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## EARNED MEDIA



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# EARNED MEDIA

## *What is Earned Media?*

Political people use the term “earned media” to describe articles in newspapers and broadcast stories that are not paid for like advertisements. Such coverage used to be called “free media” but we know that it takes a great deal of time, effort, and energy to place stories about a ballot issue. To get news attention, you have to earn it.

News coverage is never an end in itself, but rather it is a means to an end, a strategy in service of a goal. If your goal is to make sure community leaders know you are kicking off a new effort, you might try to get it in the paper. If your goal is to address misinformation in the community about what the real cost of your program is, you might ask the producer of a popular talk radio program if you can be a guest. A favorable article about your organization or project can be copied and used as an enclosure in a fundraising appeal letter. Third party validation of your importance or your viability is a good goal.

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Generally speaking, earned media does not constitute public information (or voter contact for those working on issue campaigns), because too few citizens actually pay much attention to the news. But news coverage of your issue is very important to the “opinion leaders” in your community - those who influence others. It not only gives your effort legitimacy in their eyes, but news stories can be vehicles for spreading those key messages you want people repeating to others when they are talking about issues.

When you write your organization’s strategic plan, ask yourself how and when news coverage will be most helpful and think through how you will shape the message and what opportunities for positive coverage you can create. Set your goals first, then plan media strategies that serve those goals.

In addition to laying the groundwork for positive news coverage, your team should prepare to deal with news events generated by opponents or by the media themselves. Many organizations designate an official spokesperson to deal with all press inquiries. Any media contact provides an opportunity to deliver your key messages, so having one person who is prepared to capitalize is a huge plus. If you know of a negative hanging over your head – say for example a previous director misspent money – plan for what you will say if you are ever asked about it. It is a mistake to ignore the issue and hope it won’t surface.

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## *Media List*

As you begin planning, you’ll want to make sure you have an updated media list with the name, title, address, email, fax number, and phone number of the key reporters and editors for the daily and weekly newspapers in your area plus any local TV and radio news programs or talk shows. Don’t forget to include any specialty media that might be within your market, such as senior citizen newsletters or church bulletins. When building your list, make sure you know what their news cycles and deadlines are, and how they like to receive information: email, phone, or fax.

## Media Kit

In order to make sure that every news outlet in your area has ready access to your information, think about creating and distributing a media kit. This not only ensures they have a file on your organization, but the act of dropping it off creates an opportunity for relationship-building. Some things to put in a media kit are:

- ❖ A fact sheet about the group, its history, and service statistics.
- ❖ Funding information.
- ❖ Photographs of your building and people using it, along with photos of your board, and/or your director.
- ❖ A news release announcing a new initiative, providing key message points, and usable quotes from your board or campaign chair.
- ❖ Who to contact for more information, including a web address if you have one.
- ❖ Sample brochures or other literature pieces that have been developed.
- ❖ Any favorable news coverage of the organization in the last few years.

Put all of these materials neatly into folders and make extra copies to keep handy. Provide a fresh version each year. Don't be offended if someone asks you for something you have already provided or if it doesn't appear that they are making use of the information you gave them. It is better that they have it and don't use it than that they need it and don't have it.

**It is appropriate to send an advisory 5-7 days before an event, and to follow up with a phone call the day before.**

## Press Advisories

Press advisories are used to give advance notice of an event to which press is invited, whether it is a press conference, a town hall meeting, fundraiser, or other event. The format of a press advisory is pretty straightforward, giving the date, time, location, names of speakers, the topic, and any other logistics that reporters will need to know in advance. It is appropriate to send an advisory 5-7 days before an event, and to follow up with a phone call the day before. If you include too much information in your advisory, the press will have no reason to actually attend.

## Press Releases

Press releases contain a bit more information than advisories and can be written exactly as you would like to see them in print. Take care to get your key points up front, followed by a strong quote from your best messenger, then as much backup information as you can squeeze in. Often distributed right before or after an event, press releases should provide a reporter with the who, what, where, when, and why of your story within a few paragraphs. You can use attachments to provide additional facts or background information.

Most media guides recommend limiting press releases to a single page, but we suggest using your judgment, especially if you are in a small market. If your goal is to get someone's attention so they will cover your event, stick to the advisory format if you can. If you expect them to print your story verbatim, write a release the way you want it based on your knowledge of how much space they are likely to give you. Put all releases on your organization's letterhead and use the same format and style every time. Components of a release:

- ❖ Date,
- ❖ Release instructions such as "For Immediate Release" or "For Release at 3:00pm Tuesday,"
- ❖ Contact name and number of the spokesperson. (Make sure that person will answer the phone when the release goes out!),
- ❖ Eye-catching headline,
- ❖ Lead sentence containing your key message point,
- ❖ Pithy on-message quote from your best messenger, and
- ❖ One of the two universal symbols for the end: "-30-" or "###."

## Press Conferences

You might consider holding a press conference to announce a major event or development, or perhaps to respond to an allegation or other bit of misinformation that has appeared in the media. Take care not to employ this device too often, or you may develop a “Chicken Little” reputation and find it difficult to generate coverage when you really need it. Here are some tips for putting together a strong press conference:

- ❖ Send out a media advisory 5-7 days in advance, and make follow-up phone calls the day before.
- ❖ Plan to hold your press conference at a location that is easily accessible, and that tells your story visually. Take special care with site arrangements and other logistics. You want to make sure the microphones work, that you can get inside in time to set up, and that there is room for camera tripods if you expect TV reporters.
- ❖ Given usual press deadlines, the best time to hold an event is between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.
- ❖ Have copies of your media kit available, including a press release or statements from the speakers and any important background information.
- ❖ Plan for the entire event to last only 20-30 minutes, including the question and answer session. If you have more than one speaker, ask each speaker to be very brief, to start and end strong, to stay on message, to avoid jargon, and to use a personal story if possible. Also, not everyone who offers support needs to speak. Their presence alone delivers the message.
- ❖ Offer one-on-one interviews after the question and answer session with any reporters who seem to be doing stories.
- ❖ Take pictures and copies of the release and other materials to any media outlets that were not present.

**Take photos and write up a press release to hand out at the event or to deliver to media outlets afterward.**

## Community Meetings and Events

Though most community meetings and other staged events are generally lightly attended and serve little purpose in terms of educating the public, they can still be useful for getting message points to opinion leaders if they produce favorable news articles. Before inviting the press to such an event, however, make sure you have recruited enough supporters to make a respectable showing. Some further tips for organizing a meeting or event:

- ❖ Send invitations to large numbers of people and state clearly what the meeting’s agenda is to be while delivering key message points.
- ❖ Craft opening remarks carefully, as for a press conference, and make your case clearly and concisely.
- ❖ Allow anyone who wants to speak the opportunity to do so, but don’t argue with hecklers or opponents. Keep the discussion moving and make sure you have supporters present who can help you keep the meeting on track.
- ❖ Put literature, volunteer cards, and donation envelopes on a table near the door. If you don’t have these yet, have people sign in and give them an opportunity to note if they would like to help.
- ❖ Make notes of the discussion and do follow up with anyone, especially media, whose questions you are unable to answer during the event.
- ❖ Take photos and write up a press release to hand out at the event or to deliver to media outlets afterward.

**After you have answered a question *stop talking*, even if there is an awkward gap in the conversation. Don’t be intimidated by silence. The reporter may well be hoping that you will become uncomfortable and “make news” with idle chatter.**

## Giving Interviews

By following the steps above you are providing a great deal of information for a reporter's use. Yet, some of them will still want to conduct interviews in order to write their own stories about your organization or project. Sometimes their interest in an interview will have been generated by your efforts, and sometimes they will have other reasons – such as when they are giving you an opportunity to respond to something negative someone else has said. Some interviews are done quite quickly, so a newspaper writer can get a few quotes for a story. Some may be taped or run live on radio or TV. Whatever the context, the guidelines for giving media interviews are the same:

- ❖ “Off the record” only exists in cases of long-standing relationships with reporters. If you don't know them well enough to trust them personally, then assume that anything you say can and will turn up in their story.
- ❖ Your job is to deliver tested and agreed-to message points. Whatever the reporter asks can be answered briefly and pivoted back to what you want to talk about. Try not to repeat the premise of their question as that could become their sound bite.
- ❖ After you have answered a question stop talking, even if there is an awkward gap in the conversation. Don't be intimidated by silence. The reporter may well be hoping that you will become uncomfortable and “make news” with idle chatter.
- ❖ You don't have to answer hostile questions. If you can deflect them with humor do so, but otherwise try to stay calm, smile, and compose yourself before addressing the issue briefly and pivoting back to your message.
- ❖ Even if you are interviewing by telephone, stand up and put yourself in presentation mode as though you were addressing an audience in person. No matter how comfortable you are with a reporter, avoid getting too chatty when they are working on a story.
- ❖ When a reporter calls with a question, it is always appropriate to find out what their question is, get their deadline, and promise to call them back when you are prepared to respond. Just make sure you call them back in a timely manner.
- ❖ Repeat your message as often as you can work it in to the conversation.
- ❖ Be confident, friendly, and helpful. Talk slowly and avoid jargon.
- ❖ Practice makes perfect. Even if you are unhappy with the first few interviews you give, stay at it. It gets easier with repetition.

**Cultivating a friendly working relationship with print reporters can pay dividends down the road. Articles can be clipped and used as fundraising enclosures, reproduced for distribution door-to-door, and included in your media kit.**

## Newspaper Articles

Though a relatively small percentage of the general public reads a newspaper regularly, many people associated with your organization - your board, your donors and volunteers, local elected officials, journalists, neighborhood activists, and others - read one every day. Stories originating in the paper are often picked up by other media, so if time and resources are limited, pitch your stories to print reporters first. Weekly papers are especially receptive to soft news stories involving community organizations. Cultivating a friendly working relationship with print reporters can pay dividends down the road. Articles can be clipped and used as fundraising enclosures, reproduced for distribution door-to-door, and included in your media kit.

**Even if the paper does not formally endorse your cause, they may support your effort personally, leading to well-placed and timely stories later on.**

## Letters to the Editor

Many opinion leaders open their morning paper immediately to the editorial page. Letters to the editor are the most highly read parts of the paper and often fuel the community's "buzz." Letters to the editor are regularly planted and everybody knows it. If you have an important message to convey to your community, think through who you want to carry it and what the timing should be. Know the rules for publishing letters. When someone agrees to write a letter for you, give them your key message points and ask them to follow them. It really is not helpful to have supporters off on their own tangent and not discussing the tested and agreed-to message points you know are persuasive.

## Guest Opinion Pieces

One good way to lay out a detailed position on a complex issue is through the use of a guest opinion column in your local paper. Most papers run these on occasion, but check locally to find out what they would be willing to print. Work with the editorial page editor to pick a subject and a word count. Ask them about timing issues. Once an article has appeared in the press, you will be able to use it as an enclosure in fundraising or other mail. Think about the best messenger before deciding whose name should appear on the column.

## Editorial Endorsements

Many editorial boards still evaluate projects and make endorsements, either for or against. Though they will often say they do not plan to endorse on your issue, ask to meet with the editorial board anyway. Go in and make your best case. Try to get those individuals on your side. Of course, if they do endorse you, make sure key opinion leaders all see that by making and distributing copies. Even if the paper does not formally endorse your cause, they may support your effort personally, leading to well-placed and timely stories later on.

## Broadcast Media

Even in smaller areas, there are often terrific opportunities to get your message out to opinion leaders via the airwaves and cable. Local news broadcasts and talk shows all cover local organizations and events, if only sparsely, and leaders should be prepared to make a little thunder or at least to take advantage when such opportunities emerge.

**Note that TV is a visual medium and very often there is no story if there is no video.**

- ❖ **Radio Actualities:** These are little bits of recorded sound that can be sent to radio stations, much like printed press releases, to facilitate the placement of a favorable story. They might be part of the remarks made at a town hall meeting or press conference, or your key messenger discussing an important point. To produce actualities you need an electronic voice recording system and the email address of the reporter or news director you are hoping to interest. Keep these short, no more than 30 seconds, and recognize that they will likely be edited to 5-7 seconds. Some stations will not accept actualities, but will do interviews over the phone. So, as with all other media, develop a relationship and know what they want so you can best respond if they fail to turn up to a press event.
- ❖ **Talk Shows:** Talk radio permeates the AM dial in many communities and all of those hours need to be filled with interesting guests and topics. Sometimes getting a place on the agenda is a simple matter of calling a show's producer and requesting it. You can do a show from any telephone and as long as you are humorous and engaging, you may well be invited back. When you schedule such a show, make sure you know the host's name (and use it), know the format and how long you will be on the

air, and plan enough material for the entire interview. Follow the tips for interviews outlined above and if there is a call-in portion, be prepared for eccentric comments and questions. Also, ask supporters to call in both while you are on the air and other times as well.

The key to successful media relations is planning and advance work.

- ❖ **Television:** Unless there is a giant controversy, TV news does not tend to cover organizations and projects. Even so, you will want to make sure you have provided the same media kits and press advisories and releases you send to others, so that they'll have your information if anything does come up. Watch your local news broadcasts and observe how they put stories together. Note that TV is a visual medium and very often there is no story if there is no video. Sometimes stations will send a single camera person to a staged event, but without a reporter. Pay attention to your visuals and make sure you have a good sound bite prepared. Give the press kit to the camera operator and ask him or her to take it to the reporters or producers working on the story.

## Conclusion

Relationships with journalists are like professional relationships everywhere. It is important to understand where they are coming from, what their needs are, and how you can help them. While they tend to prefer hullabaloo and "breaking news," they do see it as their job to cover your organization or effort, no matter how tame, but not to be a mouthpiece for it. They see themselves as reporters of facts and most of them genuinely are. Even if you are faced with a reporter who treats you unfairly, however, responding discourteously or ignoring them will only make the problem worse.

Never lie, exaggerate, or ad lib. Don't be afraid to say you don't know.

The key to successful media relations is planning and advance work. Make sure you know your message cold and practice repeating it over and over, no matter what you are asked. Above all, never let an adverse article pull you out of your campaign plan. No matter how much someone else wants to talk about taxes being too high, or about perceived waste in your program, you have to be talking about the things that are proven effective in persuading others to support you.

Here are some final tips for dealing with the media:

- ❖ Journalists decide what stories they will do based on their news judgment. Accept their rules and work with them. Fighting them is a losing strategy. If you know the reporter is going to pull public documents for a story, for example, make a copy and give it to her. At least you will get points for being helpful.
- ❖ Always return their phone calls. Never refuse to comment. Say "I can't talk about that right now" or "I don't have an answer on that."
- ❖ Use anecdotes and other strategies to make your issue about people – your patrons, even your board, or your director. If it is personal, it is newsworthy.
- ❖ Take care to look your best. Always carry yourself with the stature you want the media to convey.
- ❖ If an error is made, suggest they run a correction. Even if they refuse, at least they know you are paying attention. Try not to go over a reporter's head to their editor, however.