people to tell you their stories. You will be delighted to hear their stories.

Whoever you choose (and convince!) to talk with the media becomes the face and voice of your organization. That person will represent the best of your organization. They will be someone who is credible, honest and accessible.

Pitching your story to the media

So. You know who your target audiences are. You know what key messages you want to communicate. You have found a storyteller within your organization. You've given thought to *where* the media interview can be done for the best sound and visuals.

Now you have to pitch your story to the media. Whatever method you choose, make sure your 'pitch' answers the 5 Ws:

What your story is
When it is taking place
Where it is taking place
Why it is of interest to their viewers/listeners/readers
Who you are suggesting they interview

Start with an email. If you are trying to get the media out to a specific event (or are hoping they will write about it before the event...), send the email to the daily media at least a week before the event. You will need a much longer lead time for magazines.

Be very focused when drawing up a list of reporters, editors and producers for your email blitz. Make sure your media list is accurate. If you are sending the same email to several reporters, put your name in the 'TO' field, and the reporters names in the 'bcc' field. In the subject line, type 'Possible story'. Attach the news release if you've written one.

In the body of the email, recap the 5 Ws. Stress the fact that you have someone in mind who will be a great interview. Tell them why you think that person would be a great interview. If you're pitching to a radio or television reporter, suggest a place where they might like to do the interview...someplace with terrific visuals and/or sound.

For example, if you were trying to interest the media in a story about the hockey league for disabled kids, you might suggest they meet you at the arena. Or, if you haven't any ice time booked, tell them you can easily get together a few of the players for a game of street hockey.

The reporter will appreciate the fact that you've given some thought to their needs. And think what rich sound and fabulous visuals the camera operator could get during a game of street hockey!

If you haven't heard from the reporter, follow up with a phone call a day or so later. Most of us are not fond of making 'cold calls', so make sure you are prepared. Have a 'cheat sheet' on the desk in front of you with the information written in point form.

Be brief when you either leave a message or when you actually get through to the journalist. Tell them you know they are busy, but you wanted to follow up on the email you sent. Tell the reporter who you are, what the story is, when it is taking place and why you think this story is of interest to their audience. Then...stop talking.

The reporter may be interested. She may hand your call off to a producer or an editor. She may tell you she is not interested. Or, she might be on deadline and will return your call.

Be polite. Then move on to your next call.

They're interested! Yikes! Now I have to do the interview!!

Ok. The journalist you spoke to loves the story. You're ecstatic - until you remember that *you* are the designated spokesperson and *you* will have to do the interview. Uh-oh. Whose idea was this, anyway?

Starting to feel weak in the knees? That's not unusual. On most lists of 'Top 10 Fears', the fear of public speaking rates higher than the fear of flying, spiders, the dark - even the fear of death!

So, it is perfectly understandable that speaking to the public - even via a media interview - is not something most people would seek to do.

Many people - even the most experienced public speakers - have butterflies in their stomach when they face a microphone. The challenge: how do you get those butterflies to fly in formation?

Here are a few tips:

PREPARE

Do not agree to an interview without taking the time to prepare. Even if it is a topic about which you are thoroughly familiar, you need to take the time to *think* about what you are going to say, to identify your key message(s) and your target audience(s). Anticipate the tough questions and the easy ones, too. Be ready for anything - even to admit that you don't know the answer to one of the questions.

VISUALIZE

Imagine yourself participating in a successful media interview. How would you sound? How would you look? What would you say? Where would the interview take place? How would you feel? Go online or watch televised interviews for examples of what a successful interview looks and sounds like. Take notes. Imagine yourself in the place of that articulate, interesting, composed person who is being interviewed.

HAVE A 'CHEAT SHEET' AT HAND

Use an index card - the kind your mother or grandmother use to write recipes on - as a 'cheat sheet'. Reduce your key message(s) and target audience(s) to a few words or phrases. Do not write out full sentences or you will be tempted to read them. If part of your key message involves an address, phone number or date...write it on the card and highlight it so you can refer to it quickly.

REVIEW YOUR NOTES

Before the interview begins, take a look at the key words and phrases written on the card. If you are being interviewed by phone or in a radio studio, place the card someplace within eyesight. If you are doing a television interview, take one last look at the card, then set it aside.

BREATHE.....AND BREATHE AGAIN

Take a series of deep breaths before the interview begins. It will help calm you and steady your voice. If you sound calm, it will help you feel calm.

FOCUS

You have agreed to the interview because you have something to say to your target audiences. Remember: the reporter is not a target audience, but a way to reach your target audiences. Keep them in mind. You have a point (or two or three) to make.

Stay focused on *your* key messages. An interview is not an interrogation. It is an opportunity for you to speak to the public. Make the most of it!

Template: The Interview Planner

1. What is the story I want to tell through the media?
2. Who am I trying to reach? (target audiences)
3. What do I want to tell them? (key message/s)
4. Why would these listeners/readers/viewers be interested in this story?
5. What do I want to accomplish by getting this story told? (<i>e.g., call to action, inform, correct misinformation...</i>)
6. How can I reach these audiences? (<i>Television, radio, community newspapers</i>)
7. What information/documents could I provide to the journalist as background?

Template: Creating Key Messages

Who are my target audiences?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What are their concerns - or interests - in this issue?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

How can I address their concerns - or encourage their interest?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

What is the headline I would write if I could?

What's the one thing I want people to remember after hearing - or reading - about this story?