

How to spread your message in the media.



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.

Example press release layout

'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.

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. It can be you! 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 background information, and links to photographs, photos, websites etc.

Do

- Give it a date and a snappy headline.
- Keep it short, simple and preferably on a single sheet. Use approximately three sentences per paragraph.
- Number the pages if using more than one. Try to get all the crucial information in the opening paragraph.
- Include a sensible, hard-hitting quote. Oxfam will often provide you with celebrity or Oxfam quotes, or you may have a minor local celebrity you can use. Journalists 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 at least one person is available outside office hours (with a copy of the release and any background info).
- If the story is photogenic, give details of what, when and where photographs can be taken.
- Follow up with a phone call: if it hasn't been received, email or deliver another copy at once.

Don't

- 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's seen it.



Organising a photocall or media stunt

Be creative to get noticed

- Make sure you have an 'angle'. As with a press release, you must have a reason for the media to take interest – before you start. What is the point of your stunt? What are the issues you want to get across? How can you make it relevant at a local level? How can you present it as a visual story – something that will get photographed and reported on?
- If your angle is about Oxfam, make sure the Oxfam logo is obvious in the picture. This could be a t-shirt, banner, poster or Oxfam Shop front in the background.
- Attract attention with fancy dress, local celebrities, prominent members of the community, and humour.
- 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 to start, 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 a copy of the press release and 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.

Stunts can be a powerful way to get across key messages to the media but you should be prepared with killer-facts and figures to back up your photos.

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.
- Include a contact name and address
- Typed or hand written, delivered, faxed or emailed
- 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 broadcast 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.
- Some radio stations will do interviews over the phone, although they usually insist on a landline rather than a mobile

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. If they don't ask, you can take the initiative and say 'and I'd also just like to make these points...'
- 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 the Today programme 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.

