



BlueRibbon Coalition Media Guide

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Consulted Sources/Credits:

Fleishman-Hillard International Communications

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Associated Press Stylebook

Working with the media, both print (newspapers) and electronic (radio/television), is important for BlueRibbon Coalition (BRC) Board Members and affiliated organizations. Remember, we need the media more than they need us.

Over the next several pages of this BRC Media Guide, we will present ideas and concepts that will help make our job easier in working with the media. We also need to understand the media and “where they are coming from.”

BRC Board Members get called upon to interact with the media in several different ways. It may be through a news release (not press release as broadcasters do not care for this term), a one-on-one print or electronic interview, or an event that warrants the media’s attention/interest.

WHAT ARE THE MEDIA?

The media are the newspapers, radio stations and television stations in your area that can support your organization. But, remember, the media has goals also. They want/need to inform the public and monitor what’s happening around us.

Most journalists, photojournalists and their support staff—engineers, producers, and editors—are professional and conscientious just as you are.

Most media people accept their social and ethical responsibility to gather and report news and information fairly, accurately and honestly.

Regardless of any personal bias you might have, you must be willing to learn to work **with** the media to effectively reach your audience. Remember, the media can be an asset.

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL MEDIA RELATIONSHIP

1. Be honest. State the facts without dressing them up or painting a picture worse/better than reality. Printed words and audiotapes can come back to haunt you. If you are not the best source for the information, refer the reporter to the proper person. Telling a reporter “I don’t know” is not an admission of stupidity. If at all possible, follow up with “But, I’ll find out and get back to you.” Make sure you call back. Never speculate. Never answer hypothetical questions...What if...?
2. If you do not want to see it in print or hear it on the news, do not say it. In the real world, there’s no such thing as “off the record.” Always remember the red light on the television reporters video camera...it is always on (it may be burned out).
3. When you have said enough to answer the question or to explain what needs to be explained, be quiet. Do not fall for the reporter’s tactic of looking at you expectantly

with the microphone in your face. Look expectantly back at the reporter with your lips firmly closed, and await another question.

4. Never say "no comment." It sounds like you have something to hide. So does brushing past the reporter(s) without saying anything as questions are shouted after you. If you have been instructed not to talk by your lawyer because of litigation, say so. If you are waiting for new information, say so. If there is someone else who should be the source of information, say so. As a last resort, something along the lines of "I can't really address that here" followed by some bit of information can work.
5. Do not make cute or smart remarks. It may sound good when you first say it, but by the time it has been printed or broadcast a few times, it gets old. And, the tone of voice you use does not come across in print at all
6. When you are interviewed as an organization's representative, any opinion you give will be considered the organization's opinion, even if you preface the opinion with "this is just my personal opinion"
7. If you can see a reporter, assume that you can be taped. In fact, microphones can pick up the sound of your voice from 50 feet or more away. Just because you are no longer in front of the camera does not mean that the camera is not on you--perhaps from as far away as a block. Print reporters frequently tape interviews as well. Assume that all phone conversations are being taped. Feel free to bring out your own tape recorder at an interview as well.
8. Be concise and do not use jargon. At best you'll sound bureaucratic or pompous--at worst you will confuse people.
9. Consider that most broadcast reporters are trying to fill a particular time frame--usually 30 seconds or less. Practice editing the information in your remarks to fit your needs and the reporter's, rather than making the reporter edit your remarks to fit the time frame.
10. Control the interview. Within reason, you can decide when and where an interview will take place. Give yourself time to gather your thoughts. Make sure the background shots in a television interview do not put your organization in a bad light.
11. Develop a media policy for your organization. The policy should address media access and notification, just for-starters. Distribute the policy to the media. Make sure all your agency players are familiar with it as well.
12. Get to know your local media and their deadlines.

13. Do not sell your community short. Every small town and unincorporated area, no matter how isolated, is accessible to reporters who will arrive in their microwave/satellite trucks, helicopters, and airplanes.
14. Remember that television is more of an emotional medium than an intellectual one. Viewers will remember how you looked and behaved more than the content of what you said.
15. Do not plaster a smile on your face when the topic is serious. Keep your hands at your side or on your desk. Do not jingle the keys or change in your pocket. Avoid lighting up a cigarette--it is viewed as a sign of nervousness. The bad guys wear sunglasses and hats down over their foreheads. Photograph lenses will turn dark after only a few minutes under camera lights.
16. Always make reporters feel that you are trying to help. The media is your outlet to the public. Keep any hostility on your part to yourself. Remember, never pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel.

MEDIA DON'TS

Do not call the newsroom to check on your release.

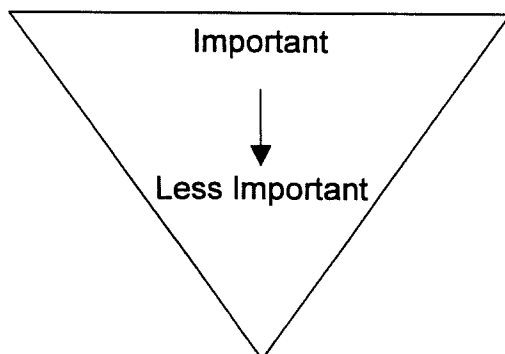
Do not overuse news releases.

Do not play media favorites.

NEWS RELEASE BASICS

News releases are an excellent method to communicate your organization's activities to the media. Writing a good news release is not difficult, but you should master the basics to be successful.

News releases should be written using the inverted pyramid style of writing. The most important information comes first in the news releases with less important information following.



--Lead sentence

--Prioritize each additional sentence

--Write in declining order of importance

Try to keep the first paragraph (lead) of your news release to two succinct sentences and include the five Ws and an H. (This is not always easy, but you should try.)

- WHO's involved
- WHAT's going on
- WHEN – date and time
- WHERE it will be held
- WHY it is happening
- HOW it will take place

Almost as important as the content of the news release is the correct format. Listed below are some format recommendations:

- Double-space with two-inch margins so an editor can make notes
- Use one side of an 8 ½" x 11" piece of paper
 - Try not to exceed two pages for a news release
 - Longer releases are not read/message may be lost
- At the top of page one:
 - Use organizational letterhead or type your heading at the top of the page with your organization's name
 - Identify a contact person, title, and phone number
 - Identify "For Immediate Releases"
- Remainder of page one:
 - Main body copy of the release with a headline; this gives the editor a quick idea of the content of your release
 - Begin your body copy with a dateline:
 - The identification of the town from which the release originates, enclosed by parentheses, followed by two dashes before the start of the news release lead
 - [i.e., (Pocatello, ID)—The BlueRibbon Coalition.....]
 - At the bottom of the first page, to identify that the news release stops, indicate "###" or "-30-" in the center of the bottom of the page
 - To indicate that the news release continues to a subsequent page, center the capitalized word "-MORE-" at the bottom.
 - Remember to always end the news release with "###" or "-30-" which is placed at the bottom of the last page of the news release
- Finalize your release with a reminder of who to contact for more information. Close with: "For more information, contact: _____."



NEWS RELEASE

Contact: John Jones, 4x4 President
Telephone: 208-555-7643

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

HOW TO WRITE A NEWS RELEASE *Headline*

DECEMBER 15, 1998, (POCATELLO, ID) – When writing a news release, keep in mind that editors and reporters receive hundreds of news releases each day. Therefore, you must grab them in the first paragraph – if not the first sentence – or your release will go straight into the wastebasket. Address the Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How —the five “W’s” and the “H” – in the first sentence or paragraph.

Supporting details are in the following paragraphs in order of importance. This is known as the “inverted pyramid” style of writing a news release. If an editor decides to shorten your release in his/her newspaper, the most important information will remain intact.

Write objectively. Avoid adjectives that show bias, such as “great,” “terrific,” “superb,” etc. If you want to inject opinion information in your release, use it in a quote that can be attributed to an appropriate organizational spokesperson. For example, if

- MORE - *Indicates you have additional pages*

WRITE A NEWS RELEASE
PAGE TWO

← This is the continuation
header (slug line)

you're issuing a news release about your club's collaboration with the Forest Service on a trail cleanup, be objective in the release's narrative, but in the quote, you could write: "This was an outstanding volunteer effort by members of our club and the Forest Service," said John Jones, president of the Dakota 4-Wheelers. (Notice that the person quoted is clearly identified by first and last name and position).

"Off highway recreationists are good stewards of the land; this is just another example of working together to show our concern for the environment," said Jones. (Be careful not to be verbose).

Write short, active sentences. Proofread the release carefully to eliminate spelling, grammar, or factual errors. **Never** give inaccurate information in a release, you will immediately lose all credibility with the media.

As for formatting, releases should be double-spaced and have at least one-inch left and right margins to allow for editor notes. The words NEWS RELEASE should be placed at the top of the first page along with a headline to give an editor a quick idea of the release content. Also put the words FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE just above the headline. Don't forget date, city, and state – use the date that your release is being mailed or hand delivered.

Indent five spaces for each new paragraph. Keep the release short, from one to two pages and use only one side of the paper (this example is an exception).

- MORE -

WRITE A NEWS RELEASE
PAGE THREE

Your organization letterhead should be used for the first page. If appropriate, include a photograph (avoid grip and grin) and cutline with your news release. Be sure to fully identify everyone in the photo and describe the event.

Indicate the end of your release with “###” or “-30-” and give pages following the first page an appropriate identification (slug line) as shown above.

Be sure to mail or hand deliver your release at least two weeks (more if it’s going to a weekly newspaper) prior to your event. If our news is about a past event (award, new organization officers, rally, trail cleanup, etc.) issue the release as soon as possible (within a week). Remember old news is no news.

End your release with a quick last paragraph “boilerplate” that sums up general facts about your organization and closes with: “For more information, contact: _____.”

###



*Indicates end of
news release*

NEWSPAPER PHOTOGRAPHY BASICS

A good quality photograph should accompany most news releases if at all possible. A quality photo contains the same elements as a good news release. A photo brings the release to life, making the story more visual and interesting. Remember, even when space in a newspaper is limited, there is usually room for a good, newsworthy photo.

Newspaper photo tips:

- Black-and-white 5x7 photographs from a 35mm negative are usually standard.
- Take action photos – people doing something; avoid mug shots and grin and grin shots if at all possible.
- Write a caption (cutline), tape it to the photo (tape should go on the back of the photo with caption facing front) and reiterate who, what, when, where, why, and how. In the chance that the newspaper uses only the photograph and not the news release, the information you wanted to convey will still come across to the reading audience.
- Type the contact name and telephone number at the top of the caption (as done on the news release).
- Identify the photo with the story. Sometimes photos are misplaced in the newsroom. Write your phone number on the back of the photo using a grease pencil or felt-tip pen.
- Use only in-focus, high-quality photos. Snapshots are usually not acceptable.
- Avoid a cast of thousands in your photos unless it truly makes sense.
- Try to get your organization banner or sign (BlueRibbon Coalition, etc.) in your photo.

WHEN SHOULD YOU SEND A NEWS RELEASE?

Write and send a news release when: 1) you need to persuade a specific audience to take action which is in their best interest; 2) in your judgment, information can benefit a general or specific audience; 3) you feel the media can help you reach your target audience; 4) you need to publicly establish a position on behalf of your organization.

As a reminder, you need to clearly understand what your local media feels is newsworthy to get them to use your release.

HOW TO GET MEDIA COVERAGE FOR YOUR EVENT

You've mastered the basics of writing a news release. You know how to give the news release life with punch; your news release is hard-hitting that communicates clearly and tells your story succinctly. You know how to compose a photograph through the viewfinder and your technical photography skills are excellent. You've followed all of the rules for format of your news release and photographs, but...

How do you get the media interested enough in your event that they will cover it in their newspaper, or air it over their radio or television station?

First, what you want published or aired must be newsworthy and timely; it must be of interest to local readers, listeners, and viewers...it must have a local tie or angle and it must be current, not something old. Television needs the "action visual" of the story. Radio needs audio or an interview with someone describing the event for the listening audience. Newspapers need detail, background information, and photographs in greater quantity than broadcast reports.

Second, you need a relationship with your media before your event occurs. You need to get to know the members of the media with whom you will work...and their deadlines. Personally meet with media representatives so they will know who you are and where you are coming from. Know the people by name and be sure they know you by name. If you can't personally visit with your media, then telephone them. Remember, you want something from them so the personal touch is best.

Third, know specifically who to contact in the various types of media in your area. For print (newspapers, etc.) call on the managing editor, city editor, specialty editor, and photographers who would cover events such as yours. For radio introduce yourself to the station manager, program director, and news director. For television meet with the program director, news director, video journalists, and assignment editor (this is a critical person who can make or break your chances of event coverage). The assignment editor is the person who schedules the news crews. If the potential story does not make his/her "to do" list, it doesn't get aired. This is time-consuming, but will pay enormous dividends in the future for your organization and the events you are involved in.

Ok...now you have an event all planned out with people coming from all over to participate. It's timely and has good local area interest. You've personally met and now know all your area media representatives. Does this guarantee coverage of your event? No...but you are 1000 percent better off than if you had done none of the above. Your chances of coverage are excellent, but dependent now upon forces you cannot control. What else is happening on this news day? Your story could be bumped due to late-breaking news that is a "must cover" for the media. To help get around this problem, begin working with the media on your event at least two or three weeks (more if you're working with a weekly newspaper) in advance of your event. By giving the

media lead-time for your event, they can actually schedule the coverage and you'll have a much better chance that it will get published or aired.

Finally, the day of your event arrives...and the media is there to cover it...both print and electronic. All your efforts have paid off and your reward is positive coverage of your event on the 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. television news and a nice positive story the next day in your newspaper. Now...take a few minutes to call or drop a note to your media contacts and thank them for the coverage...they also appreciate being recognized for a job well done. Everyone likes to receive *atta-boys/girls*.

You're all set...plan your event and be sure to include the media as an integral part of your plan. It will pay off in the long run and result in positive coverage of your event.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONTROVERSIAL EVENTS

Planning for an event that could/will be controversial such as a protest rally will take special media efforts on your part.

It is absolutely imperative that you meet your media representatives in person; face-to-face so they can form a positive opinion of you and your organization. The media are people also and will have personal opinions about your organization and event. They will do everything they can to not let their personal biases effect their reporting, but they are only human. If it is impossible to meet with the media prior to the event, call them on the telephone as a minimum. Do not use email until you have established a relationship with them based on a personal meeting. **Never** send anything to the media cold or addressed to a generic person if you really want your event covered. Information you send to the media should be addressed to a specific person whom you have already met. Do not send your information in the blind to "editor," "news director," etc. If you do, your information will end up in the wastebasket 99 percent of the time.

If you find yourself in an adversarial situation with a GAG (Green Advocacy Group) or anyone for that matter during your event...always take the high road. Do not let yourself be drawn into an emotional confrontation or a shouting match. Let the GAGs use innuendo, hearsay, scare tactics, and false information. The media is not stupid and will see through the GAG façade. Calm, reasoned arguments/comments will do more to enhance your credibility and the credibility of your organization with the media than almost anything else you can do.

In the final analysis, you have to be prepared for a controversial event and having a plan will help you do that. If something unexpected happens, remain calm and collected and use sound professional judgment. The media will respect your demeanor.