

Media Engagement

The Wilder Manual (Angelica, 2001) summarises the steps you need to have gone through to be 'camera ready', or simply to engage more actively with the media. The checklist is useful when reflecting on how to be camera ready and how to build up a rapid response team who can respond to relevant media opportunities.

Box 4: Media ready checklist

Organisational Assessment:

- Does your organisation have a media strategy?
- Is the media plan discussed as part of the overall influencing plan?
- Do you revise the media plan on a regular basis as your influence campaign evolves?

Organisational Infrastructure:

- Do you have a staff person who is responsible for carrying out the media plan and coordinating all the media efforts in your organisation?
- Do you have a planning calendar of key political events?
- Has your organisation identified its primary, formal spokespersons?
- Do your spokespersons need media training and preparation?
- Have your board and staff prepared a plan for 'rapid response' to an opportunity or a crisis that presents itself with little warning?
- Is the chain of decision-making for media statements clearly designated and understood by everyone within the organisation?
- Does your public policy budget have a media component?

Media Systems:

- Are your media lists up-to-date, complete with names of editors, reporters or producers for all media outlets you plan to use?
- Do you know deadlines, work hours and preferred communications modes for key people who work on your public policy issues?
- Do your lists distinguish types of coverage: news, feature, editorial, columns, calendars?
- Do you have a clipping file for all relevant media coverage and for a complete record of coverage of your organisation's work?
- Are you in regular contact with the editor and reporters you have designated as key contacts?

Is your information media ready?

- Do you have accurate, concise, interesting information about your organisation – its mission, history, programmes and services?
- Have you shaped a clear message and talking points for the policy issue you plan to raise?
- Have you held introductory meetings with members of the press who are likely to cover your organisation and issues?
- Do you maintain an information base that is a valuable resource to the press, including a portfolio of data and stories, and a list of staff or others who are willing to talk to the press?

Building capacity and opportunity to use the media means building relationships with those who work in the media, namely journalists. You are a resource for them just as much as they can be a resource for you. Box 5 explains how that relationship can be built and maintained.

Box 5: Tips on becoming a resource for journalists

- Be available. Give reporters, especially at news services where they work odd hours, home and mobiles numbers and tell them it's OK to call.
- Seek journalists at meetings etc and give them your business card.
- Be ready to be quoted. Having to call back once the quote has been cleared will reduce the chance of the quote being used.
- Know the issues. Read and comment intelligently on developments relating to your cause.
- Don't always assume journalists have received the information you have about topical events or relevant news releases
- Avoid rhetoric and ideological arguments; most journalists have heard all this before.
- Know your facts; never pass on information unless you know it's true.
- Know where to find information or contacts fast and therefore gain a reputation as a good source.

Source: Salzmann, Ch 5, p.67

Getting into the papers requires more than just having good relations. You can not always hope that friendly journalists will find your issue newsworthy (often it won't be). The key is timing and linking your findings and message with breaking news. Jump on opportunities to publicise your message when your issue is already in the news because then you do not need to persuade them it is newsworthy. You just need to offer them a story or photo opportunity that illustrates a new or local perspective, dramatises a point of view, or advances the debate somehow. Acting fast is key, usually a day after the news has broken. Key 'news hooks' might include: a public hearing; court decision; passage of a bill; a natural disaster; a major speech; a nomination; a national holiday; a crime; or an anniversary.

If an issue becomes a major story then the paper may run an editorial on it. These carry the most weight in policy circles and are a good way to bring issues onto the agenda, or state a position in an evolving agenda. Box 6 describes ways to get your views into the editorial.

Box 6: Tips for getting an editorial

- Familiarise yourself with the position of the newspaper.
- Identify the right person on the editorial team and get their email address.
- Explain your position in a short email and ask whether and how they would like to receive information (email, phone, meeting).
- If you don't receive a response in a couple of days, call. Persistence pays.
- If you are accepted it's likely you'll go into the office to discuss the issues.
- Conduct a trial session first, practise difficult questions, and further familiarise yourself with the editorial position.
- Don't expect more than half an hour, and make sure anyone you take can explain their views simply.
- Ask what they need from you.
- Bring written material, even if you've emailed them in advance. Don't show videos.
- Send a follow-up email offering further information.
- Offer to submit an opinion editorial if they do not adopt your position.

Source: Salzmann, Ch 22, p.168

Publications, new projects, and high profile meetings or visits are all reasons a CSO might try to make the news. There is protocol on writing press releases, but publications themselves can also be made more newsworthy. Box 7 describes some methods for how to do this.

Box 7: Tips on writing press releases

- Determine what is the main news angle you wish to communicate.
- Connect the report to a news hook.
- Check deadlines for local publications/television/radio bulletins to ensure the media release is received in time to be published before the event. (Some local newspapers have a Friday deadline for the following Wednesday publication date. Radio programmes may need to check the spokesperson to see whether they will be suitable for on-air interview, etc.)
- On average, send releases two weeks before events, except to magazines which may have a two to three month lead time for publication.
- Keep the focus local (with local spokespeople) for local papers. Send only major capital city issues or state-wide issues to state papers; only national issues (and use national spokespeople) for national papers/magazines.
- First paragraph of no more than 25 words telling briefly who, what, where, when and why about the event, issue or project.
- Use short sentences. Each sentence should be a separate paragraph. Use active sentences ('The group have decided', not 'It has been decided'). Avoid jargon and difficult words. Keep it simple. Make numbers more meaningful by making comparisons or breaking them down into familiar units.
- If using quotes in the body of the release, quote credible spokespeople and identify them with their positions in the organisation.
- Keep information clear and unambiguous.
- Keep releases short, no longer than one page. If the media want more information, they will contact you.
- Include in the media release the date the release was written, and a contact name and phone number for someone who is easily contacted during office hours. Put the summary on your website and include the link in any press release.
- Check whether the media prefers email (most do now).
- If offering interviews, make it clear whether this is an exclusive for one media outlet (could be one print, one radio and one television, as these do not see one another as competing). This can encourage coverage of your issue, whereas a general media conference may not be well attended.
- Track coverage to see how and when your information is published.
- Be sure to write and thank the journalist to develop a relationship that may encourage them to work with your organisation in tracking progress on the issue/project, and hence keep the community informed.

Source: Citizen Science Toolbox.

Further resources

- Angelica, Emil (2001) *The Wilder Non-profit Field Guide to Crafting Effective Mission and Vision Statements*, Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.
- Media Skills for Scientists (Foundation for Education, Science and Technology)
http://www.saasta.ac.za/scicom/pdfs/media_skills.pdf
- Working with the media (Economic Social Research Council)
http://www.esrc.ac.uk/images/Working_with_the_Media_tcm8-2674.pdf
- Thornton, P. et al. (1997) *I Protest!* Sydney: Pluto Press.