

Communications Primer Step 7: Cultivate Media Relationships



Relationship building with the media is really no different than relationship building in other aspects of life: listening, compassion, honesty and respect will take you a long way. And, as you might guess, a sense of humor and a smile never hurt.

Listening

You'll save yourself a lot of trouble if you research your prospective media outlets before contacting them. You'll want to think about the story you're telling and your target audience. Which outlet is

likely to reach your audience? Is television coverage better than newspaper coverage? Which editor or reporter is most likely sympathetic to your cause? The initial answer to these questions requires some familiarity with your intended media outlets.

If you want coverage on the local television news, you need to start watching the local news - everyday. And you may find that morning, evening and late news programs have different reporters and content. You might find that a certain reporter on a specific station seems to be interested in environmental news stories. This simple research goes for newspapers and news magazines, as well. Make note of the editors, reporters and stories that seem to sympathize with your message. Note how the story is told and be prepared to provide appropriate content when you pitch your stories to these reporters.

Compassion

Although it might seem like a glamorous life, being a reporter is not unlike working for a non-profit cause. Declining profits in the newspaper trade have required smaller numbers of reporters to carry more of the burden. The result can be overworked journalists facing difficult deadlines. Having compassion for this situation can make you a reporter's best friend. Translation: the more work you can do for the reporter, the more likely he or she is to run your story.

Spend time on your press releases and reporters will notice. Make sure your press releases are well-written, timely and accurate.

- Editors are trained to look at the opening and closing paragraphs - this is where you should concentrate your

What to Do About Interviews

If you're contacted for an interview, ask the reporter about their interests in the story. It's ok to ask them what kind of story they're writing and what information you can provide to help them shape the story. Of course, it's important to stay on message. Most newspaper interviews are conducted via telephone, so don't be afraid to grab your press release and read statements right from it.

If a longer television or radio interview is scheduled, then you can prepare concise message statements – also called “soundbites” – in advance. You might want to call affected citizens or local experts and ask them for quotes or stories that can reinforce your message. In some cases, radio and television producers will ask you to submit a list of topics and questions that the host might ask you on air. This saves their staff a lot of work and allows you to shape the interview to suit your strengths. As you prepare questions for them to ask you, be certain to write and prepare your answers (on a separate document, of course.)

Finally, don't ever expect a reporter to ignore something you tell them “off the record.” They are, after all, *reporters*. Professionalism is crucial and silly jokes or unkind words about an issue, the

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[Free Consultation](#)

[Print Version of Primer](#)

[Public Opinion on Great Lakes & Aquatic Habitats](#)

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[Media Contacts](#)

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efforts. Try to "hook" the reader with an inspiring, humorous, or somewhat surprising opening.

opposition's view point, or political figures may come back to bite you – hard.

- Provide plenty of quotes that a reporter can use to shape their own story.
- Make sure the contact information on your release is accurate, including email addresses and Web links for additional information.



- If you're awaiting a vote or another time sensitive decision, have most of your press release written and you'll save time getting your story out when the news breaks. Sometimes this means writing two different versions: one to run if the bill passes, one to run if it fails. This a common practice for groups working on policy issues.
- Note if images and interviews are available for the story and be prepared to provide them print-ready/pre-formatted images and contact information for "experts" and "real people" to interview.

- If you write the story to read like a news story, some small town editors will actually run your press release without changing a single word (don't expect a by-line though.)
- Use the following links to see a [sample press release](#) from Great Lakes Forever and the [newspaper article](#) it inspired!

Some reporters prefer to be contacted by telephone, others prefer email, and still many like to receive faxes. Be certain to provide your press releases and additional story information in a variety of formats. You might want to create a special "For the Media" section on your organization's Web site. Regardless of what you decide to do, keep the reporter's interests in mind.

Honesty

Honesty is crucial to developing a relationship with a reporter or media outlet. Being proactive about integrity requires a higher level of honesty than you might expect. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when speaking to reporters:

- Make sure your facts are accurate, double checked, and provide sources so reporters can follow up on their own.
- Unless you're an expert, don't claim to be one. Make arrangements with sympathetic experts, perhaps local business people or university professors, before sending out your press release. When a reporter calls, provide all the information you can, but refer them to your experts on questions for which you don't know the answer.
- Don't speak for the opposition. When a reporter asks why some people oppose your position, let them know when you're speculating about others concerns and encourage them to contact opponents for their side of the story. You'll avoid a lot of trouble by avoiding hearsay.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, ask the reporter about their deadline and volunteer to track down the information from a credible source.

Tracking Down a Lead: Finding the Right Outlet

Thanks to the Web, it's easier than ever to track down editors, reporters, and outlets for media stories you're trying to place. Most media outlets, from newspapers to radio and television stations, have Web sites with contact information regarding their reporter's duties.

Don't assume, though, that a reporter with a certain title is the best or only person able to cover your story. Only major newspapers have dedicated environmental reporters, so you may find that the best match for you is someone who covers local issues, someone who writes "human interest" stories for the lifestyle section, or a columnist who happens to share your particular environmental concern.

- When making promises to reporters about returning phone calls, arranging interviews, or providing graphics and photos - keep them. Always try to exceed their expectations for reliability.

Respect

Respect, in this case, means accepting that reporters are paid to probe an issue and try to present more than one side (your side) of a story. Media outlets are businesses and they often make decisions that will help maintain their bottom line. Reporters at many mainstream news outlets are looking for stories with broad appeal, stories that will help build their audience base, and stories that fit their editorial guidelines - when pitching a story, it's important to familiarize yourself with these guidelines.

Of course, we all face opposing views on environmental protection in our society, and we should expect to find reporters that doubt or don't share our concerns. Although the media aspires to objectivity, biased reporting does occur. Some reporters might seem hostile, but don't allow yourself to react too strongly. Stay on message and assure the reporter that you "respect" a difference of opinions and hope your opinions will receive fair and equal coverage. You can avoid reporting that's biased against you, by avoiding strong emotional statements and accusations.

You'll find more friends in the press and the public by thoughtfully choosing the public face of your fight for environmental protection - be strong, but not belligerent.

Several professional services offer media lists for sale – in print and online. The largest of these are available through Bacon's or Vocus, but the cost can be prohibitive. If you're only looking for local media coverage, check your yellow pages and gather names and information through local Web sites.

If your organization has a small communications budget, you might investigate a non-profit media resource designed for environmental groups. This online service is called Green Media Toolshed and is available on a sliding-scale annual fee (learn more online at www.greenmediatoolshed.org.)

Finally, we're providing a media list culled from the Bacon's list for the Great Lakes region. The list is organized as a spreadsheet with detailed contact information on the Toolbox CD-ROM. While the list is fairly comprehensive, success with the media will be based on your individual relationship with reporters more than anything else.



Smile

Don't underestimate the importance of friendliness and patience. Media and press work can be extremely stressful. Environmentalists have a reputation for being humorless, something we should acknowledge with humor. If you expect reporters to be interested in your cause, take some time to learn about their interests. It never hurts to compliment a reporter on a recent story of theirs that you read and enjoyed. Let them know that you're ready and willing to help them find the resources they need to tell the story. And finally, thank them for covering the story and let them

know you're available for future stories as needed.

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