

## Working with the Media

At the end of the day, media coverage often comes down to how well you are able to pitch your story to a reporter. Sending out press releases, advisories and statements without a follow-up call is rarely effective. While they are all worthwhile, it is important to remember that with the advent of faxes and e-mail, reporters receive hundreds of them a day.

Calling a reporter provides a much greater opportunity to explain the value of your story—why it is unique, why their readers/viewers/listeners will care, why it is significant, why your opinion is valuable, etc.

But calls to reporters should not be limited to pitching stories. Some reporters will want you to check in with them periodically. You may call a reporter to provide insight into a particular aspect of the issue in which that reporter has an interest. Building relationships and working with the media must be done thoughtfully and purposefully.

A few things to keep in mind when making calls:

- Never call a reporter on deadline – after 3:30 PM for morning newspapers, the day before a magazine goes to print, an hour before a show is going to air, etc.
- Always ask a reporter if he/she has a few minutes to talk about your issue.
- Know what you're talking about and *how* you want to talk about it.
- Read the reporter's work or watch/listen to the show before calling.
- Catch the reporter's attention, but be brief.

## What Makes News

Understanding what makes news is one of the most important skills a media relations person can have. And unfortunately, there is not one comprehensive definition. What's more, the answer can be different for each medium.

Having said that, there are some basic guidelines for determining if something is newsworthy:

- Does it generate interest from audiences other than your members and supporters?
- Is it controversial?
- Is it new information?
- Does it relate to news-of-the-day?
- Is it timely?
- Does it highlight a trend?
- For television: Does it have interesting visuals?

While an event, announcement, or story may not meet all of these criteria, it should meet as many as possible. However, the only way to completely understand what makes news is to read a variety of newspapers and magazines, watch network, local, and cable news and talk programs, and listen to radio news and talk shows. And don't just follow education issues. Instead, follow

an issue or trend to learn how news develops, how a story grows, and how to become part of a story.

It also is important to expose yourself, not only to a variety of formats, but a variety of perspectives. Therefore, don't just read the *Washington Post*. Also, pick up the *Washington Times*. Don't just listen to NPR, turn on Rush Limbaugh. Don't just watch CNN, watch MSNBC. Such exposure will not only help in understanding what makes news, but will be helpful in determining how to take advantage of news-of-the-day as well as who is paying attention to your issue.

Another good way to learn about what makes news and to introduce yourself and your group is to pick reporters' brains. You should make a list of the top few reporters covering education in your state and schedule calls or lunches with them.

## Top 10 Things to Think About When Working with the Media

1. Be courteous of a reporter's deadline.
2. Read, Listen, and Watch. It is important to know what piques the media's interest and what they are reporting about.
3. Know whom you are talking to when you receive a media inquiry. Ask them questions about the story they are working on and what medium it is for.
4. Don't make up an answer. If you don't know, promise to call back with an answer.
5. Think ahead about what you want to say to a reporter and how you want to say it.
6. Be aware of who is covering your issues in all mediums: radio, TV/Cable, newsprint.
7. Read the reporter's work or watch/listen to the show before calling him/her.
8. Look for opportunities within the organization to promote, as well as ways to take advantage of the news-of-the-day.
9. Establish relationships with key media who cover your issues.
10. Simplify your message; talk about things in ways they will understand.

## What to Know Before Talking to a Reporter

Before talking to a reporter, be able to answer the following questions:

- What is the reporter's deadline?
- What else has the reporter written about this subject?
- What is the reporter's angle? (How will the reporter portray the story, does he/she have a bias?)
- Who else is the reporter talking to?
- What are the three hardest questions the reporter could ask and what are my answers?
- What do I want the headline to be? (If you had to summarize the most important message and the impact of your work in 3 sentences, what would it be?)
- How can I connect the reporter's interest to Head Start's work?

## Preparing for an Interview

Interviews are the basic tools of newsgathering. An interview is not a friendly conversation. It is two people doing their jobs. Generally, unless you are a movie star or the President of the United States, the reporter is not interested in being your friend (despite his or her friendly demeanor).

### Points of Protocol

- It is common for reporters to use tape recorders. This helps them from having to read their own handwriting later. Don't feel shy about bringing your own tape recorder. It serves two purposes: (1) it lets the reporter know you are on guard and won't be manipulated or misquoted; and (2) it provides a good educational tool that will improve your next interviewing performance.
- Be certain that the reporter knows where he or she can reach you in case they need additional information after the interview. You should have his or her number as well, in case there is any need for follow-up.
- Never ask to read the reporter's copy or request changes before publication. Be aware that some smaller magazines will offer to let you check their copy and that is fine. At some of the larger magazines, fact-checkers will call you several weeks later, just to make sure the reporter got the correct information. Do not be misled into thinking that the fact checkers are "checking" the story out with you. They are just covering "their" bases.

If a reporter calls you, remember you are under no obligation to answer immediately. Ask the following series of questions.

- What is your deadline?
- What type of information are you looking for?  
Would you like me to send you some background information before we talk?
- Who else will you be speaking to about this topic?
- How much time do you need for the interview?
- If the reporter wants your opinion of a study, report or comment made by someone else, request to see it in writing. Never comment on anything sight unseen.

## Interview Pointers

- Know your audience.
- Reporters are not your audience – the public is.
- Don't use slang or jargon.
- Use "I" not the general "we" unless it is applicable.
- Take personal responsibility. It makes you more believable.
- "Off the cuff" remarks are trouble. Again, if you don't want to see something in print, don't say it out loud.
- If a reporter or yourself make an inaccurate statement, correct it immediately.
- Don't lose your cool; you'll never win an argument with a reporter.

- Reporters are sometimes deliberately argumentative to provoke a juicy quote, don't fall for it.
- If a question contains negative language or words you don't like, don't repeat them in your answer, those negative terms will be attributed to you.
- If you don't know the answer to a question say so. Refer the reporter to an expert, or offer to do research and then call the reporter back.
- Never say, "No Comment." Always give a valid reason for being able to answer a question.
- Listen to the question carefully. If you are unsure of the questions, ask for clarification.
- THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS "OFF THE RECORD." IF YOU DON'T WANT TO SEE SOMETHING IN PRINT OR HEAR IT ON A BROADCAST—DON'T SAY IT.

## Media to Contact

If you are planning a local event, you should distribute a media alert to the media in your community. While you can fax or email the release to the appropriate contacts, following up with a phone call is critical. Let the reporter know why he or she should care about this issue and what the impact is on your community. You should try to get the release to the media at least one week prior to the event.

Below, we have listed suggested media for you to contact.

- Assignment Desks at All Local Network Affiliates (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX)
- News Editor at Local All News and Public Radio Stations
- City Editor, Minority Affairs Reporter, and Local Columnists at Daily Newspapers
- Subject-specific reporters, as appropriate (housing, banking, labor, etc.)
- Weekly Community Newspapers
- Local Radio and Television Talk Shows
- Local College Newspapers
- Calendar Listings for All Scheduled Events at Daily and Weekly Newspapers

## Tools of the Trade

### Press Releases

A press release is essentially a news article written by an organization with the intent of advancing its cause or work. As such, it should include the 5 Ws—who, what, when, where, and why. Also like a news story, it should be written in an inverse pyramid, meaning that the most important information should be at the beginning and the least important at the end. The reason for such a structure is based on the fact that many reporters and editors will never read your release in its entirety. Therefore, it is critical that they get the most important information first.

A press release should almost always include quotes from the organization's spokesperson(s). There may be times it would be appropriate to include quotes from outside experts, parents, or others whose inclusion gives the release added credibility and interest.

Length is also an important factor in getting a reporter to read your release. For the most part, you should try to keep releases to no more than two pages.

Press releases walk a thin line—while they should certainly advance your cause and beliefs, they should not be perceived as so biased that they are discounted. (This is true of all your communication to the press.) It should appear balanced and not simply an advertisement for the organization.

And while they are meant to provide news, that is not the only purpose press releases serve. They are also a means for keeping in touch with reporters, reminding them that you exist, and letting them know what's going on. In other words, they are a relationship building tool.

### **Press Advisories**

Unlike a press release, a press advisory is not meant to tell a complete story. Rather it is to advise the media of an upcoming event or of availability. When announcing an event, an advisory typically includes a paragraph describing the event and its significance. This is followed by the logistical information—the date, time, and location of the event, a list of speakers, etc.

Advisories also are used to announce availability. For example, prior to the release of the study on Early Head Start, an alert could have been sent letting reporters, editors, and producers know that you are available as an expert commentator and analyst. When used for this purpose, the advisory should include a brief description of what the news is and its significance, along with a paragraph establishing the interviewee's expertise.

This type of advisory provides an excellent opportunity to take advantage of news-of-the-day. And, it can be combined with a statement (see below) if appropriate.

### **Statements**

Statements are an excellent way to comment on current events. Anytime something occurs related to Head Start or early childhood education, you should quickly evaluate the pros and cons of issuing a statement. Typically, a statement is anywhere from one to three paragraphs that analyze and comment on recent occurrences. Is it important that the language be bold and pithy. Statements are issues with the intent of inserting an organization into a story that is already being covered.

### **Op-eds/Letters to the Editor**

As you know, op-eds (opposite the editorial page), unlike news articles, are meant to be persuasive and opinionated. They usually run about 700 to 900 words, but the requirements are different for each paper.

Unfortunately, many organizations write op-eds that violate two sacred rules: (1) Always have a sharp angle, and (2) Don't write a self-promotional piece. Ignoring these rules ensures failure.

Papers also have different styles. It is important to read op-eds from a variety of newspapers to both enhance your skills and learn what appeals to different publications.

Op-eds should be written to fit a larger strategy. There are two important reasons for this: (1) Op-eds take considerable time to write and are difficult to place. Therefore, a strategic approach uses resources most efficiently. (2) Papers like *The Washington Post* aren't going to print more than one (if any) op-eds by an organization in a given year. Therefore, you need to make sure it is the one that does the most for you.

Once you've decided to write one, the choice of publication should also be strategic. Do you need to reach policy makers—then try the paper in the capital city of your state. Do you need to reach business leaders—then try local business paper. Do you need to reach the general public—then try the major dailies. And if an op-ed is picked-up, reprints can and should be widely distributed.

It is also important to remember that an op-ed is proprietary (yes, you do get paid for it if it's printed), meaning it is owned by the paper that publishes it. Therefore, you cannot submit an op-ed to several papers at the same time. If a paper has refused it, then by all means you should submit it elsewhere.

Letters to the Editor, on the other hand, can be used more liberally, and they are more likely to appear in print. Letters to the Editor should be short, direct, and edgy. However, keep in mind, just as with op-eds, that different papers have different styles. Therefore, try to read the letters on a fairly regular basis. In addition, they should make brief reference to the original article. To increase the odds of success, they should be sent within one day of when the article appears.