

MEDIA DO'S AND DON'TS

The following tips comprise a primer for making your voice heard, talking about your issue, speaking with reporters, spinning your message and other basics tactics. What you should and should not do are valuable lessons not only for living wage media work but whenever you go to the press with news on any issue.

Tips on how to move your message with the media

- **Be *for* something, not just *against* something.**

Often we focus only on what's bad—how impoverished workers are who don't make a living wage, how bad employers are who don't pay their employees a living wage.

Highlighting the problem and its consequences on our communities is important, but we should also communicate what we stand for. In other words, don't just talk about what's wrong, emphasize how it could be *better*.

One way to do this is to articulate your values in your message. What do you stand for? How do you want workers to be treated? What kind of community do you want to live in? Offer an affirmative, justice-seeking, empowering vision.

Don't just talk about what's wrong, emphasize how it could be better.

- **Check your statistics, jargon, rhetoric.**

Living wage campaigns and broader economic justice struggles inherently contain complex economic and political analysis and dynamics. Often there is a tendency to overwhelm with numbers and factoids as if that would automatically convince anyone of the need to pass a living wage bill.

Translate numbers into something easier to grasp. For example, instead of saying "seventy-five percent of voters approve a living wage ordinance," say, "three out of every four...". Further, check your rhetoric. You are trying to pass a living wage law, or secure more rights and benefits for workers, not "dismantle two hundred years of oppression and capitalistic exploitation." (See "Pass the Brother-in-Law Test" below.)

- **Always tell the truth and be factually accurate.**

Trust and integrity are critical in your relationships with reporters while giving voice to those who deserve to make a living wage. Strong relationships can mean fair and balanced coverage of your issues. Mislead a reporter and your integrity is destroyed. Besides, isn't this about telling the truth about how workers should be treated and paid? Be accurate with your statistics. That includes the number of people affected by a living wage ordinance; any analysis of the economic impact of living wage law; and so forth.

Sometimes in the "frenzy" of a living wage political campaign there might be a tendency to play fast and loose with numbers—resist this.

- **Respect reporters' professionalism.**

Journalists are extremely proud and protective of their professionalism. It pays for you to respect that. After all, don't you like to be treated professionally? Do not expect reporters to be "cheerleaders" for the underpaid. Don't presume they are as excited about your living wage story as you are. That's not their job. Their job is to report on

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stories in a fair and balanced manner. When they do this, thank them.

● **Never “wing it.”**

If you do not know the answer to a reporter's question do not make something up. You will most likely say something that is either off message or regrettable—or both. If a reporter asks you a question and you do not know the answer, say so and either introduce someone who does know, or find out the reporter's deadline and promise to get back with the answer by deadline. And make sure you do it.

● **Do not presume a reporter knows what you are talking about.**

Many of us work for organizations that use all kinds of acronyms, jargon, leftist rhetoric, mission-statement talk, and insider lingo. “Community Benefits Initiative” might be an example of such language; what does it mean? At least take the time to explain it.

Translate all terms into language reporters and audiences will understand. Take, for example, the phrase “economic justice.” Translate it so it means something to people: the right to earn a decent paycheck so you can afford a quality education for your children, put food on the table and improve your life.

● **Pass the “Brother-In-Law” Test**

To see if your message passes muster with regular folks, conduct the useful “brother-in-law test” (or sister-in-law, or family friend, or neighbor). Pick a relative, friend or acquaintance who is not associated with your cause

or organization, and see if they understand the issue. Can they grasp the concept and understand how it affects them readily? Do they “get” the issue? These folks may be your target audience at some point in your campaign. It pays to translate for them.

● **Speak in soundbites.**

Condense your message down to ten seconds or less when doing interviews with reporters, in particular broadcast media. Do not try to explain everything there is to know about decent wages, workers rights, economic justice and so forth in your soundbite.

Obviously, take the time to educate reporters about the nuances and details of an issue. But when the tape is rolling, speak in a soundbite.

● **Always return reporters' phone calls.**

Make sure you take reporters' phone calls. If you regularly miss their calls they will stop calling. Be a resource even if you do not know the answer to a question. Tell a reporter: “You know, that's not my turf; but here are three people who do work on that. You should call them. Here are their numbers.” Reporters will appreciate the help.

● **Meet reporters' deadlines.**

Find out about reporters' deadlines: They live by them. The newspaper has to go to the printer; the TV and radio show have to air. These are not flexible times. If you have not called back by 3 or 4pm. at print newspapers, the reporter will get very nervous. By 4:30pm you are out of the story. The same holds for TV news a couple of hours before air time.

If something big is happening in the news that connects to your issue, make yourself available at deadline time and you may get into the story. For example, if an article appears about, say, earnings trends of workers in your state, that might be an opportunity to get a follow-up piece on the impact of a living wage measure on those trends. Be there. You may only get one shot. When something hot is going on make sure you are in touch and know what is happening. Check your voice mail regularly.

Furthermore, if a reporter sympathetic to your issue calls on deadline for a quote and you do not know what is going on, ask them. Reporters may describe the news for you (“sources have told us that several city council members are wavering on the living wage vote”), knowing that

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DO NOT SIMPLY ANSWER REPORTERS' QUESTIONS, RESPOND TO THEM.

mEvery time you speak to a reporter —on the phone, at a rally with a camera in your face or to a reporter at a press conference—consider the interaction as an opportunity to move your message. Do not answer with what you think the reporter wants you to say, or what your opponents are saying, or with a simple “yes” or “no” answer. Respond with your message.

Obviously, you have to answer some questions a reporter asks you: your name, age and affiliation, for example. But even this can be an opportunity to communicate your broader message.

For example, when one activist was asked her age she responded: “I’m 42 years old, and like many people in their 40s I am concerned about the economic strength of our community. That means paying workers a living wage, because nobody who works should live in poverty. That’s why I’m urging the city council to vote ‘yes’ on the living wage ordinance.”

This activist not only answered the reporter’s question, but also used the occasion to respond and advance a strategic message. Spin your message, not just the answer to the question.

it will help you make a comment. They are not necessarily putting words in your mouth, although sometimes it is easy to tell what kind of quote they want. Usually, the article is more or less done and your quote will serve to round it off. This is an excellent opportunity to make sure your point of view is included. Listen carefully. Think quickly. And stay on your message.

Finally, consider staging media events and living wage photo ops at a time when local TV can cover them live.

If something big is happening in the news that connects to your issue, make yourself available at deadline time and you may get into the story.

If the event is big enough and visually provocative, a camera truck might be sent to cover it. Provide your cell phone to reporters so they can reach

you at the event. A slow news day may result in producers trying to fill time, and if your event is on their radar screen, it might be covered.

● **Always appear more reasonable than your opponents.** Whoever appears more reasonable is ahead of the game. This does not mean you can never be angry or sometimes even outraged. But be extremely conscious of using words that are sensationalistic or that portray your opponents as something they are not. It is important to be poised and confident in the press.

Stake out your ground in positive terms and check the extreme language. Say what you stand for and how it will improve our communities, all the while putting your opponents on the defense. Be careful about labeling them. It may feel cathartic to call an employer who opposes a living wage a “slave-driving worker exploiter” but that language will probably alienate people and certainly does not communicate a strategic message. We can express anger in the press, but we have to learn how to channel and convert that rage into a message that moves people to awareness and action on our issues.

But what if your opponent *is* reasonable? What if they are, say, the Chamber of Commerce or poised and composed business leaders who oppose living wage? What if they even appear to be considerate of worker issues? In other words, what if you can't “out-reasonable” them? Then be more *real*. Be more “of the people,” community-oriented, in touch with regular folks.

● **Remember: “Three” is a trend.**

Three is a trend in the media—or so goes the old axiom. And trends are news. That means if you can find three examples of something—three companies in your area

now paying a living wage, three other communities in your region grappling with living wage ordinances, three workers affected—you will position the story for better coverage.

● **Drama sells.**

This is especially true about TV. Though it may reflect the sad “Fox News” state of American media, that is the reality. The point is: drama sells.

Stage and package your news for maximum media impact. Do not spill blood, but include dramatic human-interest stories and poignant anecdotes, as well as compelling individuals and their testimonials. You must present your news so it contains some human drama. Pick a setting that visually demonstrates the content of your message. Make your event as appealing, personal and dramatic as possible, without going overboard.

● **Visualize your story for TV.**

Television is a visual medium. For every eight or twelve seconds of “soundbites” you may get into a TV news story, there will be another thirty to forty-five seconds of visual material shown in the background. Think how your message can be conveyed visually as well as verbally when planning your event. If you have a short piece of video that illustrates your message—such as workers marching or an interview with a living wage employee and his/her family) by all means give it to the reporter for use as “b-roll” (“background images and footage”).

● **Personalize your story.**

Personalize your story to the media as much as possible. One easy way spokespersons can do this is by adding a personal attribute, such as: “As a low-income worker trying hard to make ends meet,” or, “As a parent...”. Other examples include: “As a teacher...”, “As a clergy member...”, “As a small business owner...”.

● **Think strategically.**

Think in terms of how media coverage affects your goals. As a community leader or someone responsible for an issue or organization, you are not seeking media coverage just to get your name in the newspaper. You are doing it because you have been entrusted by people in your community to have a leadership role and to achieve certain goals.

Speaking to the press has implications not just for you and your organization, but for people around you. You have to think strategically about what you are saying and the impact it will have: How does it advance your issue? Your program? Your organization? How will it help you reach your goals? Think carefully about what you are saying—and why. ■

FIVE STEPS TO SUCCESS

The following is a five-step process for making news. Every organization seeking media attention should follow this process in the order presented to maximize their media potential. What is the secret to scoring good press that will create change for your community and help you get economic justice for workers? Read on.

1. Establish Your Goals

Clearly articulate your desired goals before embarking on a media campaign. The goals drive press efforts—not the other way around. Everything you do in the media is designed to help you attain your goals. The goals should also be realistic.

Typical goals might be:

- Pass a living wage ordinance
- Give a voice to workers affected by living wage
- Secure endorsements by select opinion and political leaders
- Educate the public about the issue; challenge misconceptions
- Enhance the profile and visibility of your organization
- Build movement

2. Identify Your News

Do not waste reporters' time with something that is not news. What reports, surveys or briefing papers can you produce and release that will provide a new perspective? What media events that communicate real news can you stage? What information can you provide that will present a different twist to the story? How will the community be affected in new ways?

3. Frame the Issue for Maximum Media Impact

Do you always find yourself on the defense with your opposition framing the news instead of you framing it? The news is not just about your group or your report. It is about something much bigger, with more drama, that will impact more people at a timely moment (see *How and Why to Frame Living Wage News*, elsewhere in this kit).

4. Craft Your Strategic Media Messages

Condense your complicated issue down to two or three main messages. Discipline the message (see *A Model For Your Living Wage Message*, elsewhere in this kit).

5. Create a Media Plan

Your plan will have several components, including everything from identifying and pitching reporters, to placing op eds, to staging media events. A coordinated media plan will increase your success in moving your messages and having them "echoed" through the media (see *The Living Wage Media Plan*, elsewhere in this kit).

Connect your media plan to your: **(1)** overall campaign goals; **(2)** 'get out the vote' electoral strategy; or **(3)** organizing/outreach strategy, as opposed to your media plan being something run on its own. ■

TARGETING YOUR AUDIENCE

An important part of any public relations effort is targeting your audience. Who precisely are you trying to reach with your message? You may have several target audiences who need to receive your message, or you may have one specific audience. The targeted audience will help determine the scope of your media plan. Give your audience some thought before embarking on a media campaign. This will influence how you spend your valuable resources and time. This is good strategic planning.

1. Define Your Audience(s)

The target group for your living wage message may include:

- Elected officials
- Community residents
- Voters
- General media
- Community media
- Opinion-makers and other information “gatekeepers”
- Community leaders
- Alliances/organizers
- Unions
- People of color
- People of faith
- Women
- Youth
- Business leaders
- Academia (local economists, university figures, et al)
- Others

EXAMPLE AND QUESTION: Imagine you are releasing a new report on the impact of paying a living wage in your community.

The report contains economic analysis, survey of other cities with living wage laws, tracking data of wages in your area and state, commentary by local economists, opinions by political figures, case studies of workers, and more. You may want to release the report not long after announcing, say, a campaign targeted at companies and contractors who do business with your city. You want them to pay employees and contractors a decent, living wage.

Of the above list of possible target audiences, prioritize those you think are the most important. Who would be the most important targets of a message communicated in this report at this stage in the campaign?

2. Tailor Your Messages to Your Desired Audience

The value messages will be consistent across the board, but the action message in particular can change depending on the audience (see *A Model for Your Living Wage Message* in this kit).

EXAMPLE: Continuing with the target audiences above, let's say that the Mayor's office and the city council are the top message priorities at this stage, with the general media coming in right behind them.

Your media message might be something like this:

Message #1: The Problem

“Many workers in Our Town, USA, are working two, three and more jobs just to make ends meet. Companies and developers who get tax breaks and other incentives are not sharing the benefits with the community by not paying employees a decent, living wage. This threatens the economic well-being of workers, their families and our community.”

Message #2: A Solution

“Our report shows the positive economic impact of paying employees a living wage. It shows how other communities that have adopted a similar measure have benefited. People who work in our community should not live in poverty. Companies who do business here and receive benefits from our city should pay a living wage.”

Message #3: A Call to Action

“City supervisors and the Mayor must take action and support the Community Benefits Living Wage Initiative. It's about helping workers and their families reap the benefits of working hard, and about our community building economic strength.”

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Targeting Your Audience, cont.

3. Plan Your Media for Your Desired Audience

Why waste resources on a media plan that will not reach your targeted audience?

EXAMPLE: If business leaders are a desired target, pitch the business press or business shows and pages of the local media. If local residents are important, aim for the “Metro” section of the paper and community press, including people-of-color media that may serve affected neighborhoods. Aiming for politicians? Then stage a media event on the steps of City Hall or your state capitol and aim for political/financial columnists.

4. Make Sure Your Media Plan, With its Targeted Community Audience(s), Dovetails With Your Local Organizing Efforts

Door-to-door flyering, a local community “speak out,” or other education efforts can be timed to coincide with the placing of an opinion editorial in the local paper, or the staging of a local media event.

By targeting your audience and appropriate media you will maximize your resources and create a more effective media plan. ■

MEDIA JARGON

It's important to know the lexicon of the media and PR. Among other things, it allows you to speak with reporters from a more informed perspective. These jargon phrases are often heard by activists. Better to know what they mean so you can use them correctly.

Soundbite

A *soundbite* is a short, pithy, attention-getting quote that communicates the gist of your message. Most TV and radio broadcast “bites” last eight to ten seconds. In print, you will probably get one quote that fills up one short paragraph, maybe two if you are lucky. The best bites contain action words, puns or verbal twists—sometimes even a touch of humor. Do not attempt to explain everything in your bite; that is a sound *banquet* that will be edited down to just one quick quote.

EXAMPLES

1. “They used to say Wall Street is whizzing, that stocks are up and the economy is good. It was whizzing all right, on you and me and other Americans that were working harder than ever for less and less.” —Jim Hightower, popular commentator.
2. “You don’t have to be straight to be in the military, you just have to shoot straight.” —late Governor Barry Goldwater, speaking in support of ending the ban on gays and lesbians serving in the armed forces.
3. “The women of Idaho are not getting the health coverage they need to take care of themselves and their families because of unfair insurance practices. We need a prescription for fairness that covers all Idahoans and keeps our medicine cabinets stocked.” —Idaho Women’s Network

Spin

***Spin* is the art of influencing the outcome of a story.** It is how you nudge, cajole, massage and direct the news to your benefit. It is your angle on the story. Every side of a debate has its own spin. Media activists spin stories by working with reporters and “framing” the story to emphasize particular angles while downplaying others. Reporters like to consider themselves impervious to spin.

Opponents of living wage will spin their side. Sometimes, therefore, we must “counterspin” our opposition. For example, opponents of living wage ordinances often claim “disastrous” economic impact or questionable legal implications of such ordinances. Be prepared with your counterspin, even before the other side makes its arguments.

Pitch

To *pitch* a story means to give an idea for a news story to reporters, producers or editors—and getting them excited about covering it. Activists pitch stories by calling up reporters, meeting with them in person or sending a story idea tip sheet. You must be enthusiastic about the idea and offer real news with additional sources.

Possible living wage pitches:

- Ordinance announced at rally
- Profile on workers affected
- New report shows positive trend and economic impact of living wage
- More elected officials support living wage
- Business leaders (or clergy) support living wage

Frame

The *frame* of the story is its boundaries, its borders, its defining limits, its impact and its significance.

It is your point of view. How you frame your news will determine not only whether a reporter covers it but also whether your position is communicated effectively. Framing determines who is in the story and who is not; who are the good guys and who are the bad guys; who gets to define the issue and who gets to respond.

Framing is key. Whoever helps the reporter frame the story in a bigger, more significant way gets the most press coverage—and the best. In much of mainstream media today the story's frame is set by government, corporate and other “official” spokespeople. Getting into the frame—or changing the frame of the story altogether—is one of the greatest challenges to progressives today (see *Framing the News*, elsewhere in this kit).

Hook

A *hook* is a way to make the story more interesting to a reporter. Hooks are the components of a news story that make it irresistible to journalists: timeliness, anniversaries, controversy, localizing a national story, and dramatic human interest. Think of your news as bait that is luring the fish to bite. Put the hook out there!

Hooks become part of your “frame.” They give the story more impact and prominence (see *How and Why to Frame*, elsewhere in this kit). You can hook your news to something else happening in the media, say a visit by a

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Media Jargon, cont.

major politician or a business summit. Your hook could be a milestone: the anniversary of some local economic justice battle, for example. Your hook could also be the release of a new report. Hooks can be “first ever” stories. Is what you are doing “unprecedented” or “groundbreaking”? If so, that is your hook.

HOOK EXAMPLE: Here is an example of a “calendar” hook: Mother’s Day comes around every year. Instead of the typical news story on Mother’s Day—the new shopping mall is popular with moms—pitch the press an original story that hooks to the holiday. A piece on mothers who have to work three jobs just to make ends meet because they don’t earn a living wage, and how that’s affecting their families and communities.

Lead

In modern American news style, the *lead* is the first line or paragraph of a story; it represents the initial and central point. It is an important part of your press release in that it must capture attention and summarize the news. Try to write concise leads that will grab reporters’ attention. If you do not grab them by the end of the paragraph—or sometimes by the headline—they probably won’t continue.

Op-ed (Opinion Editorial)

Often written from a personal angle, *op-eds* appear on the editorial page of newspapers or during the “point/counterpoint” portion of radio and TV shows. Writers pitch their op-eds to the editorial editors. Op-eds are very useful to communicate points on an issue in your own words. They should be short, personal and clearly state the key messages. For living wage battles, or for broader economic justice efforts, consider op-eds by workers or supportive politicians and business leaders and clergy.

Photo-op (Photo Opportunity)

Use *photo-ops* to stage high-impact images that communicate your messages. Photographs and strong television pictures can move an audience much more directly than words. The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now! (ACORN) is a master of staging photo-ops on living wage issues: pictures of workers and their supporters and families communicate what it would take thousands of words to say.

Wire Service

Wire services are news sources that file articles to newspapers and radio and TV stations across the country;

media outlets then “pull” the stories off the wire to print or air them locally. Every media activist—that’s you—should have the number of the nearest AP bureau and other wire service offices in their rolodex. If you get a local story onto the AP wire it can be picked up in papers nationwide.

The Associated Press (AP) is probably the most popular wire service, with bureaus in most media markets. Other mainstream wire services include: Copley, Dow Jones, Knight-Ridder, Gannett, New York Times News Service, Reuters, Scripps-Howard, United Press International, and States.

Related news sources are *syndicated columnists*. These journalists write features that are syndicated—disseminated—to subscriber media outlets across the country. If your news has regional or national importance, syndicated columnists or news wires might be interested.

Daybook

The *daybook* is the daily listing of events for journalists, including press conferences, rallies and other media events. It is often what reporters check first thing in the morning to see what news is being made that day. The Associated Press (AP) produces one of the most popular daybooks. To get on the AP daybook, call, fax or email your local AP bureau with a media advisory.

B-roll

These are the images shown on the screen as a television news anchor provides a voice-over of a story. *B-roll* is filmed throughout the day by crews, or can be taken from the station’s file footage to illustrate frequently covered issues such as workers protesting poverty wages.

Actuality

An *actuality* is a news piece created for radio. Activists can produce their own radio actualities and send them to radio stations across the state. An actuality sounds just like it was produced by a radio reporter, containing quotes, sound effects and background noise. Relatively inexpensive to make, actualities are an important media tool that is often underused.

No comment

No comment is a dangerous thing to say to a reporter. Rarely—if ever—use this phrase with a journalist. Saying “no comment” suggests one of two things: (1) You are hiding something; (2) You are so uninformed and caught by surprise that you are incompetent.

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If you absolutely cannot speak on an issue respond with something such as: “Our lawyers have informed us that we cannot speak on that issue. However, what I can say is that we are here to serve the community in the most effective and committed way possible and make sure every worker here is paid a living wage.” Turn the question around so you can respond with a key message.

On/off the record

Many people use these terms without knowing their technical implications. Contributing to the confusion is the fact that *on* and *off the record* mean different things to different reporters. **Generally, you must presume that everything you say to a reporter at all times—including social and casual settings—is on the record.** That means it is information that can be used with specific attribution—your name and organizational affiliation.

For some journalists, off the record means the information can still be used, but without attribution. Sometimes sources will go off the record to impart sensitive information with which they do not want to be associated. This means the person went off the record and the attribution is general—not specific by name. Going off the record first requires permission from the journalist. The journalist must agree to the terms. You must remember to go back on the record when it is appropriate. Once you say something it cannot be reversed and made off the record.

A related distinction is **Deep Background**. Deep Background usually means that the information and your name cannot be used: Think “Deep Throat” and the Watergate scandal. On the whole, it is not advised to go either off the record or on deep background. **If you do not want reporters to know something, do not say it.**

Embargo

You can embargo your news for a specific date and time. This means reporters cannot publish or air the news until the stated embargo time. Embargoes are a way for you to get information into the hands of key journalists prior to an event. That way they can do a good job covering your news without ruining the “big surprise.”

For example, a report on the economic impact of a living wage law given to journalists in advance may be embargoed until the time and date of a press conference. The embargoed copies allow reporters to study your work and begin to prepare the story.

You must write “EMBARGOED UNTIL [DATE] AND [TIME]” across all documents given to reporters in advance. Most responsible reporters do not break embargoes. Nevertheless, they are a risk. ■