

Chapter 7

The Corps and the Media Strategies to Spread the Word

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Whether you are fighting a destructive Corps project or promoting Corps reform legislation, media coverage can be a powerful tool for achieving your goals. This chapter discusses key steps for developing an effective media campaign and provides practical advice for working with the media and for drafting news releases and other media tools.

I. Designing a Media Campaign

While your organization can gain important publicity from having a spokesperson quoted in the newspaper or interviewed on the evening news, the true power of media is its ability to affect change. An effective media campaign can educate the general public, inspire concerned citizens to act, pressure decision makers to do the right thing, and draw public attention to the importance of your issues and goals.

Before developing a media campaign, you should carefully identify your campaign objective. What do you want to achieve? Your objective may be to prevent authorization of a new Corps project, to convince Congress to pass Corps reform legislation, or to convince the Corps to select a less damaging plan for a particular project. Your objective will guide your entire media campaign.

A. Identifying a Target Audience

Once you have defined your objective, you need to identify the audience you are trying to reach. Individuals in a position to help you achieve your objective are your “primary targets.” Primary targets may be local lawmakers, Members of Congress, the President, Corps employees, or other agency personnel. You should then identify the people who can influence your primary targets. These are your “secondary targets.” Secondary targets might include constituents of an elected official, fishermen whose livelihoods will suffer as a result of a Corps project, hunters and anglers, or homeowners affected by a project.

For example, in order to prevent authorization of a new Corps project, you might need to secure support — or neutralize opposition — from several key Members of Congress. These Members of Congress are your primary targets, and their constituents are secondary targets because they can influence the target Members of Congress. Your media strategy could include efforts to educate these secondary targets about the cost and destructiveness of the project that you want stopped. The ultimate goal of this education would be to inspire these constituents to tell their elected officials (your primary targets) that the project must be stopped.

B. Developing a Message

Once you know your objective and have identified your target audience, you should develop a strong message or messages that will connect with your audiences. Your message is the thought or idea you want your target audience to remember and act upon.

A good message is clear and simple; is consistent throughout your media campaign; encourages your target audience to take action; communicates the problem and the solution in matter-of-fact language; is easy to understand by someone who is not familiar with your issue and avoids jargon, acronyms, and complicated terms.

To help develop your message, you should identify the one or two points you would want your target audience to remember after reading an article about your issue. You should then incorporate the values you share with your primary and secondary targets into those points. For example, you may share government responsibility and accountability as a value. Or perhaps you share concerns about future generations. Framing your message around themes that reflect values held by your target audience will help you connect with them.

Your campaign should have one main message that is consistent throughout your campaign and among all spokespeople. For example, if the Corps is proposing to channelize a local stream to reduce flood damages when better solutions exist, your main message might be this:

The Corps' plan is environmentally destructive and wastes taxpayer dollars. The fish that live in this stream will be directly harmed by the project, as will ducks that use the stream and its floodplain for food supply and wintering habitat. There are less expensive and less environmentally harmful ways to reduce flood damages, and these are the only types of projects that the Corps should consider.

This message states clearly and simply what you want your audience to know about this Corps project. It is matter-of-fact and does not use complicated terms or jargon that may surround the issue. It also can be adapted to resonate with various audiences by altering the style, facts, and anecdotes used to deliver your message. For example, at a Chamber of Commerce breakfast meeting you could talk about how the project will both waste tax dollars and harm local businesses that rely on hunting, fishing, and tourism revenues. At a meeting of the local hunting club you could stress how the project would destroy critical waterfowl habitat.

Because your overall message — like the one above — typically will be too wordy and cover too many issues to be quoted in the media, you will need to distill that message into an appropriate sound bite to get your message into the news.

Crafting a Sound Bite that Reflects Your Message: A sound bite distills your message into a brief and memorable statement of your position that is instantly understandable even to someone totally unfamiliar with your issue. A sound bite should also accurately capture the essential message you want to communicate. Because it is the statement most likely to get quoted, you should also make sure that your sound bite is “on message.” You should avoid inflammatory or over-the-top sound bites, which though easy to write, may not convey your message effectively.

A sound bite does not — and should not — provide context or detail. To the contrary, a good sound bite will be stripped of context and qualification. In a newspaper article or broadcast, the reporter will provide the context. In a news release, you can provide the context in paragraphs following your sound bite. In an interview, you can follow your sound bite with the context and facts that support your message.

The following techniques may help make your sound bite more colorful and improve its chances of being quoted:

- (1) **Alliteration** is one of the easiest techniques to employ. Think of the word or words that are central to your issue, and then identify words that start with the same consonant sounds that can be used to craft your sound bite. *Example:* “With this project, the Corps is choosing pork over people and foul play over waterfowl.”
- (2) Using a well-understood **analogy** is another way to craft an effective sound bite. *Example:* “This Corps proposal is like a party balloon — colorful on the outside, but full of hot air on the inside.” *Example:* “This is another stone being piled on the wall of Corps incompetence.” *Example:* “Independent review will lift the cloud of suspicion hovering over Corps studies.”
- (3) Connecting your message to a well understood example from **current popular culture or events** can be very effective in making your point. *Example:* “We’d have more confidence in this study if Arthur Andersen conducted it.” (In 2002, the financial accounting firm Arthur Anderson was frequently in the news for its fraudulent accounting practices, especially those involving Enron).
- (4) When cleverness eludes you, stick to a **simple statement** that presents your bottom line. *Example:* “The proposed ‘mitigation’ cannot compensate for the natural wetlands that will be destroyed and this essential habitat will be lost forever.”

While it is not always easy to craft a sound bite, it is well worth the time and effort because this is what is most likely to make it into print or onto the air. As a rule of thumb, it probably will take about a third of your news release preparation time to come up with one or two catchy sound bites, and you almost always will spend more time crafting a sound bite than on any other element in a news release.

C. Developing a Media Strategy

Your media strategy should identify how and when you will attempt to get your message into the media to reach your target audiences. Ideally, this strategy would take advantage of both opportunistic and strategic media to deliver your message to your target audience in as many ways, and at as many times, as possible.

Opportunistic Media: An opportunistic media plan will take advantage of news created by other parties to deliver your message. Taking advantage of opportunistic media often will require an ability to respond rapidly to news events about which you may have little or no advanced knowledge. For example, if you are fighting construction of an old-style Corps flood control project in your hometown, you could respond to a local flood by issuing a news release highlighting the need for modern, nonstructural approaches to reduce future flood damages. A plan geared towards providing a rapid response to local flood events may want to identify key flood indicators that should be tracked to provide advanced notice of a potential media opportunity. Other opportunistic news events that could support your message — like issuance of the President’s budget for the Corps — are more predictable in their timing.

An opportunistic media plan also would identify opportunities for leveraging external activities into “news” in order to generate media coverage for your efforts. For example, if you have advance notice of the date that the Corps will be issuing a report on a project you are fighting, you could contact reporters ahead of time to let them know about the report and to deliver your message about the project. You could also issue a news release on the day the Corps releases its report. These types of efforts can be very effective, particularly when you have a good idea of what the report or other information being released will say so that you can anticipate the proper response.

Strategic Media: In strategic media you create your own newsworthy events to promote media coverage of your message. For example, you could issue a news release or hold a press conference on the day you file a lawsuit or release a new study on the economics or environmental impacts of a Corps project. Distributing a media advisory to invite journalists to an activist workshop, or writing an editorial piece on upcoming legislation are also examples of strategic media. Strategic media allows you to control both your message and the timing of your media efforts.

A key element of strategic media is to make your media activity newsworthy. To determine the newsworthiness of your activity you should evaluate whether it creates a compelling “news hook” that would compel a reporter to write a story about the activity right away. There are three elements of newsworthiness that give news its “hook”:

- Timeliness — by definition, news must be something that is new;
- Proximity — stories that are closest to the reader will have the greatest affect; and
- Relevance — news that applies to a reader’s life will be most interesting to the reader.

Releasing new information, such as polling data or a new independent economic analysis of a costly Corps project, can create a news hook. However, you do not always have to generate new information to generate news. For example, you may be able to creatively repackage existing information to make it newsworthy, or you could send your message with unusual or nontraditional allies. A joint announcement by environmentalists, local farmers, and local businesses opposing the Corps' construction of an agricultural water supply project or supporting a wetland restoration project could generate media because these groups typically do not join forces in these ways.

You may be able to enhance the newsworthiness of your announcement by tying it into something else that is going on in the world of potential readers (e.g., with the government, on television, or in the environment where they live). For example, you could release a report outlining the Corps' waste of tax dollars on April 15, or release a report on destructive beach projects on the first day of summer.

Activist Tip

Activists should get to know at least the following journalists, reporters, and editors in your area:

- The environmental, outdoor, or other beat reporter at your local paper(s).
- An editorial writer and news editor at the same paper(s).
- The bureau chief or news editor at the nearest Associated Press bureau.
- The assignment editors for each local TV station that covers the news.
- The news directors for public radio stations (sometimes NPR affiliates) that service your area.
- The news directors for commercial radio all-news stations that service your area.

II. Working With the Media

To get your message into the news on a consistent basis, it is important to develop strong working relationships with reporters who are likely to cover your issues. To do this, you will need to maintain regular contact with key journalists, provide them with accurate information, refer them to other reliable sources when you cannot answer their questions, and be respectful of the constraints on their time. If journalists view you as a trusted and reliable source of information, they are more likely to turn to you and your organization for comments on a regular basis.

A. Identifying Key Media Contacts

It is important to get to know the reporters, editors, and editorial writers who cover your issues at local, regional, and for some issues national, news outlets. These are the people you will need to turn to when you want to get your message out.

There are many ways to obtain this information, but it is probably easiest to begin by identifying all of the newspapers, wire services, and television and radio stations that might cover your issue. You should include local, regional, and national media outlets. You can then talk with local, regional, and national conservation organizations to find out who covers your issues at these outlets. In the end though, it may be necessary to look on websites, read previous coverage, or cold-call news outlets to obtain the best contact information. While cold calling a news team may be daunting at first, most journalists will appreciate your effort to locate the right person rather than bombarding them or others with information that will never be used.

As you identify these individuals, you should keep a running contact list that you can turn to when you have news to report, or a story to tell. The most common way to create and maintain a list is a contact management program such as Microsoft Access or Excel. However, the most important thing is not what computer program you use for your list, but that you have a list that is organized, easily accessible to you and others in your organization, and easily updatable since media contacts often change.

The following information should help you locate the appropriate reporters and editorial writers at different types of media outlets.

Newspapers: Identify all environmental reporters that may be on staff. Keep in mind that not all papers assign the specific title “environmental reporter” to those who may cover that beat. If you are unsure of the best person to cover your story, call the city desk of the newspaper and ask for the name of the most appropriate reporter. Occasionally, you may have a message that is appropriate for another reporter’s beat, such as the outdoor reporter, health and science reporter, education reporter, metro beat reporter, state legislative reporter, or city council reporter. When the message you want to send is softer and more story-like (as opposed to being part of a hard, breaking news story) you will want to contact a feature reporter. Editorial writers are also important contacts.

Activist Tip

Many companies publish media directories that can help make your job easier. Green Media Toolshed, a non-profit provider of electronic media lists, is geared towards serving environmental organizations at an affordable price. Other companies also offer annually printed directories and sell access to their media databases. For example, Leadership Directories Inc. publishes a national news media guide known as *the News Media Yellow Book*. These resources can be very expensive, but also may be available free of charge at your local public or college library.

Wire Services: Wire services are news agencies that provide news articles and reports to their subscribers who can then use the wire service stories in their own papers or television newscasts. Subscribers typically include a full range of national, regional, and local newspapers, and radio and television stations. You will want to get to know the appropriate reporters from at least the Associated Press and Reuters news services.

The Associated Press (AP) is the most influential wire service in the country, as virtually every media outlet subscribes to AP. The AP has bureaus throughout the nation, with most having a handful of general assignment reporters. The AP reporter in the bureau that covers your area should be your first point of contact when you have news to share. By securing a story through AP, you will reach many of the newspapers in your region, state, or city.

Reuters is another popular wire service. Reuters is not as large as AP, but operates in a similar way. Once again, identify the key journalist in the bureau closest to your area, and make that person one of your first media contacts.

Television Stations: The news assignment editor is your best contact at a television station because he or she selects the stories and issues that will be reported. Television reporters typically are general assignment reporters who are given their assignments by the station's news assignment editor.

Radio Stations: The news director is your best contact at a radio station. Most radio stations do not have reporters, and the news director is often solely responsible for choosing the stories that are reported.

B. Communicating With Journalists

Working effectively with the media involves more than just having your message and facts in order. It is important to understand the pressures journalists typically work under and to communicate with them in a way that fosters their ability to get their work done on time. While some of the following tips are driven by simple common sense, others are driven by the realities of a reporter's work environment.

- (1) Be **prompt**. You should always return a call from a journalist as soon as possible. Reporters are often on a deadline, and calling back too late will mean missing your chance to get your message in their story. If you cannot answer a reporter's question, do not leave the reporter dangling — let her know and refer her to others who can help if you are able. If you can help, you might want to take a few minutes to gather your thoughts before you return the call (or, if a reporter reaches you directly, say that you need 15 minutes to collect your thoughts). Immediately send promised faxes and emails.
- (2) Be **mindful of time**. Journalists are busy people. They work under the constant pressure of tight deadlines and may be working on multiple stories at any given time. You should be sensitive to their needs and to the amount of time they have available to talk to you. If you would like more time to introduce a journalist to your issue, ask if you can meet to talk in depth about your issue. Avoid calling a newspaper or television reporter after 3:00 p.m., unless you have a breaking news story or have been asked to call during that time. This is the time when many news outlets are preparing the next day's paper or the evening broadcast. If you have to pull together information to respond to a reporter's inquiry, find out the deadline and send the requested information as quickly as possible.
- (3) Be **honest**. One of the quickest ways to ruin a relationship with a reporter is to provide incorrect information. It goes without saying that it is never appropriate to knowingly lie to a reporter. You should also never provide information that you are not sure is accurate, and you should not speculate. It is far better to tell reporters that you are not able to help them and direct them to another person or organization that might be able to help. In every communication you have with a journalist, you are building a relationship that must be based on trust.
- (4) Be **accessible**. You should do your best to be available to reporters, particularly on the day you are holding a news event or issuing a news release. Also, consider providing your cell phone or home phone number to journalists, since they often have more time after normal working hours to talk. You never want to make it hard for journalists to reach you, because they will move on to another source or may give up trying to reach you altogether. If you know you will be unavailable, identify

Activist Tip

When pitching a news story, consider using an embargo or offering the story as an exclusive.

An embargo is a “hold” until a certain specified date that you put on a news release, report, or other information that you give to one or more reporters. An embargo is the best tool for controlling the timing of media coverage while giving reporters enough time to research and write the best possible story. You should get a verbal agreement from a reporter that she will abide by the terms of the embargo before providing detailed information on your issue.

In an exclusive, you provide information to only one reporter. If you give a reporter exclusive rights to a story, you should also agree to a publication date. If the reporter has not published the story by that time, or decides to pass on the story altogether, you are then free to give exclusive rights to another reporter. You cannot give an exclusive to one reporter and embargo the same information to others.

someone else who can answer media questions and respond to inquiries. Also, be sure to have your contact information available on your website, which should also have a “press room” where you post releases, pictures, and other useful information for journalists.

- (5) Be **proactive**. You should call reporters if you have news, or if you want to get your message into a story. Do not wait around for a reporter to call you. For example, if you have a story to tell about a Corps project funded by the President’s budget, you should call reporters as soon as (or even before) the President’s budget is released. For any strategic media efforts (*i.e.*, news over which you control the timing), you should initiate communications with reporters to pitch your story.
- (6) Be **aware of competing news**. When planning strategic media, be cognizant of other competing news events and avoid releasing information when you know another large or competing event is being held in your area. Your event or activity also is likely to get more coverage if it is held early in the week. You should avoid releasing information or holding events on Fridays because it may be forgotten — or seem like “old” news — by Monday. You should also contact reporters and hold press events early in the day so reporters will have plenty of time to write their stories. Prior to your event you may want to ask if you can meet to talk at length about your issue and concerns.

The best way to initiate contact with a reporter is by phone. You can then follow-up by sending additional information or materials. Be sure to tell the reporter you are sending follow-up information so she knows to look for it. Most important, send the materials right away. If you need time to pull information together, you should let the reporter know (find out if there is a deadline) and send the information as soon as possible. If you are unable to reach the reporter on the phone, leave a short, to the point message with your name, the name of your organization, your title, and your phone number. If you want to send information immediately to make sure the reporter has access to it for a breaking story, make sure you tell the reporter that in your phone message, and then send the materials right away.

When pitching a story (or following up with information) you should follow the following widely accepted protocols for the various types of media outlets.

Newspapers: You should call newspaper reporters between about 10:30 a.m. and 3 p.m. Reporters do not appreciate interruptions in the late afternoon when they are wrapping up their research and interviews and starting to write for the morning paper. Phone calls and e-mails are the most effective way to reach reporters. Sending a fax into a newsroom without directing it to a specific contact is not an effective way to get a reporter’s attention.

Wire Services: Reporters for wire services can file stories at any time of the day, but it is still best not to call them in the late afternoon. Phone calls and e-mails are the most effective way to reach wire service reporters.

Television Stations: Television stations rarely plan their day's coverage far in advance. Television stations also rely heavily on stories coming over the AP wire. Do not call television stations between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. (to steer clear of the noon broadcast) or after 4:30 p.m. (to steer clear of the evening news). Early morning calls are fine. Assignment editors typically decide where to send reporters and cameras at a 9:00 am morning meeting. In contrast to newspapers, faxes are still a good way to approach television news operations. Place a call to the assignment editor or "futures editor" to make sure you have the appropriate fax number. They will put the fax in a folder for the date of your event and take another look at it during that day's morning planning meeting.

Radio Stations: Radio news relies heavily on stories coming over the AP wire. Faxes are still a good way to approach radio stations because they often experience rapid turnover (making email addresses quickly obsolete) and typically are very small so that faxed press releases generally get to the right person.

C. Making an Interview Work for You

The key to making any interview or question and answer session successful is to maintain control of the discussion. Keep in mind that while you have zero control over the questions you are asked, you have 100 percent control over the answers you give. To maintain control of an interview — whether its conducted in person, live on the air, by phone, or at a news conference — you should:

- (1) Focus on no more than three key messages that you can support with facts and examples.
- (2) Refine and rehearse your messages so that you can sum them up in 30 seconds.
- (3) Prepare responses to potential questions and rehearse those responses. Make sure you are prepared to respond to questions that reflect the opposing viewpoint and to any opposing studies or research. In answering questions, never concede your opponent's message — you should never even repeat your opponent's message unless you rebut it in the same sentence. Be prepared to politely redirect all questions that you cannot answer or that address topics unrelated to your issue, back to your message.

- (4) During the interview, deliver your most important message first — put the lead in the lead — and provide facts and examples only after discussing all of your messages. When delivering your message, be brief and to the point. The more succinct your message, the more likely it is that you will be quoted.
- (5) Stay “on message” when answering questions. If a question is not related to your message, veers the conversation into a different area, or is one you cannot answer, briefly acknowledge the question then bridge the conversation back to your message. Do not dodge a question; instead redirect it to your message. Remember that in general your goal is to deliver your message; it is not to provide an answer to every question that you are asked.
- (6) Always base your message and answers on facts, and never let a reporter convince you to speculate or hypothesize on an issue. Do not try to “wing” a response if you don’t know the answer to a question, and do not base a response on facts that you cannot prove (even if you are confident of those facts). If you do not know the answer to a question, you should just say so. You should then feel free to refer the reporter to other experts.
- (7) Be conversational and do not use sarcasm or make flippant remarks. Be positive, not defensive. Do not use inflammatory or accusatory words like “outrageous,” “negligent,” or “deceitful.” Stay jargon-free and make sure you do not talk in shorthand. And while a smile or a laugh can deflect barbs, you should avoid jokes.
- (8) Speak clearly so the reporter can understand and accurately record your comments. You may want to slow down when you see a reporter taking notes or hear the clack of the keyboard during a phone interview to make sure the reporter can accurately record your statement. Feel free to ask a reporter to read back your answer if you are not sure she caught it. Unless you are doing an interview live on the air, you should also feel free to pause, and say, “I’d like to try that again” or “Scratch that, that wasn’t quite right.” Finally, give yourself time to formulate an appropriate response to a question, even if you need to pause for a few seconds before responding.
- (9) Remember that nothing is ever “off the record” unless you have specific prior agreement with the reporter to be off the record. The comments you make after the pad and pencil have been put away are often the comments that wind up in print. Do not say anything to a journalist, even casually, that you would not want to see printed in the paper or hear on the air.

Activist Tip

Because television tells stories with pictures, making footage available to reporters will increase your chance of appearing on the evening news. You can provide professional quality footage or assist reporters in obtaining original footage. For example, you can take reporters to the site of a proposed Corps project, or invite them to a media event with a strong visual element (i.e., an attractive or striking location or backdrop, a large crowd of protestors, or colorful and large pictures and graphics that support your message).

Most television stations prefer to receive footage (often referred to as “B-roll”) on a professional format known as Beta Sp. This is not the same as the consumer beta tape format. Some stations may accept footage on consumer formats like Mini-DV if the subject matter is otherwise hard to obtain. Use a tripod to increase your odds of getting footage a station might use.

III. Media Tools

There are a number of standard media tools that you can use to implement your media strategy, including news releases, advisories, and opinion pieces. This section provides broad guidelines to help you create these tools. You should also try to “brand” your written materials so that journalists will quickly recognize that they come from your organization.

A. Media Kits

A media kit is a collection of materials that provide basic information about your organization’s stance on an issue or series of issues. Its purpose is to give members of the media easy access to the tools they need to accurately report on your issue. Ideally, your media kit will be compiled in a folder or binder marked with your organization’s logo and will include

- A fact sheet or general overview of the issue;
- Recent news releases related to the issue;
- Published positive editorials about the issue;
- Visual materials such as graphs, photographs, slides, or CDs;
- Other materials that describe your organization’s mission and stance on the issue; and
- Your contact information.

B. News Releases, Statements, and Advisories

A news release (often called a press release) is the most common way to get your message to the media. It advises the media of a news event, provides your views and message about that event, and gives background information. A news statement is similar to a news release but is simpler to prepare because it provides your comments on a news event without providing the context or any background information. The purpose of both a news release and statement is to get your message into any story about the news event you are commenting on.

News advisories are used to announce news events and provide information to editorial writers. A news event advisory is an announcement that informs reporters of the time and place of a news event such as a news conference, news briefing, public workshop, or rally. An editorial advisory provides background or in-depth information to editorial writers and urges them to take an editorial stand on an issue. An editorial advisory can be written in an informal style, as if you were speaking to the person receiving it.

A **news release** should include

- Your organization's logo;
- The date of the release, and the date that any embargo will be lifted (e.g., "embargoed until 9 a.m. on February 20, 2005");
- Contact information for the person who will be available to talk to reporters;
- A headline that conveys the most important message of the story;
- A "dateline" that identifies the city and state where the story is taking place (in capital letters);
- A first paragraph or "lead" that provides the main idea of the story;
- A quote or quotes from a key executive from your organization or an expert;
- Supporting paragraphs that answer the "how" and "what" of the story and provide more details on the lead (all paragraphs should be short and concise);
- If the release is longer than one page, an indication that it continues by adding the word "more" at the bottom of the first page, and a header on the following pages that includes the release date and page number;
- If appropriate, a web address where more information is available;
- Boilerplate language at the end that describes your organization (this could be your mission statement); and
- Below the boilerplate language, include "###" to indicate the end of the release.

A **news statement** should include

- Your organization's logo;
- The date of the statement;
- A headline that conveys the most important message of the story;
- The name, title, and organization of the person making the statement (under the headline);
- A lead paragraph that provides the main point you want to make, and one or two additional paragraphs that provide further comment (open each paragraph with a quote mark and close the last sentence of the last paragraph with a quote mark);
- If appropriate, a web address where more information is available;
- Boilerplate language at the end that describes your organization (this could be your mission statement); and
- Below the boilerplate language, include "###" to indicate the end of the statement.

A **news advisory** to announce an event should include

- A title telling the recipient what the event is about;
- All necessary logistical information about the event in a "who," "what," "when," "where" format, including the time, location, and/or phone number for a teleconference;

- Sufficient background information to make your story interesting, without giving away too much information (you want reporters to come to the event to get the story); and
- Contact information.

An **editorial advisory** should include

- A direct pitch urging the recipient to take a stand;
- An indication that you have experts or staff that the writer can speak to;
- A statement of the problem, and any proposed solution;
- Factual information to drive home the importance of the story;
- A statement identifying what individuals can do to be part of the solution, if possible;
- If the project or issue affects human health, include a statement of that fact; and
- Contact information.

Style Tips for Preparing Media Tools

Newspapers are commonly written in either the Associated Press or Chicago style, and it is important that news releases, statements, and advisories conform to one of these standard styles. Any bookstore will carry guides to these styles, and you may want to purchase one as a handy desktop reference. You also should

- (1) Spell out the names of organizations and agencies the first time you refer to them. If the release contains additional references, put the organization or agency's initials in parenthesis immediately after the first reference and use those initials in subsequent references. *First Reference:* The Corps Reform Network (CRN) released a report today that... *Second Reference:* The CRN report surveys wildlife data for...
- (2) Attribute opinions, judgments, and calls to action to a person or other source. *Do:* "Senator Brown's position on this issue defies common sense," said Tim Eder, National Wildlife Federation's Water Resources Director and Corps Reform Network Coordinator. *Don't:* Senator Brown's position on this issue defies common sense. *Do:* "Floridians should call Representative Jones' office to urge her to support this bill," said Melissa Samet, American Rivers' Senior Director of Water Resources and Corps Reform Network Co-Chair. *Don't:* Floridians should call Representative Jones' office to urge her to support this bill.
- (3) Avoid writing in the passive voice which can make your writing weak and uninteresting (in the passive voice, the subject of the sentence receives the action expressed in the verb). Use the active voice to make your writing stronger and clearer. *Do:* Today, Senator Russ Feingold introduced comprehensive Corps reform legislation in the U.S. Senate. *Don't:* Today, comprehensive Corps reform legislation was introduced by Senator Russ Feingold in the U.S. Senate.
- (4) Make all quotes short and concise so they can be easily pulled from your release and used in a news story. When conveying numerical information, it is important to keep those numbers manageable. *Do:* "The next WRDA bill could cost taxpayers more than \$5.5 billion." *Don't:* "The next WRDA bill could cost taxpayers \$5,531,452,000."

Activist Tip

You should make extensive use of any editorials that support your position. Always send copies to any targeted Members of Congress and other decision makers with a letter stating (or restating) your position. Where appropriate, use the editorial to renew your call for a statement in support of your position or to request a meeting. You can also send an editorial to other papers to encourage them to editorialize in support of your position. Supporting editorials should be included in any media kit prepared for your issue.

C. Editorials, Op-Eds, and Letters to the Editor

Generating editorials, op-eds, and letters to the editor should be an important component of any media strategy. Editorials supporting your position can be extremely effective in influencing decision makers, including Members of Congress from the paper's coverage area, and the general public. Op-eds, particularly when written by respected experts or decision makers, can do the same. Letters to the editor are also an excellent way to disseminate your message since the letters to the editor section is often the most-read section of a paper.

Editorials: In addition to sending news advisories to editorial writers, you should talk to editorial writers whenever you have a specific issue that is appropriate for editorial coverage. The rules for working with reporters apply equally to working with editorial writers. In addition, you should be prepared to (1) prove why your issues are important to their audience (including by providing facts and figures, and identifying academics and policy makers who support your position); and (2) provide attractive written materials that support your issue (e.g., brochures, fact sheets, graphs, pictures, or reports).

Larger newspapers often have editorial boards that share editorial responsibilities. Like individual editorial writers, these boards are prominent opinion-makers. Meetings with editorial boards follow the same protocols as meetings with editorial writers with two key differences. Editorial board meetings are more formal and occur at regularly scheduled interviews. As a result, they provide less opportunity for spontaneity and offer less opportunity to discuss breaking issues.

Op-Eds: An op-ed is an opinion piece prepared by someone other than an editor that appears on the page facing the editorial page (op-ed is short for "opposite editorial," a name derived from this standard location). Syndicated columns and guest opinion pieces also appear on this page. The key to getting an op-ed published is to make it relevant to the paper's readers, usually by localizing the information.

Policies for the submission of op-eds vary greatly from paper to paper, and you should check a paper's website or call the editorial department for guidelines on word count, exclusivity, and submission before preparing your op-ed. You should call the op-ed page editor the same day you send an op-ed to confirm that he or she received the submission. If your op-ed is not published or you do not hear from anyone after two or three days, call the newspaper back and ask if they plan to run it. If they pass on your op-ed, you are free to give it to a competing paper. You should never send the same op-ed at the same time to papers that compete for the same circulation area.

An op-ed should

- Suggest a headline (but note that the newspaper ultimately will decide the final headline);
- Include the author's name at the top;
- Be relevant to the paper's readers. You can create relevance by localizing the information or otherwise tying it to an issue of concern to the readers (*e.g.*, by tying it to an editorial or article previously published in the same paper);
- Be organized in the following order: (1) pique the reader's interest, (2) provide background, (3) explain the problem you are addressing, (4) provide a solution and discuss any challenges to reaching that solution, (5) include a call to action; and (6) close with a snappy statement that will mobilize readers;
- Be written in short, concise sentences that are limited to one thought each. An op-ed can be casual and conversational in tone (*e.g.*, start with a personal experience and be descriptive);
- If appropriate, mention your organization (*e.g.*, mention a report or study you have released);
- At the end, restate the author's name, position, and organization and provide the address for your organization's website.

Letters to the Editor: Letters to the editor respond to news stories, editorials, or opinion pieces that were previously printed in the paper. They are an easy and effective advocacy tool for sending your message on an issue addressed in the original article; reinforcing a point in the original article that drives home your message; clearing up inaccuracies or false information that may have been reported; providing information omitted from the original article; making a local issue national or a national issue local; and reaching a large audience to garner support for an issue.

Letters to the editor should be brief and should respond to only one article or opinion piece. Many newspapers have a 200-word limit on letters to the editor, and longer letters either will not be published or may be edited. Letters to the editor should be sent to the paper **as soon as possible**, ideally within one day from the date the original article was published.

A letter to the editor should

- Include the headline of the article to which you are responding and the date of publication in the re: line of your letter or in the first line or two of your letter;
- Use a strong lead sentence to attract the editor and reader's attention, and immediately state your reason for writing;
- Include supporting facts and assertions in a second or third paragraph, and mention your organization and its views on the subject;
- Use the final paragraph to sum up your letter and, if appropriate, to demonstrate the "larger picture" surrounding the issue;

- State your points in a clear, concise, and professional manner that clearly ties your campaign message to the article to which you are responding. Do not restate any incorrect information included in the original article as this will only draw more attention to the incorrect information;
- Be free of spelling and grammatical errors; and
- Include your name, title, organization, address, and daytime phone number (most newspapers will not print your letter until they have called to verify that you did, in fact, write it).

Be sure to check the paper's website or editorial page for specific guidelines for letters to the editor. Many news organizations have an online form you can use to send a letter to the editor, and almost all provide an email address, fax number, or mailing address on their website. A phone call to the newspaper will help you ascertain the most appropriate staffer to whom you should address your letter. It is often a good idea to make a follow up call to confirm receipt and stress why it is important for the newspaper to publish your letter. While many larger newspapers will not confirm receipt of a letter, smaller papers often will.

D. News Conferences and Briefings

A news conference is a live media event that is used to announce breaking news, make an important announcement, or release new information like a major detailed study or report. The purpose of the news conference is to provide your information to multiple members of the media at the same time, and answer any questions they may have. A news conference typically will start with statements by one or more spokespersons followed by a question and answer session.

A news briefing is more informal and more intimate than a news conference. While, a news conference may include dozens of members of the media, a news briefing is more select and is done with only a handful of reports — usually no more than 12. Because it involves a small group, the setting can be an office conference room or a restaurant over lunch.

Teleconferencing is a way to communicate with the media, even when distance or other factors keep you from being in the same room with them. An audio teleconference typically will use a telephone conference service that can accommodate many callers at one time. Video conferencing is also available, though it will be more expensive. Video conferencing is done through a television, and while the visual and audio quality is not the best it is the closest thing to being in the same room.

Ideally, you should give reporters a full weeks notice of any planned news conference or briefing. A week before your event, send a news advisory to the editors and reporters who are most likely to cover your event. Be sure to include a cell phone number so reporters can reach you on the day of the event, provide logistical information in “who,” “what,” “when,” “where” format, and highlight any photo opportunities. Follow up with phone calls after the advisory has been distributed. Some news conferences will, of necessity, need to be convened on shorter notice. You should give as much advance notice of these news conferences as possible by sending a media advisory and calling those members of the press most likely to cover your story.

To help generate attendance at a public event, you should send a brief summary of your event to the Calendar/Events Editor at all relevant newspapers three weeks before the event. The summary should describe your event, emphasize why people may want to attend, and include a phone number that the public can call with questions. Your event information will usually be published five to seven days beforehand. One week before the event you should also send a news advisory to reporters, as discussed above.

News Conference and News Briefing Checklist

When preparing for a news conference, news briefing, teleconference, or other public event you should

- Clear the date, time, and place with all speakers and participants;
- Make sure there are no other major events or news conferences that could conflict;
- Limit remarks to no more than five minutes per speaker, and have no more than four speakers;
- Leave ample time for questions;
- Have all speakers agree on talking points ahead of time;
- Confirm that presenters have prepared in advance, developed quotable sound bites, and rehearsed answers to anticipated questions;
- Ensure that any visuals, graphs, or charts are ready by the date of the conference;
- Have enough handouts and media kits for all attendees, and post all materials on your website;
- For conferences held inside, make sure the room can accommodate all attendees;
- For conferences held on location, make sure the location is accessible and relatively quiet;
- Test all technical equipment, and make sure backups are available;
- Schedule any needed translators;
- Have a sign-in sheet or other method for recording reporter attendance; and
- Send a media advisory to editors and reporters most like to cover your event one week before the event.

E. Paid Advertising

A well-placed advertisement in a newspaper or on the radio can augment your earned media efforts. The cost of advertising varies widely among media outlets and within markets. The cost also varies based on the type of advertisement you want to place. For example, a black and white newspaper advertisement will cost less than a color advertisement, and a 30 second radio spot will cost less than a 60 second spot. It is typically less expensive to advertise in a weekly paper than a daily paper. Radio advertisements also can be relatively inexpensive, particularly in rural areas. You should explore the costs with the newspaper or radio stations most likely to reach your target audience before doing any other work on preparing an advertisement. In determining paid advertising costs, you also will need to factor in the cost of preparing the advertisement or radio spot.