



THE SPIN PROJECT

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Reporters are people too.

Developing Relationships with Reporters

One of the most effective things an activist can do to promote her views is to cultivate relationships with reporters. In his book, *Making the News: A Guide for Nonprofits and Activists*, Jason Salzman quotes a reporter from a major daily whose sentiments are probably echoed by journalists everywhere: “A lot of what gets covered depends on personal relationships at the paper.” Can’t get more explicit than that.

Here are some tips for strengthening relationships with individual reporters, and expanding and prioritizing your media database:

News is a two-way street: Be a resource for reporters.

Reporters need you just as badly as you need them. You need them to cover your issue and carry your frame and message. They need the fresh information and real stories you can provide. Develop a reputation as someone who has accurate information, meets deadlines, can provide additional contacts and sources, and is always good for a clever quote or a much-needed fact.

Make sure reporters know they can trust you. Help them feel the information they need that you provide about your issue is accurate and up-to-date, that you are playing fairly and squarely with them.

Respect their professionalism. Even if their media outlet has a different opinion about your issue than you, all parties can engage in the process respectfully. Provide other contacts for the reporter, even from the other side if requested. Once or twice a year offer to “do lunch” and then brief the reporter on upcoming news.

Think like a reporter.

Reporters (and people in general) won’t listen to you just because you’re right; they pay attention when you’re relevant. Think in terms of what a reporter and her boss, the editor, would consider newsworthy. Everyone thinks their issue is the most important, compelling subject and should be covered all the time, but reporters are faced with hundreds of issues and stories. How is yours interesting? What sets it apart? What hooks

make your story particularly relevant right now?

Be accessible to reporters.

They will usually try to get you on one phone call. If they cannot find you they will often move on to other sources. Give reporters your direct line and a cell phone number—plus your home number if appropriate. Carry a pager or cellular phone, especially at media events where a reporter might be calling you to get the news as it is being made. One group scored extra television coverage simply because an editor, scrounging for news on a slow day, phoned an activist at a rally to get a quote. Before the activist hung up she had persuaded the editor to send a news crew to cover the event.

Always be prepared to say something about an issue when a reporter calls. A reporter never likes to hear, “I’ll get back to you later today.” They may not have ten minutes to spare or you might not get back to them on time. Clever, fast-thinking activists can spin off a soundbite at will. It takes practice, but you get good at it.

If you absolutely do not know the answer to a reporter's questions—especially technical or factual inquiries—say the following: “I don't know that information. I will find out and get back to you immediately. What is your deadline?” Then get back to the reporter on time. You may also offer one or two other expert sources for the reporter's rolodex. Provide additional contacts and sources, and is always good for a clever quote or a much-needed fact. Clever, fast-thinking activists can spin off a soundbite at will.

Know your facts.

Your reputation rides on the accuracy of the information you give reporters. Never give reporters inaccurate or even questionably accurate information. And if you are spreading rumors or gossip, let the reporter know and be prepared to back it up. The opposition will most likely attempt to distort and downright lie about the facts. At least be factual on your side.

Do not expect reporters to be your cheerleaders.

Decision makers at news outlets often oppose progressive stances because of their pro-business (and pro-advertising revenue) disposition. Even those reporters working for supportive media can't be viewed as a megaphone for your issue. The job of the news re-

porter is to be unbiased, or at a minimum fair and balanced. So, among other things, that means they should not be expected to reprint your press release verbatim, although some small-size media might.

Do not call reporters just to be quoted.

Sometimes you may be a major source for a reporter and still not be quoted. It is frustrating, but those are the breaks. If you feel the omission of you or your group substantially affects the story, call that to the reporter's attention. But remember, reporters are wary of sources who whine about not being quoted all the time. Be a resource even if it means you might not be in the story. Maybe next time you will.

Do not waste reporters' time.

In other words, don't be a schmooze hog. This is tacky and will tarnish your reputation. Only contact reporters when you have newsworthy information, a good pitch or are responding to an inquiry or a story. Some reporters keep a mental list of news pests and other obnoxious non-sources who aggravate them on a routine basis. Do not make that list.

Many reporters loathe the caller who says, “Hi, did you get my press release?” Reporters do not have time to call everyone back to say whether or not they received the release. If you call a reporter, go ahead and pitch your story. In the course of the pitch, you can remind him or her about the media release and offer to send another.

Do not exaggerate.

You can spin your news, but check the hyperbole. Be reasonable. Not every story pitch will be jaw-droppingly important. Reporters are primarily looking for the facts, additional contacts, or your quotes to convey a sense of importance or controversy. They do not want Oscar acceptance speeches, used car salesman “act now!” pitches, or screaming drama queens on the other end of the phone. Only contact reporters when you have newsworthy information, a good pitch or are responding to an inquiry or a story. Reporters are primarily looking for the facts, additional contacts, or your quotes to convey a sense of importance or controversy.

Everything is on the record.

Enough said. Even if you feel like you have a great relationship with a reporter, don't say anything you

wouldn't want to see on the front page or the evening news. If you talk with a reporter for an hour about responsible tax policy but utter one aside about how your organization is being investigated by the IRS, guess which part of the conversation is likely to make a headline?

Never say, "No comment."

Like it or not, your audience and journalists will take that as an admission of guilt. If you don't know the answer to something or don't feel comfortable answering a question, it's perfectly acceptable to respond with, "Can I get back to you on that?" But remember: if you promised more information, deliver it on time.

Don't take it personally if you get "bumped."

If you have the unfortunate luck of staging a living wage rally or photo-op right when some huge national story breaks, and your event is missed because all the media is covering the big story, those are the breaks.

Be a media consumer.

Many progressives dislike or ignore television and other important media outlets. If you want to reach the audience you've targeted, you have to know the media they use. Watch the news shows in your city, taking notes on the reporters. Read bylines and remember who covered what issue. Research your issue on Google News, Nexis, and websites of relevant publications.

A word about "exclusives."

Giving exclusives—the first and only shot at important news—can have both positive and negative repercussions. On the positive side, a well-placed exclusive to a key media outlet can result in a major, in-depth story that will spark other news coverage. Plus, you develop a stronger relationship with the reporter. On the negative side, be prepared to take the wrath of reporters who did not get the exclusive. Kiss their butts—in a professional manner, of course—and toss them something else in the future. Never give an exclusive to a reporter and then feed the story to another reporter. Both will be furious. If you get into a "bidding war" for a story, take the audience size of the media and your relationships with the reporters into consideration.

Checklist: tips for a perfect pitch

- Pitch your story
 - Don't call to confirm receipt of releases or advisories
 - Treat this as an initial sales call, not a follow-up
- Keep it brief
- Pitch to reporters with whom you have a relationship
 - This means first building the relationship!
- Have a back-up pitch – if they don't like your first idea, they might like your others
- Have multiple hooks
 - Provide more than one reason your story idea is interesting
- Ask questions and anticipate and answer questions
- Be knowledgeable about reporter's prior work
- Ask for referrals
 - If this reporter is not interested in the story, which of her colleagues might be?
- Visualize your story for TV and print photos
- Reporters are human beings too
 - Respect their schedule, deadlines, priorities, and humanness
- Personalize your story
 - Offer compelling spokespeople to tell the story
- Always be more reasonable than your opponent
- Pass the "brother in law" test
 - Would an outsider who is not in the activist world understand or sympathize with your story?
- Tell your story and control the message
 - If they ask you a question outside of your message, guide them back to the message
- Don't be a diva
- Don't exaggerate facts or the importance of your issue
- Avoid "sweeps week" in television
 - Check with your local stations to see when "sweeps", the ratings period, occurs. Avoid pitching TV reporters during sweeps so reporters can focus on the gory/bizarre stories that boost ratings during those weeks.
- Consider exclusives
- Know the media outlets your target audience consumes

Be Organized: Create a media list/database

- Purchase media directories such as the Yellow Pages, Bacon's, Burrelle's, or the New California Media Ethnic Media Directory
- Exchange media contact lists with your colleague organizations
- Capture information on reporters who contact your organization
- Remember alternative, independent, ethnic and community media
- Continually expand and update your database
- Prioritize the reporters who can help you advance toward your goals

Bonus points: If you really want to start a great relationship

Take a reporter to coffee/ a meal

Call or e-mail a reporter who writes about your issue and comment positively about a recent article.

Tour a newsroom or make other personal contact.

Go to City Hall, a local trial, or other places media are already gathering.

Capture essential information about reporters from other staff/ colleagues.