

CHAPTER FOUR

04 Working with the Media

(Adapted from Community Bicycle Network of Toronto)

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4.1 Step One: Choose Your Media Strategy

The media develops a story about your group and the work you do. This “story” will not equal the reality of what you’re doing - with all of its many details - it will only portray a small piece of your work. Plan a media strategy to make sure the right aspects are covered.

What do you want your media campaign to accomplish? Do you want to promote an event or get new members for your group? Decide the image you want portrayed and what kind of reaction you’re looking for. These decisions will help you figure out how to create the story you want. This may seem like a calculating thing to do, but if you don’t decide what the story is, the reporter will.

Quick tips:

- Always have one person in your group who is the media contact.
- Nothing you ever say is “off the record”.
- Make it easy for reporters to make news about you.

4.2 Step 2 - Appoint a Media Contact Person



Journalists like to deal with one person – it’s less confusing for them. If your contact person doesn’t have much experience with the media, ask them to observe the day-to-day routine at a community radio station or newspaper office.

If they’ve never given an interview to the media before, have them role-play with a friend first or member of your group, or have them sit in on someone else’s interview.

Don’t be taken by surprise. Get to know who’s who in the media so you know who is supportive and who is hostile. You can research a journalist by reviewing articles that they’ve published and see what their views have been in the past. You can also ask them some informal questions before they interview you to get a sense of their views.

Nothing is ever “off the record”. Never contradict yourself, blurt out something or confide in a journalist and think they didn’t notice because they didn’t write it down.

If you are worried about being misquoted, you can tape your interview. However, this may offend some journalists. You may want to explain that you’re learning about giving interviews and you want to review how you did.

Be available at all times. Journalists work with very short timelines. Your media contact should be able to respond quickly to requests for quotes and interviews.



4.3 Step Three: Draw up a Media Contact List

Find out where to send a press release or announcement. Ideally, you should also know which reporter is to receive it. If you can't get a name, ask for the city editor, assignment editor or features editor. Also include newsletters, small community papers and ethnic papers, church bulletins and so on.

Be aware of the deadlines for sending in your material. There are often different deadlines for writing a letter to the editor, a feature story, a community calendar listing and a classified ad.

Make repeated contacts with the media as deadlines approach. Send an advisory note about an event well in advance, and then follow it up with a formal press release and a phone call later.



4.4 Step 4 - Create your Event with Media in Mind

Make your event easy to photograph. TV stations and newspapers are always looking for good images (they're known as photo opportunities).

Make everything into an event. Even if it's a report that you worked on for two years, develop a forum to release the results so there's an "event" that can be covered. Rallies, walkathons, book launches, petition drives, well-known speakers and press conferences are all events that promote a more complex issue.

Remember that problems and conflicts are often considered newsworthy events. Don't go public with negotiations you're making with a politician or internal problems in your group unless it somehow serves a purpose (or the information has already been leaked and there's nothing you can do). Once a situation is made public, people are usually less willing to change their stand. If you want to put pressure on a politician through the media, ask for something (a meeting with your group, a public forum, etc.) that let's them save face.

Try and make abstract ideas concrete. Use visual images and examples to illustrate your point. For example, don't just give numbers of how many cars pass through your region each year. Instead, say that if they were piled nose to nose they would reach however many miles into space.

4.5 Step 5 - Provide all of the Required Information

If you do the background research, reporters will quote you. Check your sources because they won't forgive you if you make them look foolish.

The less work a reporter has to do on your story, the easier it is for them to fit your news into their schedule. You also want to attract their interest; they receive many more announcements that they can use. Try and catch their attention by being clear, brief and interesting. They are looking for something that's new and of particular interest to their audience.

If you are holding an event, offer them your help in arranging for interviews and photographs. Have any relevant information or background material on hand, and wear badges to identify the organizing crew.



4.6 Step 6 - Writing a Press Release

Style

Press releases follow a strict style. They are 1 to 1 ½ pages long, double-spaced and typed. They should be clear and concise and designed to grab the attention of the editor who scans 200 of them a day and picks out 20 to follow up on. Try and tell it like a news story, give your event a headline and an angle that you want them to use.

Leading information

What, how, why, when and who should be covered in the first paragraph. The “why” is very important – why is this news? Why is this happening and why is it interesting? You need to give this information in 3 or 4 sentences.

Try answering such questions as:

- What will take place?
- Why are you holding this event?
- Who will be there?
- When and where is it?
- How many people are participating and what will they be doing?
- What do you expect to come out of the event?

Background information

The next paragraphs should give more detailed information, background statistics, a summary of the issue, or details about the event. Use sentences that would make good quotes and give facts that capture their interest. If you are asking for an interview, or want them to attend a press conference, remember that you’ll have another chance to give them information. Don’t drown them in details.

Contact information

At the bottom of the page, include the name of the media contact for your group and their phone number(s), as well as the name of the person organizing the event (who can arrange interviews or filming) and your group’s logo.

4.7 Definitions

Media Contact Person

The designated person in your group a reporter should interview or ask for information.

Photo Opportunity

An event that looks visually interesting, so that TV reporters will cover it.

Press Release

An announcement you send to a newspaper, TV or radio station about something you want them to report on.

Public Service Announcement (PSA)

Similar to a press release, except that you are asking for a free announcement about something that benefits the public.

