

Working With the Media

Where is the Reporter Coming From?

Keep in mind that reporters have a job to do, and their job is to get a good story. They are not your friends and they know little, if anything, about your issue. They are under deadlines and often have multiple stories going at once, and they are under constant pressure from their editors. The media are businesses with the ultimate goal of selling papers and increasing their ratings, which place added constraints on reporters.

Don't let that intimidate you. You're not going to lose anything by trying. If you're not having any luck, be direct. Ask the reporter what it will take to get them to cover your story. They might tell you exactly what you need to do. And remember, reporters want to cover good stories, which are what you are providing.

The 'RULES' of Working with the Media:

1. **Stay on message!** Don't confuse the reporter with too much information. They will often choose odd things to highlight in their coverage, so only give them the information you want to get across. It is good to have a short message that you can repeat constantly;
2. **Never lie.** It destroys your credibility. If you don't know an answer, admit it, but say that you can find it for them and get back to them – promptly (remember, they are on a deadline);
3. **Never thank them for writing a story.** It's their job! Particularly, don't thank them if they write a *good* story; it makes them question their objectivity and whether they were too biased towards your position or issue;
4. **There is NO off-the-record.** Remember, the reporter is not your friend; they are out to get a story and sell papers. If you tell them something "off the record" it will still end up in the story – it just won't have your name attached to it;
5. **Stay on message!** Repeat it, and repeat it again.

Some Useful Tips:

1. **Do the work for them.** If you provide all the information they need to write a story, it makes their life easier (remember they are on a deadline). Furthermore, it allows you to give them the information you want them to have;
2. **When you call a reporter, always ask if they have a minute to talk.** Often times they will be on deadline and will not be able to talk to you then. If they are busy, ask when a better time would be to call them. The reporter will appreciate this greatly and be more receptive;
3. **You can't be on the phone enough.** Fax your press advisory or release, but call to follow up. Be direct: Ask if the reporter plans to show up;

4. **Develop a relationship (not a friendship).** Find out who the environmental reporter is and make sure to send information to them directly. If you are credible, helpful and timely, they will come to you when they are looking for information. It is good to have one person from a group be the press contact for consistency reasons, but this is virtually impossible in student groups with such high rates of turnover;
5. **Reporters are looking for specific things that make a story newsworthy.** Here are some 'hooks you can use to 'catch' a reporter: conflict, dramatic human interest, new announcement, trend, local spin to national or global issues (or vice versa); controversy; a fresh angle on an old story; milestone, anniversary, celebrity, special event, etc. Young people like us get covered. Visuals always get attention and send a message that is less corruptible than a verbal one;
6. **Before talking to a reporter, see if what you are planning to say passes the "cousin" test.** In other words, run it by your cousin or someone who doesn't have any knowledge of your issues - to make sure that you are sending the right message, and that it is clear. If you're talking to a reporter and feel like things aren't coming out right, just stop, say "let me start again," and do so;
7. **If you are having a rally or large event, have your members practice their sound bites beforehand.** That way they can be prepared when a reporter asks why they are there. Although, not everyone needs to be an expert. Have one or two people who know the issues well be designated as press liaisons. This way the information you give to the media can be controlled. Make sure everyone at the event knows whom to direct the reporters to after they have given their sound bite.

Media Tools: (see Sierra Club training manual for examples):

- **Media List:** The first thing you need is a media list. It should have reporters names, faxes, phone numbers, addresses, and emails for TV, radio, and newspapers in your area. To build this list take a look Beacon's (which can be found in the library). Take a look at local publications for reporters who deal with your issues. Call your local Sierra Club office for help.
- **Press Advisory:** An advisory is written in simple form, stating the basics of an upcoming event (Who, what, where, when, and why) without giving away the substance of the event. It is a way to alert journalists to events that might interest them. An advisory should be sent out several days before an event and be followed up with phone calls to the reporters. The follow-up call encourages them to cover the event, and is an opportunity for you to answer any questions the reporter might have.
- **Press Release:** A release should be written exactly like an ideal story would be written, including quotes. Place the most important items at the beginning of the release. It should generally be kept to one page and should be sent out the day of the event. Follow-up with a phone call to make sure that the release has been received, and urge them to cover the story.
- **Associated Press (AP):** There's an AP bureau in every major city and in the State House. The AP is a news wire, which means that they send out things to other news outlets. Always send your press advisories and releases to the AP because if they cover an event, it will reach many more papers, radios, etc. than you could. This isn't to say that you should expect the AP

to do all the work for you; you will still have to do work. The point is that sending your advisories and releases to the AP will increase your chances of getting covered.

- **Letters to the Editor:** The editorial page is the second most widely read page of the newspaper after the front page. A letter to the editor should be short – not more than 250 words (varies with paper) – clear, direct and simple, with a maximum of two or three points. Avoid personal attacks. Try to find a local angle, and try to pick a timely issue (or send a letter when it is most timely). Be sure to sign it and include a way for the press to contact you to confirm that you wrote the letter.
- **Radio:** Radio is a great, but often untapped, way of getting press. Radio news editors usually work alone in small dark rooms. Give them a call to let them know about an event or story. They might not be able to send anyone, but you could ask to do a “radio actuality” right then and there. Often they’ll say yes, and you’ll get to give a little statement, which they’ll play on the radio all day.
- **Public Service Announcements:** Normally they're not the most effective way to get a message out; however, college radio stations are often an exception, and every station is required by law to air a certain number of PSA's every year. First, with a lot of college radio stations, you can get away with just sending in a script that DJ's can read on the air. The key to these is to keep it short. 30 seconds is pushing it; 15 seconds is ideal. Try reading scripts out loud at a normal pace to get the right timing. Writing for broadcast means avoiding long words and long sentences. Try to say what you need to say in the simplest and shortest way. You're going to have to leave out a lot of details, so it's good to use PSA's to get people to check out a meeting, table, rally, concert, or website, etc. where they can get more information. To place your PSA, call the local radio stations and find out what their policy on PSA's is. Bigger stations will have a person who specifically handles PSA's and other ads. Often you can then simply fax or e-mail the script to the station. But always call in a day or two to follow up and see if they are reading the ad on the air.
- **Visuals:** Visuals are a great way to get TV and photo attention. You can build giant puppets or objects to represent your issue. Visual messages are not as easily distorted as verbal ones. If you see a reporter taking an interest in your visual make sure that you approach him or her to put in a few words.

Media Samples:

Example Letter to the Editor:

To the Editor:

Texas Governor George W. Bush is hoping that, come November, voters will choose him as the next President of the United States. Before voters make a choice, there are a few things that they should know about Governor Bush. Texas has the worst air pollution in the nation. It also has the highest rate of toxic waste production, and the largest number of highly polluting factory farm. Texas’ environment has suffered under Bush.

So far there has been no indication that America's environment as a whole will fare any better under Bush. He has already stated that he will work to increase logging in our national forests, including areas that Clinton's Roadless Initiative seeks to protect. He advocates drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and opposes stricter clean air standards, pollution regulations for factory farms, and the designation of new national monuments.

Call Governor Bush and tell him that if he wants your vote, he'll have to do better for America's environment than he has for Texas'.

Sincerely,
Your Name,
Your Address,
Your Phone Number,
Signature