



# Building a Media Strategy

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## **I. OVERVIEW OF A MEDIA STRATEGY**

Media relations are key to any successful communications effort on your behalf. Other communications components, such as publications (magazine or newsletter, brochures), a logo, a Web site, special events, design capability and video production should round out your effort.

The first step is to analyze the needs and desires of your audience. Implementing a plan without doing some research can lead to expensive and time-consuming miscues.

This is the starting point of your media plan. Effective planning and coordination with key partners will satisfy your advocates, as well as draw additional support for your work.

### ***a. Targets of Your Media Plan***

Generally, you are promoting active transportation as a service. Essential target groups of your message include decision-makers, advocates, allied organizations and the general community.

The strategies for serving these groups will vary. You primarily try to deliver products and services to satisfy the first three groups, and seek your growth from the general public. Along with the media, your goal is to positively impact these groups through a successful communications strategy.

### ***b. Communications Success: It won't happen overnight***

Successful media relations strategies depend on four key points:

1. Media relations are essential to the process of planning and building an active transportation network.
2. Qualified persons must be involved in a communications effort.
3. Committing the necessary financial resources, however modest they may be, is essential.
4. Patience is key! An image is neither simply created nor improved overnight.

## **II. BUILDING MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS**

Building media connections, regardless of the scope and target, takes time to make the connections, to gain the necessary credibility and then to sell your story. Expect to deal with recreation, health, environment, real estate, business and lifestyle reporters and editors, all of whom may have a story to tell about your efforts. Whether they are print or electronic media journalists, they can help disseminate your message.

### ***a. The Key Players***

#### *The Editor*

The chief executive of a major newspaper department may have risen through the ranks either as a beat writer, columnist or away from the public eye as a copy editor. It is this editor who decides what will be covered by staff, what features will be developed and how various stories will be treated in terms of priority.

#### *The Reporter*

At smaller dailies and weeklies, the editor you wish to interest in your story might also be the reporter. In metropolitan dailies, reporters may be specialists on just one "beat," or have a couple of assignments depending on the season. You will know the key reporters by their bylines.

Good journalists will make every effort to learn about your organization, ask sensible questions and report the responses correctly. Plan your media strategy by putting yourself in their shoes and trying to anticipate the information they will need.

#### *The Television Director*

In most cases, the director is either the number one on-air announcer, or an experienced producer/director who has risen to prominence behind the camera.

As a grassroots promoter in a metropolitan market, you will need a pretty compelling story to break onto the screen. Often, the focus of a broadcast will be a controversy. Or, you will need to spend a lot of time developing newsworthy visual feature opportunities to achieve a breakthrough. In small communities where the local director may have a solid 15 minutes each day (vs. five minutes in a big city), there is real opportunity to further your media goals.

#### *Other Newspaper/Magazine Professionals*

Active transportation is suitable for much more than the recreation/outdoors pages or the transportation writers. The controversial side of active transportation is news for them, and if you can win them over, they can help promote the movement.

The weekly paper will have just as much interest in developing trend features (such as a new network of trails or bike lanes), but they'll need a local community connection to make the story. More often than not, these writers are entry-level journalists being trained to cover all subjects. They may need support and information from you if they are to develop meaningful stories.

### ***b. Establishing Mailing Lists***

Start by compiling a list of print and electronic media within the area you wish to influence. This list should include:

- (1) Daily newspapers
- (2) Weekly newspapers
- (3) Trade (transportation-related) publications
- (4) Regional magazines
- (5) Television stations (including the local PBS station) and
- (6) Radio stations (including the local NPR station).

You may find these listings in any number of special directories or local telephone books. Excellent sources include *Editor & Publisher Yearbook*, *Bacon's Media Directories*, *Broadcasting Yearbook* and *Gebbie All-in-One Directory*. Contact information for most reporters can be found online on a newspaper's web site. Reporters get up to 100 email messages per hour, so you need to make sure that you are telling the right reporter why you think the story is best for them, or you may get overlooked. Also, **do not send mail with attachments**, unless directly requested, as some spam filters will catch these messages and they will never make it to the reporter.

Your reporter file should include the names and pertinent information of all people you might be dealing with at a particular publication. You will want to include separate listings for each editor, columnist and reporter.

Media personnel change assignments frequently, so updating your mailing list often is an important part of the job. Once you've established contact with a particular media source, a periodic check on personnel assignments should keep your list current.

### ***c. Initial Contact***

Don't be shy. Members of the media expect you to contact them. They are usually approachable. You can introduce yourself via email, telephone or in person at a function or event. If you're making phone contact, first ask if he or she is on deadline. If not, simply introduce yourself and get to the point. If the reporter seems approachable, you may suggest getting together for lunch – or a walk or bike ride on a current project – to discuss how the two of you can work together in the future. Often, the reporter wants something in writing. That's where a press release, media kit, news alert or advisory comes in (See **III. Communicating with the Media**).

### ***d. Establishing a Positive Relationship***

Now you've scheduled a face-to-face meeting with a reporter. Congratulations! Bring along a copy of your organization's brochure, newsletter, fact sheet and your business card. Ask for suggestions on what you might do to help increase and/or improve coverage. Find out what other materials you might supply in the future. Offer timely feature story suggestions, such as upcoming events or newly opened facilities.

Ask how you might deliver information in a timely manner to insure that your event is covered. Ask about the paper's deadlines. Would the reporter prefer receiving information by e-mail, mail, phone, or fax?

Let the media representative know you and other staff or volunteers are available to assist on any related issue. Good newspaper and electronic media feature ideas often are wrapped around local reaction and opinion relating to national and international developments. For example, a local paper might be seeking reaction to a recent controversy. Your assistance can counteract negativity that might appear in the article and tell how your group is working hard to address the issue in the future.

There may be times when the media will seek your assistance on matters not related to your specific project or event. **Go out of your way to get the needed information.**

Always return phone calls: What's really important is that a reporter gets in the habit of contacting you and knows you can be relied upon as a good source.

To achieve your goals, it is critical that you make the reporter's job easier by providing news of substance, with reliable facts conveniently packaged and delivered in a timely manner.

#### ***e. A Few Ways to Stay in Touch***

Stay in touch with your media contacts even when you don't have anything immediate to promote. Receiving a handwritten note or brief phone call commenting on an article is often an ego-boost for a reporter and can enhance your professional relationship. Be careful about thanking a reporter for covering an event or writing a story. Remember, the reporter is doing his or her job and should not be made to feel as if he or she is doing you a favor. A holiday greeting with a personal note is a nice touch. Sending periodic updates on progress or digital photos is a good way to stay on their radar screen.

If there is time and money available, an annual event or bike ride with the media can be a big step in achieving long-range communications goals. It might even develop into some "first-person" stories on a feature page or in front of the TV camera.

You might also consider giving an award to a member of the media for his or her contribution to covering the active transportation movement.

#### ***f. Remember, You're Being Quoted!***

An organization should determine who its primary spokesperson is. Several people might be capable and qualified to answer queries of a general nature involving the project, but one spokesperson should field the more specific questions. And, of course, the spokesperson should be answering queries directly from an official policy standpoint, not personal opinion. Thus, as has been often repeated, groups and managers must have policies well thought out, well publicized and current at all times.

*Remember that there is no such thing as "off the record."* If you are not prepared to speak with a reporter about a controversial issue -- or one you don't yet have enough information about -- ask the reporter to call back, or schedule a time later that day for an interview. Reporters have come to expect a call back, and good reporters will leave themselves with plenty of time to write a story. No reporter is really on a five minute deadline, so don't worry about taking twenty minutes to get your thoughts together. "No comment" can be interpreted as a challenge to a reporter to dig further. If you find yourself in that position, amend your "no comment" to "I haven't had enough time to

discuss or research the matter. I'll get back to you after that." Or, "Our attorney has instructed us not to release information in this case because confidentiality may be compromised."

Ultimately what matters is that you are honest. Your credibility and the credibility of your supporters is always on the line when dealing with the media.

### ***g. Educate Yourself on Media Workings***

Start by reading the publications, watching the telecasts and learning the type of news the media covers. Review priorities and put down on paper how you feel active transportation could fit into the structure. Getting the right news to the right market is crucial.

Being aware of deadlines is the name of the game. One section of a newspaper might have a 72-hour before publication deadline, while another might accept last minute news. Magazines often work up to three months ahead of the cover issue date. Even weekly newspapers have diverse deadlines. When attempting to publicize items such as trail openings or other events, these deadlines must be strictly observed for you to get results. Getting to know your audience and understanding—as well as respecting—deadlines will give you increased credibility with your media contacts. Making their job easier will pay long-term dividends for you.

### **III. COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA**

Building and maintaining positive relationships with the media is a two-way street based on trust, confidence, familiarity and professionalism by both you and the media. There's no secret formula to delivering your message. As in any relationship – personal or professional – communications may be in person, by telephone, by mail, by fax or by e-mail.

#### ***a. The Telephone***

The most frequent method the media uses to obtain information is phone. When a reporter calls to say he or she is working on an active transportation story, ensure that your message and the name of your organization are an important part of that story. Consider offering to set up an interview with your organization's most influential or best-informed member, president, founder, CEO, etc. Such an interview will identify the individual quoted as a member of your organization, enhance the article in the eyes of the editor and may result in a longer piece appearing in a more prominent section of the paper or magazine.

Also, if you are often out of the office, make sure you regularly check your voicemail. It is important to respond to these calls in a timely manner. If you don't, the reporter will get the information elsewhere.

From time to time, reporters might ask questions that you don't have an answer for. Offer to find the answer and return the call promptly. When it makes more sense to refer the caller to someone else, provide the name and number or e-mail address of that person.

#### ***b. News Releases, Advisories, and Alerts***

The most time-consuming method of communicating and the one that requires the most expertise is written communications. News (press) releases, advisories or alerts are the written communications tools by which you provide the media with information about your event or organization. By sending this kind of written communication, it is your hope that the recipient will use it as the basis for a story about your news event.

News releases come in a number of formats, tailored to fit the activity.

1. **The Conventional News Release** resembles a newspaper article and announces
  - a. Specific news
  - b. Events for the season
  - c. An upcoming local event
  - d. Awards
  - e. The appointment of professional staff members.
2. **Media Advisories / Media Alerts / Fact Sheets** are used for long-lead publications or daily media outlets when you don't have all the details of an event and want to give the reporter a heads-up. They are also directed at calendar and events sections of publications. They follow a "Who, What, When, Where, Why and How" format and give contact information. Ideally, they are followed by a more detailed news release

as information becomes available. They are especially useful at attracting photo, television and radio coverage, since these journalists often dismiss news releases.

3. **The Bio Sheet or Background Release** is useful in providing reference information on the organization and its leader or providing more detail of a specific event.

### ***c. General News Release Guidelines***

When a release is mailed or faxed, it should be copied on well-designed news release letterhead. When the release is e-mailed, it should include the organization's name and contact information at the top.

Most releases include "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE" or "FOR RELEASE <DATE>." Next comes the headline, summarizing the content of the news release. However, you should not expect the publication to use your headline. It is merely to entice the reporter.

At the beginning of the lead sentence, you will indicate the geographic location of the news ("St. Louis, Mo."). This is referred to as the dateline.

Use an easy-to-read font (never script). End each page with an intact paragraph. If the release is more than one page, include -more- at the bottom of the page and -2- or -3- at the top of the following pages. The release should clearly end with -30- or # # #. Below that add *For more information, contact:* followed by a name, title, phone number and e-mail address. If your organization has a Web site, you should include that, as well.

### ***d. The News Release Style and Content***

Write your news release using the inverted pyramid style that journalists use. This means beginning with the main information. The first sentence or two (the lead) should include the "who, what, when, where, why and how" of your story. Editors, particularly at daily newspapers, have limited space. In a news article (opposed to a feature article), editors cut copy from the bottom. By following these simple guidelines, you improve the chances for your event to be covered.

The body of the news release should be an expansion of the brief facts you presented in your lead. Write in clear, concise language. The most important information should come first, followed by information that is helpful and may be of interest to the editor, reporter and/or reader.

Included in the latter category is the "stock paragraph" or "boilerplate," a brief description of your organization and its function that concludes every news release. Since everything you attempt in communications is an effort to improve the awareness and image of your organization, it makes sense to take every opportunity to tell your story. The following is an example of a stock paragraph:

Founded in 1986, Rails-To-Trails Conservancy (RTC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to enriching America's communities and countryside by creating a nationwide network of public trails from former rail lines and connecting corridors.

Finally, if the reader should act as a result of the release, include a directive:

- "Entries may be sent to..."
- "For more information write... or call..."
- "All schools interested in the program should contact..." "Tickets (\$3.00 adults, \$1.00 children) are on sale at..."

### ***e. Media Kits***

A media (press) kit refers to several pieces of information and photos developed for a major event or conference inserted into a kit. These kits are normally kept by reporters and referred to over time.

A media kit for a conference or special event could include:

- A cover letter;
- Copies of recent news releases relating to the event;
- The conference or event program;
- Invitations to special social activities during the conference;
- A biography and photo of the organization's president and board chair;
- Fact sheet/s on the organization;
- A list of board members;
- A copy of the organization's magazine or newsletter, and
- Copies of pertinent articles about the organization.

Materials should be inserted into a 9x12 pocket folder with your organization's name, logo and address on the front. You also can insert your business card in the inside pocket of the kit. Once in the hands of the media, you should continue to supplement the media kit with updated information on a regular basis.

### ***f. Other Written Communications***

Although most of your written communication with the media will consist of news releases, there will be occasions and opportunities for other options: A letter to the editor, an op-ed or opinion piece and a query letter to a magazine.

Sometimes a controversy that has been covered by a local publication will provide you with a chance to gain visibility and to communicate your viewpoint through a Letter to the Editor. The letter should be signed by the organization's president or board chair or someone in the organization who has a particular interest in the issue from a local point of view. Before writing the letter, you should determine the length of letters accepted for publication. Remember, the letter has to reference an event that has been covered by the publication. Some publications insist on exclusive use of the letter.

The op-ed (opposite the editorial page) or opinion piece should be submitted by a prominent member of the organization. It is longer than a letter to the editor and is written in essay form. Most major publications insist on exclusivity and a certain length (e.g., 700 words).

The query letter is a written suggestion to a magazine editor recommending an article on a certain subject. Consider identifying a freelance writer who works regularly for a magazine and encourage him or her to send in the query letter.

### ***g. The News (Press) Conference***

Consider holding a press conference if your organization has big news to report: perhaps you are launching a new trail project, a local or national celebrity has agreed to participate in an event in your city, or you have received funding from a prominent source. Conversely, press releases are helpful (and maybe even critical) for the launch of a new campaign. Whatever the case, plan your news conference carefully.

Make sure that the newsmakers will be able to attend the conference. Reporters want the news directly from the source, not from a spokesperson. Your president and/or board chair should be at the conference, even if he or she is not part of the news. They should open the news conference with a brief welcome and introduce the person who will make the announcement. This is customarily followed by a question and answer session moderated by the communications director.

Notify the media by a news alert *at least* 24 hours in advance of the news conference. You may want to confirm by phone. Few things are as embarrassing as organizing a news conference and then having one reporter show up. The best way to avoid this is to be sure you have something to say that is worthy of a news conference.

Your banner or logo should be prominently displayed to appear in as many television and still shots as possible.

A variation on the news conference is a media briefing at which print reporters are invited to meet with the leadership of your organization to discuss a number of related concerns (none of which guarantees immediate and significant coverage) over breakfast or lunch. Such a round table discussion could result in future coverage or serve to clarify your organization's stand on a particular issue. Reporters often find them a useful source of background information. Remember that these meetings are "on the record," which means that anything said by the organization's spokesperson can be quoted or referenced in an article. The main speakers should prepare for the briefing by anticipating questions and developing key messages.

Another variation on the news conference is the teleconference, which can be an effective way of encouraging reporters to call in for an announcement and question the spokesperson. This method works best when you have a dozen or so reporters who follow your activities on a regular basis. They are notified by e-mail in advance to phone a special telephone number at a specific time. Conferencing centers can arrange the connections.

### ***h. Editorial Background Session***

If there is an important local issue that your newspaper is covering and you need clarification or editorial support, arrange for two or three key members of your organization to meet with the newspaper's editorial page editor. These meetings can involve the entire editorial board, several members or only the editor, depending on the issue. The editor might also include in the meeting the beat reporter who regularly covers the issue in question. These meetings do not result in coverage, but are intended to set the record straight or encourage future editorial support.

## **IV. USING RADIO AND TELEVISION**

Depending on your newspaper's circulation, you might reach several hundred thousand readers with a positive article. But getting your message on television or radio can expand your audience by millions—even if the message is only 30 seconds long.

Think of it in terms of this quote from Todd Hunt and James E. Gronig's book, *Public Relations Techniques*: "If the print news release is still the bread and butter of public relations techniques, getting your organization's story on television is the peanut butter and jelly."

### ***a. Selling Your Story to Local TV***

As with presenting your story idea to a newspaper, you must first know what you have to offer. Consider whether you have an activity or project—such as an opening, statewide bike ride, or other events—that lends itself to visual coverage. Think about the people involved. Projects often have compelling human-interest stories to tell.

If you think you have a story worth pitching, do a little research. Which local station seems interested in your kind of story? Is there a television reporter who has covered related stories in the past? Select the station or stations, call the newsroom and ask for the assignment editor. This person works with the producers and assigns reporters and camera crews for the day.

Once you have identified a responsive person, present a succinct justification for the station to cover the story or event. Remember, you are not asking them to cover your event; you are giving them a reason to do so.

More than likely, you will be asked to fax or e-mail a fact sheet to the assignment editor to help him or her convince the producer to pursue your story. If you're having trouble getting someone on the phone, try faxing or e-mailing your idea.

A lot depends on what else is going on in your community on that day. You may be competing with other more urgent news events. Don't be discouraged. At the very least, you have made a good connection and the assignment editor may think about calling you the next time a related event occurs.

If interest is expressed, but a camera crew is unavailable, offer to stop by the station for an on-camera interview. Wear clothing with your logo and take along visuals such as posters, photos or a report.

There are basically four times during a regular weekday when you might be able to negotiate live television coverage:

1. **Early morning news:** Many stations have their weather reporters broadcast live from someplace interesting or newsworthy in the community. Start the day on a trail, sidewalk or outdoor venue, even if your event doesn't begin until later in the day. Or you may be successful in persuading your organization to schedule its events when they are most likely to attract maximum coverage.
2. **Noon news:** In many markets, the same idea for the previous live shot applies at this time.

3. **Evening news:** This is the easiest time of day for you to schedule an event, but it also is very competitive for the live news van or camera crew. Will the mayor stop by? A local celebrity? Give the station a reason to be there.
4. **Late news:** This is generally not a good time for a live shot because it is late, the news is abbreviated and there is little time for feature coverage.

One of your most important concerns when trying to attract television coverage should be the visual surroundings of your event. Television, unlike the print media, needs a picture to tell a story. Is your event being held in a dark, drab area? How might you dress it up to make it more appealing?

Decorate the walls or fences with banners strategically positioned in camera range. For an indoor event make sure the backdrops and dividers are uniform and help you tell your story. If you are trying to have someone in your organization interviewed on camera, select a quiet place for this to occur.

### ***b. Local Radio as a Promotional Partner***

Your considerations for getting radio involved in your organization's activities are different from your concerns for television. Again, you need to do some research. Which stations share our concerns and interests?

1. Think demographics. To whom does your event appeal? Match that with the station's audience.
2. Most markets have a station that leads the way in community service. Try to connect your event with one of the station's community causes. Is the morning deejay a cyclist or outdoors enthusiast? Find out if he or she will help you.

The station's promotions director is probably the person to talk to about working with you on your event. This person usually handles special events, charity benefits, etc. In smaller markets, radio station personnel often have multiple responsibilities. If it is not clear who is the best person to talk to, ask the switchboard operator, "Who at the station handles special events?" In very small markets, it is sometimes the general manager.

Once you have the proper person, you will follow some of the same procedures for attracting television stations to your event. Give the station a reason to support or cover your event:

1. Offer the station the opportunity to be good citizens at your event. Most radio stations are community minded.
2. Offer the station's deejays or on-air personalities a visible role at your event. They want the exposure.
3. Offer them the opportunity to display banners.
4. Suggest that the station broadcast a live remote from your event and make it interesting for them.

If your event has a local sponsor, use that company's clout with the local radio (or television) station to get the station involved as a media sponsor. The result could be additional airtime through contests and giveaways in advance of your event.

### ***c. Public Service Announcements (PSAs)***

Broadcast stations are required to provide the public service of distributing to the community useful information from government agencies, charities, community betterment groups and other not-for-profit organizations. If your organization qualifies for consideration, you might explore this opportunity.

PSAs often air in timeslots where paid advertisements have not been sold. Though placed during less-than-ideal times for reaching a station's largest audience, PSAs can still be valuable. For radio, as well as television, you may be able to get your event on the station's Community Calendar, with a voice-over providing the pertinent details, a contact number and Web site.

A radio station might even offer a "live read" by its on-air personalities to promote your event. Airtime such as this is in great demand, so don't be late in asking for it. Six to eight weeks advance notice is usually required to get a one- to two-week run for a PSA.

Submit copy, for the announcer or radio on-air personality to read using the following guidelines:

1. Keep it short and snappy. Give just the facts in as upbeat and colorful language as possible.
2. Make it clear that this is a local event.
3. For radio, make the tone blend with the station's format. Don't be too hip for an adult contemporary station, and don't be stuffy for an alternative music station.
4. Provide a script that is typewritten in large (18 pt.) capital letters and double-spaced.

The thing to remember for television and radio is to make your event as lively and visual as possible. Exciting news:

- Is whatever a newspaper editor or broadcast producer says it is.
- Provides important information.
- Is timely.
- Relates a specific, unique action. There is something in a story that provides a "hook" for the reporter. It is the reason a story is worth covering.
- Is local. It has an impact on this area. While reporters recognize that national trends may impact the area, their stories will focus on how those trends impact the local community.
- Involves people. Reporters are looking for the "human" angle. The people affected by a story.
- Is unusual and different.

Editors base their decisions on the following when judging the value of a news story:

- How important is the information to the audience?
- How many people does it impact?
- In what way does it impact people (emotionally, financially, legally, etc.)?
- Is the information timely, unique, local, visual (television)?

*Remember:*

To make news, the challenge is to take a general story, find the specific local impact, identify the players and their roles (including those affected by the story) set the event or development within a reasonable time frame, and express it in such a way that viewers / readers can readily understand the significance.

The key to all of this is to .remember the audience. The news executive needs to believe that the publication's or station's audience will be interested in the story.

Know the media you are pitching and then pitch the appropriate story to the appropriate person.

## APPENDIX

### Tips for Working with the Media

#### DO:

- Help reporters do their jobs. The more you help, the better it will be for you.
- Learn the media outlets in your area and key contacts.
- Send material to the appropriate person. There is much turnover in the media so update contact information frequently.
- When supplying a news release to the media, make it brief, simple and written in AP style. Well-written, not cute, first paragraphs are important. For TV, supply any relevant visual information.
- When calling a news organization, ask if it is a convenient time to talk. If not, ask when would be a better time to call back. In every case, keep your conversations brief and to the point.
- When a reporter calls to get information and you are not the right contact, tell the reporter that you will *quickly* find the right person and have that person call the reporter back.
- Be aware of each media outlet's deadlines and don't follow up during crunch times. Prior to an interview, send background information on the interviewee and your company or organization to the reporter. This reduces the chance for errors.
- Be available for follow-up calls. After an interview is completed, make sure the reporter knows how to reach you if there are additional questions.
- Cooperate as much as possible. This demonstrates your willingness to make the story a good one. Do not argue with reporters. The old saying goes, "never argue with someone who buys their ink by the barrel, or their videotape by the case."

#### DON'T:

- Ask for written questions in advance. There will be an assumption you have something to hide.
- Request certain reporters, or reject others. Refusing to talk to a certain reporter will not make a story go away.
- Get upset with reporters if they ask tough questions. They are simply doing their job.
- Tell a producer or reporter which answer to use because you thought one was better than the other.
- Give information "off the record." There is no such thing.
- Expect a station or newspaper to allow you to approve a story, or even show you the story prior to airing or printing.
- Try to throw advertising weight around. That will almost always backfire. There are exceptions to this in small towns served by one newspaper.