

GETTING THE WORD OUT

AN ACTIVIST'S GUIDE TO THE MEDIA

Government employees at all levels need to communicate the Local's achievements and viewpoints to the larger public. A successful press strategy can mobilize public opinion behind the union's issues and goals and provide recognition for good works. This brochure discusses some common media relations tactics successful advocates use to get the word out, through the news media, about their cause.

Before you begin, always remember one thing. There is no adequate substitute for personal relationships with journalists who come to trust you as a dependable, no-nonsense source of information and perspective. Once you have become a trusted source, editorial writers are more likely to remember your position when they write about your issues, and reporters are more likely to use your news release, attend your news conference or pay attention when you participate in public forums. If you haven't done so, introduce yourself. Perhaps over lunch.

NEWS RELEASES

Most of the information in today's newspaper or on the evening news started with a news release from someone, somewhere. A properly prepared news release has the best chance of getting results. A news release should not raise more questions than it answers--unless, of course, it's designed to alert reporters to a news conference, speech, public testimony or other event intended to provide answers.

All effective news releases have certain similar components:

- Use official letterhead. At the top-right, include the name and office and home phone numbers for the person to contact for more information (CONTACT: probably yourself).
- At the top-left, indicate a release date (FOR RELEASE: IMMEDIATELY). The release date becomes especially important if the press release contains advance information or quotes for an event that hasn't happened yet. In such cases, be more specific (FOR RELEASE: 11 A.M. WEDNESDAY, NOV. 23).
- A headline should grab the reporter's attention. Think about why some newspaper headlines make you want to read further, then write the headline you'd like to see in the paper.
- The lead, or opening paragraph or two, should answer the archetypal journalistic questions Who, What, When, Where and Why, although not necessarily in that order. These are the "Five W's." Remember them.
- Then work your way down, anticipating what reporters might want to know.

- The last paragraph in every news release essentially should be the same. This is called the boilerplate. It answers the questions that never change, regardless of what you're writing about. These are questions about your Local: what its purpose is, when it was formed, and how many people it represents in what type of jobs.
- Double-space each page. Type "END" at the bottom of the last page.

Good writing really means good information, logically ordered and easily understood:

- Be concise and factual. Nonfacts such as opinion should be in quotes and attributed to you or another spokesperson. Be sure all names and titles are accurate. If you're not sure of something, look it up or leave it out.
- Avoid union jargon and technical terms. If using initials to refer to a program or benefit or agency, spell it out the first time.
- When possible, include facts like numbers, statistics, ratios and dates. Use examples to back up the facts.
- Keep sentences short, usually under 20 words.

The best news release in the world is not effective unless it gets to the right person:

- Radio news departments may have only one reporter who possibly does all interviews by phone. If you don't know who covers your issues at larger media, call the newspaper or TV news and ask. Sometimes "beats" overlap. You may send the release to the labor reporter, for example, but also to the feature or government reporter, newspaper city editor, and TV and radio news directors as well.
- Develop a media list. Get names, addresses, phone and fax numbers for key members of the media. Keep an extra set of mailing labels ready for quick use and update the list regularly.
- Find out deadlines. Observe them. Stories often don't get used because they are sent to the media too late to cover an event or too long after an event has occurred. Reporters on deadline can be under considerable stress, so that's no time to call for a friendly chat.

NEWS CONFERENCES

A news conference is an efficient way to announce important news to several reporters simultaneously. It offers more opportunity for TV coverage than does a news release. Legislative positions, health and safety information the community needs to know, a new project being undertaken by the Local, or candidate endorsements may merit a news conference, for example. News conferences also require more work on your part.

NOTE: If in doubt about whether your information is really "news" don't hold a news

conference. Don't hold political news conferences at the worksite.

Choose the right time and place:

- Pick a convenient site and time for reporters that avoids deadlines and rush-hour traffic. Mid-morning or early afternoon is good.
- Sometimes outdoor sites are the most attractive, for example in front of an appropriate well-known public building. Then TV crews don't have to bother with artificial lights. But you have to risk changes in weather and unexpected noise.
- Indoors, know beforehand where the electrical plugs and light switches are. Be able to turn off air conditioning if the fan noise interferes with sound recording. Unplug phones so they don't ring while you're talking. You may need a microphone or sound amplifier, depending on room size. You will need a podium so TV and radio reporters can attach their own microphones.
- Refreshments are always appreciated.

For a good turnout, be thorough and aggressive:

- Make sure reporters get the "Five W" media advisory at least two days before the news conference. What you mail or fax is very similar to a news release. The main difference is that rather than incorporate the "Five W's" in narrative, sentence form, simply list--like on a party invitation--the Who, What, When, etc.
- Call each reporter to confirm receipt of the release and ask if they plan to attend. Target certain reporters for special nudging, even up to the last minute.
- For reporters who do not attend, arrange for speedy fax or hand-delivery of your news conference handouts (see Press Kits section).

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice:

- While you need a news release for reporters, the news release also serves the important purpose of being a guide to follow in making your verbal presentation. Essentially, follow the points in the press release. Read it over many times before the news conference, then speak from notes or highlighted sentences in the news release. Usually, five minutes is plenty of time for an opening presentation.
- Practice saying the main points that you will keep coming back to, regardless of where reporters' questions seem to lead. Don't let anything lead you away from your point.

PRESS KITS

Press kits can be handed out at a news conference or any other event. The kit can be a simple folder, ideally with the union's decal on the front if you have one. Contents should always be on union letterhead with a contact name and phone number. The press kit may include some or all of these:

- A news release
- A copy of the spokesperson's statement
- A fact sheet on the issue at hand
- An agenda of your event with correct names and titles of participants
- Copies of any charts and graphs helpful in making the union's point
- A fact sheet on the union
- Relevant news articles or other materials that will help the media understand the issue
- Biographical paragraphs about the union's leaders or speakers

ISSUING STATEMENTS

When news releases and news conferences result in news, the story is mostly about you. Often, however, you can seize opportunities to get your side across when the story is about a larger effort--government downsizing for example, or a public hearing where numerous interests are represented. With luck, reporters will seek you out for a comment. Better yet, issue a statement: a one-paragraph message formatted like a press release except the headline says "Statement by Name-and-Title Regarding..." These can be faxed to reporters or handed out at public meetings. Even if your actual remarks run longer, reporters appreciate a brief typewritten statement that emphasizes what you think is most important.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters usually comment on items and editorials in the newspaper, but you can bring up any subject. Since editors hesitate to publish frequent letters from the same person on the same subject, this form of communication is a good way to involve other members of your Local. Writing letters can be a good exercise for activists because it helps focus the issue more clearly in their own minds. Editors are more likely to print letters that are:

- Signed with your name, address and phone number
- Contain no more than 250 words
- Well reasoned and indicate the writer knows the subject (like good news releases, good letters contain numbers and facts, not just opinion)

- Timely and relate to an ongoing issue in the news or respond to a news article or editorial printed no more than a few days before.

GUEST COLUMNS

Often called "op-eds" because they usually appear on the page opposite the editorial page, these essentially are longer letters to the editor. They can run up to 750 words. Sometimes they are intended to refute an editorial, but they don't have to. Call first and ask if the editorial page editor is interested in seeing your op-ed. The same tips apply here as to letters to the editor--except that since an op-ed is longer, you need:

- A beginning, which identifies the problem in one or two paragraphs
- A middle, wherein you put forth the reasons (including facts and data) for thinking the way you do and for proposing the solution you recommend, and
- An end, which in one or two paragraphs, ties in the points you made in the middle to the problem you identified at the beginning.

EDITORIAL BOARD MEETINGS

Many newspapers are unfair toward unions, but most editors nonetheless consider themselves fair-minded people. This means they usually feel obligated to at least hear you out. This type of meeting gives the union a chance to present its views directly to the editors of the paper, to discuss unfair articles and editorials, or to urge the paper to take a particular editorial position. A meeting may not get a favorable editorial but it increases the likelihood that your perspective will at least be mentioned.

- Write the editorial page editor requesting an editorial board meeting. Explain what you want to talk about, whom you might bring with you, why the issue is timely and important to the community. Suggest that he/she may want to invite other editors and reporters to attend. Follow up a few days later with a telephone call.
- Your delegation should include only the number of persons necessary to present the issue and to answer any questions. Usually, two will suffice. If you can add a knowledgeable non-member authority or public official to show broader support, all the better. One person should do the most talking at first, although all can respond to questions.

GENERALLY SPEAKING...

- Don't assume reporters know what you mean. Avoid jargon, initials and acronyms. If you think a reporter is not following your point, state it a different way.
- Have a good attitude. Be polite. Be patient.
- Don't confuse style with substance. A consistent message is more important than a catchy new soundbite.

- Anticipate questions, especially the hard ones.
- If you are not the best person to be interviewed on a certain topic, put the reporter in touch with that person.
- If you want to win your point, appeal to the public's self interest.
- Know the facts. Never lie. Never guess, and never think less of yourself if you don't know the answer. Tell the reporter you will get back with the answer--and always do so. If you realize you gave a reporter misinformation, call immediately to set the record straight.
- Share information with reporters as you receive material from government agencies, the national office or other sources. Put your name and phone number on any information you give to reporters.