

How to... spread your message in the media

Whatever activity you are planning, it helps to have the local media on your side. They can help you spread your message and engage support. The greater the publicity, the greater the chance there is of more people becoming involved, or hearing the message. There are many potential opportunities: news stories; features and in-depth interviews; letters to the editor; phone-ins; photo stories and filming opportunities.

Producing a compelling press release

The main tool for working with the media is the press release. By preparing a clear, professional press release, you greatly increase your chances of getting journalists to pick up on your story. A well-written press release will make it easier for them to understand exactly what you are doing and why. If you provide a local emphasis to the story, it will be more likely to attract their attention, even though it may be an international issue. On Mondays, non-Parliamentary days, or days after Bank Holidays, news is thinly spread and you are likely to get greater attention. Don't send a press release out on a Friday! Decide on a day and check the deadlines of different media outlets. Many magazines have three-month lead times, whereas newspapers and radio/TV stations can be contacted at very short notice. Use an embargo if necessary to ensure all your coverage appears at the same time and to give journalists a deadline to work to.

Do's

- Use headed notepaper; give it a date and a snappy headline.
- Type it but keep it short, simple and preferably on a single sheet. Use approximately three sentences per paragraph.
- Number the pages; end the first with "more follows"; start the second with a new paragraph; on the final page finish off with "ends".
- Try to get all the crucial information in the opening paragraph, including who, what, when, where, why, how.
- Include a sensible, hard-hitting quote from an identified spokesperson, maybe a celebrity. Journalists may edit a release, but they won't change a quote. Quotes can be emotional, whereas the text of press release must be factual.
- Where you have them, include telling statistics – but not too many. The focus should be on human interest.
- Provide contact name(s) and phone number(s) – make sure all your key people have a copy, and that at least one person is available outside office hours (with a copy

- of the release and any useful background information).
- If the story is photogenic, give details of what, when and where photographs can be taken.
- Add brief extra background information in a "Note for Editors" section.
- Check deadlines in advance: make sure your release arrives in time for journalists to follow it up.
- Fax it if you can. Follow up with a phone call: if it hasn't been received, e-mail, fax or deliver another copy at once.

Don'ts

- Never assume the reader will know anything about your concerns.
- Rambling prose and irrelevant details detract from the impact.
- If you use both sides of a sheet of paper, the second side is likely to be ignored.
- Avoid repetition, clichés, jargon and abbreviations.
- Never make claims you cannot prove, and avoid exaggeration: overstating your case is more likely to wreck than to win your argument.
- Sloppy presentation, mistakes and bad grammar damage credibility: get someone else to check for sense, accuracy and spelling.
- Ignore media interest in your press release at your peril: you sought their attention, so return their calls.
- Wit may win a smile, but irony seldom works, especially on strangers.
- Never assume your release has been received until you've spoken to someone in the newsroom who has seen it.

Pro-forma press release

For immediate release or Embargoed until...

An embargo allows you to keep control over when your story is publicised and gives journalists a date to work to.

NEWS RELEASE

Heading

The heading should be typed in bold and centred. Keep it short, snappy and to the point.

First paragraph

Start with a bang. Get the five 'W's in straight away – Who, When, What, Where, Why.

Following paragraphs

Make your points in order of importance. The second

paragraph should elaborate on the first. You are essentially telling a story, so you must give the reader the full picture. Spell out the facts, give statistics, and quote names and numbers of people involved.

Quotes

Include a direct quote from the most relevant person involved: it will humanise the story. Keep the quote brief, providing an overview of the event. If writing a quote for somebody else, get their approval before using it.

Remember to give the person's full name and job title.

More follows...

If the press release spreads to a second page, type "more follows" at the bottom right hand corner and "continued" at the top of the second page. Never split paragraphs or sentences.

ENDS

Make sure it is clear where your story ends.

Contact...

Give names and telephone numbers of people a journalist can contact for further information.

Notes to Editors

This is your last chance to give journalists details of how they can get copies of a report, photograph or any other information, including web links.

Organising a photocall or media stunt

How to set up a photocall

- Make sure you have an "angle". As with a press release, you must have an "angle" – or reason for the media to take interest – before you start.
- Choose an outside location if possible, one that's easy to get to, where there's space for a group of people to gather without causing an obstruction.
- Write a press release to send to picture editors and TV stations. 11am is usually a good time, meeting the needs of both morning and evening papers. Give full details of the location.
- Phone picture desks a day or two beforehand, to make sure the event is in everyone's diaries.
- Make sure you have a spokesperson available at the event. Take your own photos in case the newspaper does not send a photographer. Keep a note of which journalists and photographers turn up.
- Have written details of the event ready to give to journalists, with names and titles of anyone appearing in the photograph. Have a contingency plan in case of last minute problems such as rain or illness.

Letters to the Editor

Another good way of getting an issue into the local paper is to use the letters page. You could either initiate a topic or react to a letter or article that has already appeared in

the newspaper. Linking international issues in with local concerns will increase your chances of getting your letter published. Again, it is always worth following up with a phone call to ensure they have received your letter. Letters are one of the most widely read parts of the paper and can spark debate and generate wider coverage.

Your letter to the Editor should be –

- Opinionated, but conveying campaign messages and statistics
- Short and to the point – no more than 250 words in length
- Include a contact name and address
- Can be typed or hand written, delivered, faxed or e-mailed
- Can be in response to a previous letter (quote the letter writer and date) or on a new issue.

Broadcast media

Opportunities

Local BBC stations, local television coverage and commercial radio stations all provide opportunities for working with the media

How to get a radio interview

- Highlight the interview potential on your press release, giving a number to call to set up interviews and offering spokespeople/interviewees. Send releases to the producer/researcher for your chosen BBC programme or the newsdesk for commercial radio and follow up with a phone call.
- Have an articulate spokesperson available. Make it local, giving a local link and something that local people can do.

How to be the perfect interviewee

- Be prepared: re-read your press release – they will base questions on this. Why are you there? Be clear on what you want to achieve. Have three main points you want to get across, and take them with you if you're not sure.
- Talk about a real life example, using it to help explain the issue. Ask for examples from your staff contact.
- Be confident. Presenters are friendly: it's not Today or Newsnight!
- Talk about how local people can get involved or are affected. Quote telephone numbers, website addresses, local venues for more information.
- Don't use complicated language or jargon. See an interview as a chat with a friend and make eye contact with the presenter.
- Arrive at least ten minutes early.