

Advocacy through the Media

The media includes newspapers, magazines, radio and television. (There is a separate factsheet on using online social media.) You can use the media to convey a message or to gain publicity for a cause. Media coverage of your issue can help you to reach your objectives. To use the media effectively, you will need to build good relationships with journalists and take their needs into consideration.

Approaching the media

You can use many methods to get media attention for your issue.

- 1. Issue a press statement.** A press statement (or press release) is a general announcement which you distribute to the media. It might be to invite the press to an event you are planning, or to respond to an issue which is in the news at the moment. Send your press statements to all the major media outlets active in your area. The best way to send out a press statement is by email. Make the first sentence interesting and informative to attract the journalists' attention. Make the statement clear and short (about one page maximum) and try to put the main facts up front. Make sure to include the name and contact details of your group's spokesperson. That person must be available to respond if journalists want to follow up. After sending out a press statement, you should follow up with the journalists to make sure that your document was received. The best way to do this is with a phone call.
- 2. Hold a press conference.** A press conference is an event for journalists where one or more spokespersons deliver short statements and then answer questions about an issue of interest. You must notify the media in advance of the date, time, venue and topic of the press conference. Make sure that your topic is a genuine and important news story. If you are launching a public awareness campaign you may want to have a celebrity, such as a prominent politician or a sports star, make the announcement. Make sure that your venue is easy to find and appropriate for filming if you have invited television journalists. Start on time. Keep the panel of speakers small and the speeches short, as journalists are likely to be most interested in asking their own questions about the issue. Distribute copies of the key statements, to make it easier for journalists to get facts, titles and names correct. Offer refreshments if possible, or at least some water. Keep a list of the journalists who attended, with contact details, so you can provide follow-up information later on.
- 3. Write an opinion piece or a letter to the editor.** Letters or opinion pieces are usually in response to a recent news article or event. They can be a good way to express your opinion, inform people about your issue or correct facts in a previous news article or letter written by someone else. Newspapers may have guidelines that you should follow if you want your letter published, such as the maximum length. Editors may edit or shorten long or complicated opinion pieces or letters. Newspapers will not publish anything that attacks private individuals, nor will they publish too many letters or articles by the same person. You might be asked to provide your name and contact details so that the editor can confirm that you actually wrote the letter or article. If you prefer to remain anonymous, you can ask the newspaper not to publish your name.

The 5 "W's": Key media information

- What is happening?
- Who is doing it?
- Where is it happening?
- When is it happening?
- Why is it happening?

TIP

You can place an "embargo time" on your press release, telling the journalist the date and time when the information can be made public. This allows you to give advance notice of an event to the media so that they can plan their coverage. It also prevents one media outlet from trying to get an advantage by reporting on the issue first.

EXAMPLE

PRESS RELEASE
Embargoed until 24h00, 12 February 2018.

TIP

The timing of your press conference can help you attract media attention. For example, if you are lobbying for stiffer penalties for domestic violence, you could hold your press conference right before International Women's Day. As the press will want articles for that day, your press conference will make their job easier.

TIP

If you are responding to a previous article, it is helpful to mention its title and the date of publication. Then say why you are writing the letter. If the article gave wrong facts, point out which facts were wrong, give the correct facts and explain why the correction is important. In concluding the article or letter, you should usually ask for some action, such as calling on Government or someone else to do something about the issue.

4. Give an interview to a journalist. The key to a good interview is knowing your subject and being prepared. You should talk to the journalist before the interview to agree on the subject and define the issues. If the interview is for television or radio, ask to see the questions in advance so that you can prepare informed replies. Make a list of the key points you want to mention so that you don't forget anything – but do not read a prepared speech, as this will sound unnatural. Keep your answers short and use plain language. Concentrate on the important points and discuss them first. Above all, stay calm and focused. Once you have answered a question, stop talking. Do not repeat what you have already said, or wander off onto other subjects.

TIP

A practice interview with one of your colleagues may build confidence and help you prepare short and attention-catching statements (“sound bites”) for the interview.

5. Appear on a radio or TV talk show. Approach this in the same way as an interview. Be prepared and professional. Find out in advance what questions you will be asked, but be ready to cope if the programme does not follow the plan. Do not be afraid to say that you don't know the answer to a question – you can go on to provide some related information that you are sure about.

6. Provide photographs. The media always look for “photo opportunities”. For example, you could invite a local government official or celebrity to come to your event and pose for photographs. You could arrange a public event that is visually effective, with everyone wearing shirts of the same colour or carrying creative signs. If you have a speaker at your event, try to make sure there is a backdrop behind the speaker that identifies your organisation or indicates what the event is about. If no journalist is present at your event, take your own photographs and send them to the media along with information explaining who is in the photograph, when the event took place and what is happening.



Building good relationships with journalists

- It is important to have one person in your organisation who acts as the **contact person for the media**. Journalists will need to know that what this person says represents the views and positions of your organisation. Your spokesperson should be accessible, reliable, accurate and professional.
- Note which media outlets are reporting on your issue, and find out which journalists are involved. Establish **contact with the relevant journalists** and keep them informed of new developments. Give them a reliable way to contact your spokesperson for comment – remembering that journalists often work evenings and weekends. If your organisation's spokesperson cannot be reached, your group's voice will not be heard.
- Remember that different types of media have different **deadlines**. It is important to familiarise yourself with the production schedules of the media outlets you intend to approach. Daily newspapers, weekly newspapers and monthly magazines will all have different deadlines for preparing the next issue for publication. Radio and television programs will also have strict timeframes to follow. You may be able to make arrangements to pre-record an interview, and some radio interviews can be done over the telephone. If there is a problem with the availability of transport or cameras, offer to go to the studio instead of asking the journalist to come to you.

Follow-up

Keep track of how the media is covering your issue. Take note of who else has commented on the issue. This will help you see who is supporting your position and who is opposing it, and understand the arguments for and against your issue. This will allow you to prepare good responses which can strengthen your position. ■

WHAT TO DO IF THE PRESS IS NOT REPORTING ON YOUR ISSUE

It is unrealistic to assume that the media will cover all of your issues or events. However, if your organisation is failing to receive any media coverage at all, you may want to find out why. Here are some questions to ask.

- **How is your organisation viewed?** Is your organisation seen as being too extreme or too marginal? Does your group have a history of being disrespectful or insulting to others? You may want to arrange personal meetings with journalists or editors to give them a better understanding of your organisation and your issue.
- **Is your information relevant?** The media only pays attention to current and newsworthy issues. Make sure that your information relates to a current topic or policy, and that the media audience will find it interesting or useful.
- **Can journalists reach you easily?** You can supply journalists with an information package that includes names and contact numbers, background information on your organisation and its current campaigns, and information on who does what in your organisation.
- **Has there been a problem with media relations in the past?** If there has been some past difficulty, you could set up a meeting with the journalists or editors concerned to try to resolve the problem.