

Utilizing the News Media

The news media, and particularly the print media, are some of the most powerful tools available to influence decision makers.

Most people get their information through the media. Child advocates and community-based groups have successfully used the media to inform the public and build support for important objectives. Getting coverage of an issue in the papers or on the airwaves can help move people to not only support a cause, but also to take positive action.

Know the local media. Read the paper, listen to the radio station or watch the television program in which you want your story covered. Find out what kind of stories they usually cover, and what kind of angle they like on stories. Some have particular audiences or formats to which you might need to tailor your message or approach.

REMEMBER: reporters are looking for stories and like ones that are easy to write. The more complete the picture you provide, the more likely it is to be printed.

Build relationships with the media. It is much easier to get your story printed or on the air if you have built a relationship with the media contacts before you need them. One way to do this is to establish yourself as a credible source of information and leadership on an issue.

Determine your objective. You should have a specific objective each time you seek media coverage. Examples include calling attention to an issue, calling for action on the part of an elected representative, or making the public aware of an upcoming event. While it is important to plan how to get media attention, don't forget to keep in mind what you want to say.

Opinion pages and editorials. Sometimes a “news event” might not be the best way to reach your goals. The opinion pages of a newspaper can provide great opportunities for advocates. With editorials from the newspaper, letters from readers, and columns from professional writers and community members, it is often the most read section of a local newspaper. This is even the place where policymakers often turn to investigate what the hot issues are among their constituents. Request a meeting with the editorial board, or write an op-ed piece or a letter to the editor. Even a short piece will get your name and ideas in print.

Buy advertising. Sometimes the best way for an advocate to have definitive control over the content and timing of a media message is to buy advertising space or airtime. This allows for a specific and narrowly targeted message. However, the benefits of paid advertising have to be weighed against the cost and limited reach of the ads.

Write good news releases. If you decide to do a news release, it is important to produce a professional looking and quality document. Answer the five W's – who, what, where, when, and why, and follow a standardized form. Keep in mind not only the reason for seeking media coverage but also the purpose of the news release. Are you inviting them to a news conference or are you giving them enough information to write a story from your release?

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Don't rely solely on your news release. Even a well-crafted and perfectly executed release can easily get misdirected or misplaced in a newsroom. Make sure that you follow up the release with a phone call to the reporter or editor.

Know your material and purpose. Remember your objective and that you are the expert on the topic. Let the interviewer or reporter rely on your expertise and learn to re-direct their questions. If they ask you something off topic, you can say, "That's a good question, but what I really want to emphasize...."

Don't be afraid to say you don't know. Although it helps to anticipate possible questions, you can't always be prepared to answer everything. Instead of replying with vague or incorrect information, simply state you need to verify your answer and that you would be glad to supply them with the information. You can also offer to put them in contact with another person. Your integrity and credibility are more important than a quick answer.

Don't forget to use newsletters, community calendars, and bulletins. How do you find out about issues and events? The local newspaper, radio station, and/or television station are not the only "news outlets" in your town. Get your message out whenever and wherever you can.

Passion. Child advocates should not be daunted when trying to attract media attention. Our stories are often inherently newsworthy because they deal with important issues that have serious effects on large numbers of people. You have strong feelings about your work; use that emotion to your advantage. Sometimes passion is contagious!

Sources:

The Advocacy Institute. (1997). Blowing Away the Smoke: A Series of Advanced Media Advocacy Advisories for Tobacco Control Advocates, Advisory No. 5. Washington D.C.; The Benton Foundation and Center for Strategic Communications. (1998). Strategic Communications for Nonprofits. Washington D.C.; Association for Children of New Jersey. (1996). Community Education Toolkit. Newark, NJ.