

Working With the Media

A customized guide created by *do good* Consulting



As a non-profit leader, your opinions and thoughts will often be sought by the media and colleagues, elected officials, students, and community members.

How do you learn to be a spokesperson and work with the media to effectively promote your message and the image of your organization? This guide offers tips and examples to guide you.



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Introduction

You need not be a superstar to appear on the evening news or the front page of your local paper. Many of the folks you see there are just like you: involved in their community, making notable achievements, and promoting new and cutting-edge projects.

As a non-profit leader, you are obviously very passionate about your cause. You are also likely someone whose opinion the media will seek when it comes to the issue on which you work. Your status brings you authority, and the right and ability to speak with added weight to issues impacting our community and future generations.

At your organization, you will be working with colleagues to develop new initiatives: programs, research, educational tools, and much more. As you make progress and gain success, you should share and promote your initiatives and work with the public, and using the media to project your message is a great way to reach the masses.

It is important that you are prepared as a spokesperson, both for the issues for which you are passionate, but also for your organization, the clients you represent, and your members and donors.

This guide offers you some tips to help you cultivate strong relationships with the media personnel in your region to generate hard-hitting stories and top coverage to get your community and state talking - and doing something - about these issues.

Before the Interviews Start

Whether it's a reporter from your hometown paper or a well-known media celebrity, your status as a key player in a non-profit organization is likely to net you more than one media interview. If you have never been on camera before, had a microphone shoved at you, or sat down with a reporter, preparing for this experience is your first step.

It need not be daunting. Media personnel are people with jobs just like us. Knowing that our words and image might make the 10 o'clock news, though, can make just about anyone nervous.

Here are tips to help you establish strong relationships with your local media representatives and to help prepare you for print, radio, and TV interviews:

1. Get to know the media and reporters most likely to cover you. Begin by really getting to know the local media. Tune in and open the papers: whose "beat" covers your issue area? What are their typical angles and storylines? Can you tell if they have a particular interest area that could tie into your work and focus? In addition to making sure you have a subscription to the local paper(s); be sure to watch the local news, bookmark media websites, and get active in organizations where you are likely to meet reporters and editors, such as the Chamber of Commerce or Rotary.
2. Get to know reporters personally. Media personalities in east central Illinois tend to be people just like you and me. Like us, they appreciate getting to know others, and being networked helps them do well at their job. To help cultivate a strong relationship, contact your local reporters to arrange a short meeting to introduce yourself. Be considerate of their busy schedules and make it brief. Drop off printed materials (business cards, brief research pertinent to your cause, etc.). Over time, you will have other opportunities to develop these contacts into more familiar relationships. Develop a media list (phone and email database) of your contacts for easy reference. Be sure to keep it updated, as turnover in the media is just as common as with other jobs.
3. Develop two to three key points to make - *your message* - and stick to them. Keep them brief, focused, and simple: we live in an era of sound bites and short attention spans. Don't let reporters get you off subject: always come back to the point(s) you want to make. Otherwise, you risk a weak story, having readers or listeners miss your point, or ending up with no story. Get comfortable with the facts, figures, and anecdotes that support your points and have them ready to

provide to reporters if necessary. Anticipate questions reporters might ask and have responses ready. Practice ahead of time, but be sure not to sound “canned”.

EXAMPLE:

Key Point #1: Habitat for Humanity is a volunteer-driven organization.

Key Point #2: Habitat for Humanity builds homes in partnership with families in need. We offer a hand up, not a hand out.

Key Point #3: Habitat homes are sold to Habitat homeowners, not given away. Habitat does not charge interest, making mortgage payments affordable for Habitat families.

4. Reporters are usually on deadline, so if they contact you, either try to take their call or be sure to call back right away. When you do speak with a reporter, always find out to whom you are speaking, which media organization she works for, and what her deadline is.
5. Don't feel pressured. If a reporter shows up or calls unannounced and you are unprepared, reschedule for a time when you will feel comfortable and at ease.
6. When a reporter calls requesting an interview, be clear on the subject of the interview and get some sample questions. If you need time to collect your thoughts (and the reporter's deadline allows), offer to call back later at a specific time. *Follow through in a timely fashion or your credibility erodes.*
7. Reporters' schedules are often determined by “breaking news”. Don't be offended if an interview gets canceled or rescheduled for a more urgent story.
8. Have printed materials (reports, photos, etc.) to support your information whenever possible to help reporters minimize errors. Offer to email the reporter printed information in advance of or right after the interview.
9. Make yourself available to the media at any time. The more available you are, the more likely they are to contact you, and the more likely your issues and angles are to be covered. In establishing relationships with local media representatives, be sure to provide them with your work, home, and cell numbers so they can reach you day or night. Be sure to get their numbers, too, and enter them into your media list.
10. Always give the media information that is newsworthy. In working with the media, you need not always wait for them to contact you. If you have something new, noteworthy, and relevant to a large share with the public, drop your reporter contacts a line asking them about their interest in covering it. Your chances increase if you also provide a good human interest angle to your lead or story. Be aware, though: reporters are not interested in yesterday's news, items of interest to a very limited audience, or routine events.

The Interview

Now that you have interviews set, knowing what to expect – and how to handle yourself – during the interview will help you stay focused, create a great story, and project a positive, dynamic image.

Whether it's a beat reporter from the local paper who shows up, a stringer from the local NPR affiliate, or a regional TV reporter, here's what you need to know about being in a media interview:

1. Before the interview begins, remind yourself of your message (your 2-3 main points). **Stick to your message throughout the interview and don't get distracted by or lured by tangents. Practice key phrases in advance.**

EXAMPLE:

Reporter: "So, what do you think about the price of tea in China?"

You DO: "Actually, the real question is 'are kids today learning about China's human rights issues?'. It's important for them to understand the world around them. They need to know what's going on – they read the paper, watch the news, and scan current events on the internet. These issues must be discussed with them."

You DON'T: "Can you believe they want \$5 an ounce for that stuff? It's a rip-off!"

2. **Keep it brief!** TV and radio stories generally use a 10-20 second cut – a couple if you're lucky. Even print reporters look for short, snappy quotes. **The shorter and more concise your comments, the better.**

EXAMPLE:

Reporter: "How do you intend to disburse the results of your study?"

You DO: "We intend to use every means possible to bring this study into home of every community member."

You DON'T: "Well, the Chamber of Commerce is a good start. The University of Illinois and Parkland, too. And the cities and county. Hm, and local businesses. There are probably some good iserves, too. Oh, and it'll be on our website."

3. **Avoid academic or technical jargon.** Your audience is the general public, so stay at a basic level and explain special terms if you must use them.

EXAMPLE:

Reporter: "How were able to achieve such high participation rates?"

You DO: "I use method called Mind Like a Steel Trap that uses attendee's interest in singing and dancing to help them remember accounting priciples. It's cutting edge, and it's working. Just ask my participants."

*You **DON'T**: "I specialize in MLST. It was developed two years ago by Dr. Smarty Pants at Hoity-Toity University. Program participants use musicology and vocal sound to commit accounting functions to memory. It's a technique supported by the NPTA."*

4. It's tempting to talk a lot to get your full point across, but in doing so, you jeopardize the clarity of your message. Instead, return to your key points to get back (or stay) on track. If you just presented a key point in an unclear or rambling way, stop for a second and make your point again. The reporter needs the quote to make sense.
5. Remember these five C's to ensure success in working with the media:
 - ☞ Speak with conviction in a conversational manner.
 - ☞ Use catchy phrases (soundbites) that include your main points.
 - ☞ Always maintain your composure.
 - ☞ Project confidence! You are the expert!
 - ☞ Use color: Tell stories, examples, and anecdotes to illustrate your point.
6. In speaking with reporters, remember that their questions will be edited out: your responses must stand on their own. **Speak in complete thoughts and get to your point quickly.**

EXAMPLE:

Reporter: "What's the average cost of a Habitat Home?"

*You **DO**: "Habitat homes are sold to homeowners after a rigorous selection process at cost and with no profit, which works out to \$85,000."*

*You **DON'T**: "85,000."*

7. Don't overestimate a reporter's knowledge of your subject. When a reporter bases a question on information you believe is incorrect, set the record straight in a polite, non-confrontational manner. Offer background information where necessary.

EXAMPLE:

Reporter: "Why are Kiddiland Elementary's classes so large?"

*You **DO**: "Kiddi's classes are full - we are a very popular school - but they are not large. In fact, Kiddi Elementary has the smallest class size in all of Kiddiland: about 20 students per classroom. That's even better than the national average."*

*You **DON'T**: "The classes aren't large. Who told you that?"*

8. If you don't understand a question, seek clarification. Don't talk around it.

EXAMPLE:

Reporter: "Littering is a big problem. What should be done about it?"

*You **DO**: "Are you referring to the increasing rate of fly dumping along County Road 9?"*

You DON'T: "I know, I was just driving behind a car this morning who dumped his whole ashtray right out the window! Gross!"

9. If you don't have the answer to a reporter's question, always say so. Tell them where to find the information (if possible) or tell them you'll look into it and get back to them. Always get back to them with the *answer in a timely fashion*.

EXAMPLE:

Reporter: "What percentage of your participant's kids receive free lunches at their schools?"

You DO: "That's a great question, Sandi. I don't have that number off the top of my head, though. Let me verify it with the regional director this afternoon. I'll call you with it no later than 4PM. Will that work for your deadline?"

You DON'T: "Well, I heard it's about 40%, but I'm not sure. Anyway, it's a lot."

10. Never say, "No comment." Instead, if you can't - or choose not to - answer, explain briefly.

EXAMPLE:

Reporter: "So you agree, then, with the points made in the 2007 Report on Racial Inequity?"

You DO: "Unfortunately, Ron, I can't answer that because I haven't had the chance yet to read that report."

11. Avoid traps and difficult situations with these tactics:

- ↳ If a reporter poses a question using negative language, avoid getting baited into a negative response.
- ↳ Reporter's sometimes play devil's advocate to get colorful responses. Never give angry, defensive responses. Instead, return to your key points.
- ↳ Avoid saying things "off the record." Reporters may or may not honor this. If you don't want to hear it on the evening news, don't say it.
- ↳ If a reporter asks you to speculate or answer a hypothetical question (i.e., "Assume that..." or "What if...") and the direction seems sketchy, respond with something like: "I can't speculate on the unknown, however..." and restate one of your main points.
- ↳ If a reporter pauses after you've answered a question, avoid feeling tempted to add more. Sometimes they use this pause to get you to say something you otherwise wouldn't. Smile and wait for the next question.

12. If interviewed by phone, a reporter must by law tell you when you are being recorded. If you're not certain, ask.

13. Always be honest.

Tips For TV & Radio Interviews

We've all seen them before: the interviewee who chewed gum on camera, the executive who forgot it was a live interview, and that poor fellow whose toupee wasn't right. Don't let this be you!

Here are a few tips to keep the interview process going smoothly and ensure a top-shelf job on your part:

1. For television interviews, wear solid-color clothing. Stripes, plaids, and other designs are distracting to viewers, as are large, jangling, or reflective jewelry. Make the audience focus on your message and words, not your outfit or accessories. Also, if you do not need to have your glasses on, remove them for camera interviews: they can glare into the lens and reduce the audience's ability to connect with you visually.
2. Look in a mirror just before going on camera. The reporter may not tell you your lipstick is smudged over or your tie is off-center.
3. Choose a location with limited noise. Silence your phone and email alert. Avoid rooms with loud noises (i.e., kids, dogs, HVAC units). Never chew gum while being interviewed!
4. Find out in advance if the interview is edited or "live". If you agree to a live interview, be sure you're comfortable thinking on your feet and responding off the cuff. Sometimes you do not have a choice, but if you do, and you prefer a non-live interview, ask for one.
5. While it is normal these days to insert "um", "like", and "you know" into casual conversation, these unconscious fillers do not play out well on or in the news. Often, reporters will print verbatim what you say, including such stammers and TV and radio reporters are unlikely to edit them out. This stresses the need for you to be comfortable with your message, your key points, and your general topic area. It also helps if you can approach the interview stress-free: avoid high-intensity meetings, hectic errand-running, and difficult conversations just before your interview to keep distractions to a minimum.
6. In edited (non-live) interviews, pause briefly before answering questions. This helps reporters get "clean" sound bites and allows you to think out your answer. It's also okay to stop and start over again if you don't like the way you worded your answer.

7. In TV interviews, look at the reporter, not the camera. If your topic is an upbeat and positive one, be sure to wear a genuine smile. This comes across in the tone of your voice and engages listeners. If the topic is not upbeat (and not a tragedy), avoid coming across as angry or upset: it can turn listeners off.
8. Sit (or stand) still in front of microphones. Avoid chairs that rock or spin. Also, avoid nervous habits like pen tapping and coin jangling.

After the Interview

Phew, now that it's over, you can take a deep breath and loosen the tie. Reflect on your experience, noting your strong and not so strong points. Before you run home to program the TIVO, take some time to do your own personal "outcome evaluation" - a personal reflection of how you did. How do you feel? Did you get your main points across? Did the reporter seem engaged? Do you feel that you connected with her? Did you exchange contact information to help keep the relationship moving forward? Just reflect and jot your notes down in a journal if you wish.

Here are some tips for after the microphones and cameras are turned off:

1. It's unlikely you'll have a chance to review a reporter's story before it appears. However, you can ask questions after the interview to test for comprehension.

Example: "What do you think is the main story angle here?"

2. You are free to ask when a story will appear. The reporter may not know, but if she does she will usually be happy to tell you.

3. If you feel after reflecting on an interview that you misspoke, gave incorrect information, or missed something major, call the reporter as soon as possible.

EXAMPLE:

You DO: "Hi Brenda. Thanks for the interview earlier today. I was thinking about what I said about AIDS testing. I wanted to clarify a point I made about reporting. What I really meant to say was....."

4. If a *major* error appears (the wrong date for an upcoming event), let the reporter know right away. Sometimes a correction can be printed or aired. If an issue is minor and insignificant, resist the urge to correct the reporter - you risk jeopardizing your relationship with them.

EXAMPLE:

You DO: "Hi Sam. Thanks for a great article in yesterday's paper. I wanted to clarify one important issue, though. The date for the gala is Saturday, June 7, not Friday, June 6. I am terribly sorry if I misspoke. Do you think you could run a correction in tomorrow's paper?"

5. Give positive feedback to reporters (if merited) after a story appears. Written notes, email, phone calls, or voice mails all work fine. Like us, they usually hear only complaints and rarely get a call or note to say they've done a good job. If

you're unhappy with a story, share your concerns tactfully with the reporter first. Contact the editor as a last resort.

EXAMPLE:

*You **DO (positive feedback)**: "Hi Sue. Just a quick message to let you know I really enjoyed the story on the 10PM news last night. It was concise and delivered a big punch. I have already heard from colleagues about it and they, too, thought it was a great piece. Thank you again.*

*You **DO (critical feedback)**: "Hi Sue. Thanks again for the interview yesterday. I heard the piece on AM600 this morning. I had a couple of things I wanted to discuss with you. Can you please give me a call back when you have a chance? Thanks."*

6. Record the broadcast and use this guide to critique your performance, looking for ways to improve in the future.

In Closing

Reporters come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and types. No one is the same. Use this guide as a starting point to getting comfortable working with the media.

As you get more and more comfortable in your role as a spokesperson for your cause, you will find yourself building stronger and lasting relationships with your media partners. They are your key to reaching thousands of community members, elected officials, parents, and children.

Partner with the media wisely and to your advantage, and you can create a great deal of change for people, children, and families throughout your community!