



Extra! Extra! Read All About It!

Press is vitally important to any campaign or strategy. The press you get—or don't get—can determine your success or failure. Spend time educating yourself about public relations and how to get effective press—it will save a lot of time and headaches in the long run.

(From GRACE's "How to Confront a Factory Farm" at www.factoryfarm.org)

This chapter is designed to give you practical tips for working with the news media. At the end of each section there is a list of useful links, each of which will help your group further develop an effective communication strategy.

Communicate with the media and build relationships with reporters and editors

Here are some simple guidelines that will give you a better shot at getting your story in the headlines.

Be a Resource for Journalists

Reporters are busy people who work on tight deadlines. Hand your story to them on a plate by fleshing out the "Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How" of your issue/event. Send the information directly to a reporter who covers related issues or include it in a press release. You will increase your chances of getting coverage if your story is pre-packaged and ready for the reporter to use.

Remember to be clear and concise, especially since many media outlets do not have a full-time environmental beat reporter and therefore will not be up-to-date on your issue.

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| ✓ Be available | ✓ Know your facts | ✓ Avoid overdoing it—only call when you have something to say. |
| ✓ Be ready to be quoted | ✓ Know where to find information fast | ✓ Respond to factual errors |
| ✓ Know your issue | ✓ Know their deadlines | |

Make Your Story Newsworthy

Note: The following information is taken primarily from The Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society

Reporters will more likely bite the bait if there is, for example, new relevant research, a new political development, or new community concerns at the heart of your story. If you are staging an event, consider using the tips below in order to pique a reporter's (and a photographer's) interest.

Be sure to give your story "legs" (i.e., there is enough there for a reporter to continue covering developments and different angles of the same issue). By doing so, you will ensure further coverage and increase the likelihood of people following your issue.

Characteristics of a newsworthy event

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| ✓ Novelty | ✓ Social issues or prominent public figure involved | ✓ Bright props and images |
| ✓ Shock | | ✓ News stories about the event published in advance |
| ✓ Conflict | ✓ Humor | |
| ✓ Simplicity | ✓ Outdoors | |
| ✓ Kids | ✓ Action | ✓ Local impact |

Frame Your Issue

Decide the focus of your story (health issues, pollution, or community integrity for example). Trying to make too many points will be confusing and not make good news. Stick to one simple and concise point.

Localize your story

Remember that readers are always more interested in a story when it has a direct impact on their everyday lives.

Feature community members in your story

(i.e., Mr. Green whose health has deteriorated since the construction of a factory farm down the road) in addition to the usual characters (politicians, and "experts," for example).

"Piggy-backing"

Consider piggy-backing your issue to other political events, like elections or previous campaign promises. What are the financial issues? Is taxpayers' money being wasted? Are jobs being lost? Are the environmentally sound alternatives better for the economy? (They usually are.) Make it interesting to someone who "doesn't give a hydro-electric dam".

Collaborate

Consider teaming up with other local community groups. Showing collaboration between groups helps to reinforce the importance of the issue to the community and will give your group more legitimacy.

Prepare Spokespeople

Make sure your spokespeople are available!

- Select two people to be media spokespeople. Having two will ensure that there is always someone available to speak with reporters.
- Leave more than one method of contacting spokespeople: cell phone numbers, office numbers, home numbers, email addresses and pagers. Keep ringers turned on!

Be engaging

Those representing your issue should be well-versed and comfortable speaking in front of cameras and in high pressure situations.

Not every question has to be answered

Repeat the message you want to be heard if an irrelevant question is asked.

Be comfortable saying “no.”

If the story is potentially damaging to your organization then politely decline.

Be on the ball!

Be sure to always call reporters back, especially to follow up, correct misquotes, or fill in missing information.

- If you are unable to talk to reporters when they call, ask for their story deadline and get back to them before that date or time.
- Refer them to someone else for more information or a quote if that proves helpful for both you and them.

Resources

Sierra Club of Canada

Former director of the *Sierra Club of Canada* Elizabeth May lays out strategies for confronting environmental issues, with details on how to work with the press to get your voice heard in mainstream media.

www.sierraclub.ca/national/activist-how-to/how-to-be-activist.html

The Institute for Media, Policy, and Civil Society (IMPACS)

A bilingual set of downloadable resources including how to develop effective communication skills, tips on preparing to speak with reporters, checklists for spokespeople, tips on how to develop a strategic communications plan for not-for-profit organizations, and details on how and when to use various media tools.

www.impacs.org/communications/PubResources/

(Note: IMPACS has ceased operations but at the time of publication their website was still active.)

Making the News: A Guide for Nonprofits and Activists

by Jason Salzman. Published by Westview Press, 2003.

A Media Handbook for Creating Social Change

by The Center for Reproductive Law and Policy

www.crlp.org/pdf/mediaguide.pdf

Press Releases and Press Conferences

A good press release is your group's way of alerting the news media of your story. Crafting a press release is a skill that will come in handy when trying to get your issue or event covered. There are a few critical tips that will help save your press release from being tossed into the newsroom trash bin.

Your press release should read like a news story, not like your group's manifesto. It should be no more than one page long. Include quotes from group representatives. Be sure to include phone numbers so that reporters can call to get more details and re-work your press release into their own story. Send your release in time to ensure it reaches the media before or on your release date. If you are far from a media centre, you can fax your release, or phone it in to the closest office of the Canadian Press (CP). CP is a wire service. If it puts your story on their service, it will automatically reach television, radio and newspaper newsrooms. It is then the decision of the news director in each outlet whether to use your story.

Pages to Include in a Press Kit

- Cover letter or memo
- Press release
- Fact sheets or background information on different aspects of the issue
- A sheet with quotes that explains your cause
- A question and answer sheet that explains the issue in an easy-to-read way
- Copies of other newspaper articles that explain your issue well
- Charts, visuals or photographs
- Background biography on your organization's expert on the topic
- A page that explains your organization and what it does
- Business card or card with your spokesperson's name and daytime phone number, along with name and address of your organization for a reporter to have at hand

Writing a Press Release

- Write a strong, catchy headline up to 4 sentences in length
- Include key information (who, what, where, when, and why).
- Keep each paragraph short (1-3 sentences)
- Keep the entire release to *one* page maximum
- At the bottom of the page write "-30-" or "###" (indicates that anything above the mark can be published as is)
- Be creative! Print your group's letterhead and use bright coloured paper (ex: if your issue concerns water, print on blue paper)



Timing

To ensure the best coverage, choose the best time for launching your story. Consider:

- Mondays through Thursdays between 10 am and 2 pm is the prime time for reporters being on the job and looking for news.
- Consider hosting a strong, visual event around 5 pm or 10 pm for local live broadcasts.
- Avoid Fridays! Saturday's broadcast news has fewer viewers and the newspapers generally have less space for stories.
- If you are holding a weekend event consider planning for Sunday to get coverage that night and the next day.

Media Advisories

When your group is planning an event, use this tool to alert the press. Similar to a press releases except that they are used to announce an event and have the "5 W's" (Who, What, Where, When, and Why?) written down the left hand column to clearly outline what your group is planning.

Hold a press conference

It is a great way to get attention, but only hold one if you have a newsworthy story and have an acknowledged expert who normally wouldn't be available. Hold press conferences somewhere that is familiar and convenient to the media. Try to avoid having to spend money to rent space. Is there a good community centre close to the downtown? Can you get the help of someone in City Council to use City Hall or the Regional Government Centre? Also, consider handing out leaflets with key information listed so reporters can refer to it in their stories and avoid misquoting you. See the *Media Tools* section for more tips.

- ✓ **Tip: Always follow up press releases with a phone call.**



Writing letters to the editor and Op-Ed pieces

Letters to the editor are one of the most widely read sections of print media. They are useful in that they can be quick to write, and are published without being heavily edited and interpreted. Use them when you are responding directly to a news story that has been published recently (or not published). Check out the paper you will be submitting to for the length of an existing letter to the editor, and use that as a guideline to avoid having key information cut by the editor. Often daily newspapers have a 300 word limit for letters.

Writing an Op-ed (or opinion editorial) is another excellent, unmediated way of voicing your group's opinion in a subjective manner. In this section, readers expect to hear people's blatant opinions and create dialogue on hot issues. Op-Ed sections are often read by influential people in the community and will likely get them thinking (and hopefully, acting) on your issue. If nothing else, writing op-eds helps to build your group's profile.

When submitting your piece, be sure to:

- Limit the number of points you make
- Avoid being overly emotional
- Include a cover letter with contact information
- Follow up your submission with a phone call. Don't be shy to ask if your piece will be published, and if not, why, so that you can be better prepared for the next try.

Also consider gathering a few individuals from your group and schedule a visit to the editor or the editorial board of your local newspaper. Sit down with them and explain why this is an important issue and why the paper should support your position in its editorials. Make sure to bring a press kit to leave behind with the editor(s).

See the Media Section for a sample op-ed.

Resources

- *How to Save the World in your Spare Time* by Elizabeth May
A practical guide based on “How to be an Activist” workshops for grassroots organization led by May while she was executive director of the Sierra Club of Canada. The book includes sections on basic organizing, lobbying, using the courts, fundraising, media and public mobilization. Published by Key Porter Books, 2006.
- Refer to the *Sierra Club of Canada's* resource as listed under “*Learn how to communicate with the media*”.
www.sierraclub.ca/national/activist-how-to/how-to-be-activist.html
- The *David Suzuki Foundation* is an excellent resource with step by step tips on how to write a letter to the editor, and provides contact information for major national daily papers as well as some provincial papers.
www.davidsuzuki.org/Take_Action/Letters.asp



How to Find Press

The best press outlets to target are prominent newspapers, television stations and radio programs in your area, as well as the local weeklies and the agriculture media. For the web savvy, check out online alternative media—a great way of reaching people! The following resources will help you find media outlets locally and nationally.

Local Libraries

Local and regional public libraries are a gold mine for recent and archived news publications. Ask librarians about the range of publications they have shelved and how you can get access to them. Knowing which papers (and which reporters) cover related issues, and how they cover them will only make you better prepared.

The David Suzuki Foundation

This web site provides tips on effective letter writing as well as a list of national and provincial media contacts.

www.davidsuzuki.org/Take_Action/Letters.asp

IndependentMedia.ca

A Directory of Non-Corporate Journalism and a comprehensive list of non-corporately owned media including television, print, radio, and on-line sources. Includes links to regional independent media centers.

independentmedia.ca

Online News

- *Rabble* is an online, not for profit media source, run by journalists and artists, which prides itself on providing progressive points of view on a diversity of issues.
www.rabble.ca
- *The Tyee*—an independent alternative daily newspaper reaching every corner of B.C. and beyond.
thetyee.ca
- *The Dominion: Canada's Grassroots Newspaper*
dominionpaper.ca



Points to Remember and Ideas to Try

To make your press more effective, you might want to try the following ideas:

- Every time you do something, you should alert the press. If you're holding a public meeting, invite the press. If you're having a fundraiser, invite the press. If a local official does something you don't agree with, alert the press.
- Take out an ad in the local paper with a list of the public concerns. Include contact information and phone numbers of elected officials. Remember to take the ad out more than once in case someone misses it the first time.
- Create a local web site or a blog and publicize it to the media. One group did a press release about their new site and many media outlets published information on it.
- Find out if any local universities or colleges have newspapers and/or radio stations. If so, develop a relationship with the people there and try to get them involved in the issue. Make sure to send all press releases to them. Try to interest journalism students in writing articles about the ILO and getting them published in the paper. University students can be a great resource. You may also want to try doing the same with the local community or co-operative radio stations, if there happens to be one in your area.
- Use people of all ages from your group to represent you. The younger and older, the better. Recently, 11 and 12-year-old youngsters made a trip to the Canadian Minister of Agriculture to express their concerns. This resulted in extensive media coverage.
- Avoid personal verbal attacks on public officials or the owner or operator of the proposed facility. Do not raise your voice or show anger in public.
- Work constantly to get the group's message out to the public. For example, encourage different people to write letters to newspaper commentary sections, have everyone in your group phone radio shows, talk shows, ask questions at community meetings, etc. Better yet, have spokespeople get booked as guests on local radio stations.
- Just as you need to prepare information booklets or packets of material for elected officials in order to educate them on the issue, you need to do the same for reporters. Don't assume local officials, or the press, understand the problems with factory farms. Gather information on the impacts of ILOs from the *Beyond Factory Farming* web site www.beyondfactoryfarming.org and educate others by speaking with and distributing information to them. Make sure your local government administrator has copies so information can be put on file for public access.
- It is very important to clip and save all news stories about the ILO. File month by month. This can be useful in verifying promises made and promises broken. Do not throw the clippings away.
- Create a group name and logo. Use them in stories and at events.
- Use creative techniques like street theatre to grab the media's attention and get people of all ages involved.
- Announce events with public service announcements (PSAs). Media outlets provide this free service to community groups wishing to advertise their events. Your local radio stations, for example, will likely have an answering machine designated to record community announcements (such as information sessions, rallies, etc.) that they will later air, sometimes several times leading up to the event.