

USING THE MEDIA TO ADVANCE YOUR CIVIL RIGHTS CASES

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I. Media Relations

Writing a News Release

When writing a news release, keep in mind that the media receive hundreds of releases every day. Try to follow these guidelines: Keep it short (one page for events) and professional. Come up with a catchy headline that will attract someone's attention. Write the news release as you would want to see it in a publication.

Treat your lead (first) paragraph as if it's all the reader is going to see. Ask yourself, what is the information the reader *must* learn from me if he or she learns nothing else? Quotations in the news release should be put in quotations from your designated spokesperson. Include things that the media finds newsworthy.

Title the release "news release" or "news conference," not a "press release" or "press conference." (Press refers only to print.)

Have someone proof the release for spelling, grammar, and content (to determine whether what you are trying to relay is clear and accurate). Sometimes the person who writes the release may not notice mistakes that a fresh pair of eyes will catch.

The Media Advisory

Like a news release, the Media Advisory has a *release date*, *contact information*, a *headline* and a *lead* that captures the gist of what you want to impart.

But, after that, the advisory simply lists

- *What* (e.g., “Launch of Get Out the Vote Campaign”)
- *Who* (e.g., Members of “Youth Defending Democracy”)
- *When* (10 a.m., Tuesday, August 12, 2008);
- *Where* (e.g., “First Amendment Room, National Press Club Building, 14th & F Streets NW, Washington, DC”).

Obviously, if you make a mistake in the location and time, or if these change, notify the media immediately.

Sending Out Your Release

Mail, e-mail, fax, or hand-deliver your release at least one full day before you want or anticipate coverage (no more than one to two weeks in advance if you are announcing an event). Make follow-up calls at least to key media to verify receipt by assignment editors, producers, reporters, and so forth. If they don’t have it, get the appropriate number or address and send it again.

Making a Media Kit

If you have a lot of information you would like to share with the media, you might want to make media kits. Reporters should be given a pocket folder, preferably with your organization’s name on the front, that contains:

- Your news release about the matter at hand
- A fact sheet about the matter at hand (keep this simple, like a bulleted list or timeline)
- More substantive background information on the issue
- News clippings related to the issue
- Information about your organization

Promoting Your Event

The morning of your event (between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m.), it is a good idea to have someone make calls to the media again—this time, just remind whoever answers the phone about your event (“Hi, this is Lynn with Animal Liberation, and I am just calling to remind you that we will be protesting the downtown Macy’s at noon. I just wanted to make sure you have the information and to see if there’s anything else you need.”).

Dealing with the Media

Always try to call the media early (between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m. local time). When possible, schedule your event for between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., the best time for reporters’ schedules.

Be enthusiastic and professional. It is always important to tell the truth. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so honestly and offer to find out the information if possible.

Once reporters know you are an accurate and reliable source of information, they will be more likely to work with you in the future.

Dos and Don'ts for Dealing with the Media

- Do be proactive in your dealings with the news media.
- Identify the news operations you want to work with and make a good contact list.
- Introduce yourself and your organization. Find out if there is a specific contact person or reporter you should know. Have coffee or lunch with him or her, if possible.
- Do be aware of lead times and deadlines. Ask if you must.
- Do send your media advisories, news releases, and statements to appropriate news media in a timely fashion.
- Don't call an editor or reporter when he or she is on deadline unless it is urgent.
- Do be available when a reporter calls (or get back to him or her as quickly as possible).
- Do tell the news media why your release is important to their readers and viewers.
- Do try to nurture a friendly or at least respectful relationship.
- Don't send out your news release and forget about it. Follow up within a day to make sure the news agency has received the information you sent.
- Don't get into a feud with people who buy ink by the barrel or who rule the airwaves!

II. Media Training

Unless the person(s) speaking for your organization or cause is a seasoned pro when it comes to media appearances and interviews, it is a good idea to train or rehearse his/her/their responses.

It helps fine-tune the message, catch any missteps, and prepare for the downside. The following are pointers that should be stressed in preparation for encounters with the news media.

Before the Interview

- Prepare a “talking paper” on primary points you want to make.
- Anticipate questions; determine response/position.
- Practice answering questions.
- Cover controversial areas ahead of time.
- Know who will be interviewing you, if possible.
- Determine how much time is available.

During the Interview

- Be informed. This is the golden rule. If you don’t know the issue you are there to discuss, someone else should do the interview.
- Don’t agree to an interview unless you know your subject better than the person you’re being interviewed by—or if it is a debate, the person you are up against—and can head her or him off at the pass. Make sure your information is reliable and can stand up to critical examination.
- Anticipate the questions, particularly the hostile ones.
- Be calm. This doesn’t mean you can’t be passionate and enthusiastic, but your emotions must be calibrated. If necessary, take a deep breath before answering the question. Be polite but firm with everyone.
- Don’t try to make too many points. Focus on one, two, or three main points. Any more and both you and the audience might get lost.
- Finish your point. If the interviewer tries to interrupt you before you’ve gotten to the important thing you want to say, don’t be afraid to carry on talking until you’ve said it. Sometimes it’s useful to say “Just a moment, please.” Be assertive without being rude. Don’t let yourself be bullied.
- Simplicity. Make your points as clearly as possible. Use short sentences and simple words. Try not to use a sentence within a sentence or you’ll confuse the listener and invite misquotes or misinterpretation.
- Try to bring your answer back around to your main message.
- Take notes with you if you must, but do not be seen during the interview reading them *unless* you are quoting language or figures verbatim and want the interviewer (and audience) to know that.
- Use humor appropriately. If you can do it without making it sound frivolous or irrelevant, humor can go a long way in helping win your audience over.
- If you don’t like the person you’re dealing with, don’t show it. Whatever you might think about him or her, you must leave your feelings behind when being

interviewed or engaging in on-air discourse. One way to approach this is to think of the person as someone who is wrongheaded and needs to be corrected. Your role is to put him or her right rather than to put him or her down.

After the Interview

- You can ask to double-check the reporter's information regarding technical or factual points, but do not ask to see an advance copy of the story. This puts the reporter in an awkward position, may raise unnecessary suspicions, and is otherwise considered bush league.
- Do not send gifts to reporters; it is considered unethical for them to accept them and may raise unnecessary suspicions about your motives.
- Offer the reporter your phone number (or e-mail address) in case there are follow-up questions.
- Ask when and where the story is scheduled to appear. If the reporter doesn't know, arrange for notification ("Would you call me/shoot me an e-mail when you know?" Be sure to give them the right contact information.).

What to Beware of in Media Interviews

- If you don't want to or can't answer a question, and a nonanswer is inconsequential, admit it and move on to another topic.
- If you don't want to or can't answer a question but a nonanswer can make you look bad, say something like "I'm not prepared to answer that right now" or "I want to look into that further before I comment."
- Don't speak off the record. And remember: The interview lasts as long as a reporter is there, regardless of where his or her notebook, camera, or tape recorder are.
- Don't think (or pretend that) you have to answer every question.
- Don't speak for someone else.

The TV and Radio Interview

- Be concise. It's amazing how little time you get. Work on speaking in 15-second "sound bites." You must know exactly what you want to say, and say it in as few words as possible, with clarity and determination. The main point must come at the beginning of the interview: You should summarize the whole issue in just one or two sentences before expanding on your primary theme.

- Talk “over” (not into) a lavalier (clip-on) mike.
- Do an audio check using your normal voice. (Do not blow into the mike.)
- As long as you are near a microphone, do not say anything you would not want to hear broadcast worldwide.
- Always ask for (or bring with you) a bottle of water in case you catch a cough or a scratchy throat. Nothing is worse than coughing or wheezing your way through an interview.

Tips on Appearance for TV Interviews

- If makeup is offered, use it. But you can request minimal makeup and reject certain colors or applications. It is your face, after all. At the least, allow powder to avoid a distracting (and often unattractive) shine.
- Check your eyes, teeth, and nose before going on air.
- Avoid wearing pronounced stripes, checks, or geometric patterns.
- Gray, brown, blue, or mixed-color suits or dresses are best.
- Gray, light blue, off-white, or pastel shirts or blouses are best.
- Avoid having your hair cut right before an interview.
- Do not wear sunshades or tinted glasses.
- Sit far back in the chair, shoulders back. If your suit coat or jacket is hip length, sit on the hem to keep your collar and shoulder lines smooth. After you’ve adopted this posture, tilt slightly forward to appear engaged. (This is easiest if you’re seated at a table or desk. If the seating is open, support your tilt by propping your elbows on the armrests.) If you use your hands to gesture for emphasis or illustration, keep them at chest level.
- Keep your eyes on the interviewer (or other guests), not on the camera. (Exception: In some cases, you will be set up in a separate “one-shot,” and the floor director will tell you to look into a particular camera. This is so that, in a split screen, you will appear to be looking at the interviewer.)
- Blink normally; no deer-in-the-headlights staring. And remember that rolling or darting your eyes is exaggerated on the air.
- Smile—but don’t grin—when you’re being introduced, welcomed, or bid adieu.

The Newspaper, Magazine, or Online Interview

- Make sure you are prepared in detail; print reporters are often more knowledgeable than broadcast reporters and may ask more detailed questions.
- Begin the interview by making your major points in statement form.
- Don't let the reporter wear you down. Set a time limit in advance.
- Don't get so relaxed that you say something you wish you hadn't.
- Avoid jargon, industry lingo, or acronyms as much as possible. If you use them, don't assume the reporter knows what they mean; explain them.
- Be aware that the reporter may try different ways to gain information you may not want to give.
- Don't answer inappropriate questions; simply say it is "not an appropriate topic" for you to address or that it's inappropriate to address "at this time."
- Do not speak "off the record." And remember: The interview lasts as long as a reporter is there.

Attachment

Getting Your Message Across When, Where, and How You Choose: The Communications Plan

This chart shows who should be involved in communicating a new, revised, or ongoing message.

DETERMINE MAIN MESSAGE Officials, Policy Staff, Press Officer and Key Press Staff, Experts (as needed)
DETERMINE STRATEGY FOR DELIVERING THE MESSAGE Appropriate Staff, Press Officer & Press Staff, Experts (as needed)
PREPARE MATERIALS Press Officer and Press Staff
TRAINING/REHEARSALS Principals, Policy Staff, Press Officer and Press Staff
LAUNCH Press Officer and Press Staff
FOLLOW UP Press Staff