

GTP ORGANIZER TRAINING

Training Guide #26 Media

The famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright believed that architects should only take a pencil in hand when they have a clear mental picture of every facet and detail of their design. In the same way, one should never write a press release—the keystone in media work—before “cutting” the story.

It’s the cut of a story that makes it interesting, exciting, and relevant. Humor and human interest are important elements to play up. Stories that point to disparities in power, such as attacks on the high and mighty by the underdog, are always popular; and highlighting the gap between words and deeds, particularly by those who claim to be public benefactors, makes good press.

How much and how well an action or event gets media coverage often depends on the cut or slant of the story. Whether an organization has a picnic in the park to mark the end of a successful park cleanup campaign or, in the alternative, a “We Love South Park Day” on Valentine’s Day, makes all the difference in the world for news media.

The keys in cutting the story are timing, action, and personality—the story should be just breaking or, better yet, about to break; involve action, somebody (or bodies) or some thing in motion; and there should be a personality (which may also be an organization), which is compelling, demanding attention.

The general guides for dealing with the media are to be honest, accurate, and factual. Distortions, name-calling, and threats are obviously bad practices. Don’t “talk off the record” or try to retract past statements. Don’t lecture editors or reporters or ever lose your temper with them. Prepare ahead for possible hostile media questions and assume that your phone conversations are being covertly recorded.

Take advantage of media opportunities. React quickly with phone calls to the media if you support or oppose a current action. Deliver written statements within eight hours. Tie an action to your statement if possible: a statement opposing a new police practice is more newsworthy if linked to an action or even to sending telegrams to the mayor and police chief. Use the press rooms in government buildings for media contacts.

Also react quickly if attacked. Call the media and get in your side of the story. Leaders should be prepared to handle unsolicited calls from the media in campaign battles. Get your side of the story out first; stay cool when questioned, even when the questions are hostile; don’t lie but don’t admit anything unless absolutely necessary; launch a counter-attack; and don’t *argue* the merits or get sarcastic.

When cutting the story keep in mind the media for which you’re writing. You should be a subscriber and consistent reader and viewer/listener of the media you want coverage from. Produce a release that mimics the way the targeted media would handle it. Remember you’re trying for a news story, not an editorial.

Media Outline

Scheduling the Event*

1. Preferred Times
 - Morning reduces risk of competition
 - Avoid Mondays, there's a tendency for media errors
 - Avoid Fridays, Saturday papers tend not to be read
2. Check City Desk (print press) or News Assignment Editor (electronic media) to avoid scheduling at same time as other major events

News Releases*

1. Maximum one page (or at least all the essential information on one page)
2. Include:
 - Date
 - Release date
 - Contact name(s) and phone(s)
 - Summarizing headline
 - Information on activity and organization
 - Cut the story interest and write it as reporter would
3. Mail in advance (four days or more)
 - TV and radio (to news assignment editors)
 - Newspapers (city desk)
 - Additional releases to personal media contacts
 - Mail from P.O. for more dependable service
 - Mail copy to self to check delivery time

Calls*

1. Call everyone to assure receipt and correct filing
2. "Read" the story if not received
3. Ascertain coverage plans
4. Call again with further developments
5. Re-call entire list on action day

At the Event*

1. Circulate press sign-up sheet (if appropriate)
2. Start on time

Call-Backs*

1. Call no-shows and give 30-second statement on action
2. Make radio call-backs, stating "This is (your name) from (organization name). I have a (time of statement in seconds) on (description of event). Do you want it right now or do you need a level check?"
3. Call and thank reporters (emphasizing their professionalism, not their sympathy to the issue or cause)

Loose Ends*

1. Be at your opponents' press conferences and media events—you'll probably get more coverage than they do if you handle it right
2. Avoid peaking media campaigns too soon—press gets bored

Main Types of Media

Dailies

1. Key person is city editor: decides how a story will be played, headline, length, and placement
2. Most dailies have several editions
3. Two types of reporters: general assignment and special beat—know who's who
4. Photographers are assigned by the editor—don't specially request one—but print media often will use 5 x 7 or 8 x 10 black and white glossy prints
5. Feature stories on your organization or campaign can be promoted by writing a letter to the city editor or appropriate reporter suggesting a special angle or aspect that would make the story interesting
6. If you have a position on an issue that has been in the news, an editorial can be promoted with the editorial writer or editor—don't demand or argue, just discuss the issue in a clear, rational way
7. Letters to the editor are worthwhile, but should be brief (150-300 words), simple, and clear

Weeklies

1. Community papers want neighborhood news, issues, and people
2. Learn their deadlines (usually 2-3 days ahead of publication day)
3. Get acquainted with the community editor and ask about the kind of news that's wanted
4. Get pictures

Radio & TV

1. Assignment editor is counterpart to print city editor
2. News is sent in same form as to newspapers: calls and written statements (press releases)
3. Be brief, don't ramble, and cover important points within 30 seconds
4. Speak clearly and firmly but be natural—don't read or sound like you're reading a statement
5. On TV be conversational and talk to the report rather than the camera—look neat, don't look down and don't orate, and remember you're in people's living rooms
6. For important statements call radio stations and ask if they want to cut a beeper tape—be polite if they're not interested, they may be next time
7. TV needs 1 1/2 to 2 hours to prepare before a broadcast

Broadcast Editorials

1. Many radio and TV stations provide rebuttal time

2. Call the station immediately and request such time—they'll schedule a time to tape your statement
3. Prepare carefully, don't waste words denouncing the station—say, “we disagree and here's why. . . .”

Wire Services

1. Send all releases to wire services
2. Main ones are AP and UPI, but be sure to include city news services

* Based on Citizens Action League materials

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