



Getting your story in the media

CORE 12

Journalists have miles of paper and hours of airtime to fill every day. How do they do it? Where does all that news come from? News doesn't just happen. Apart from unexpected events - crashes, floods, fires etc, most 'news' is known about in advance.

High profile campaigns from the larger charities have teams of dedicated PR staff behind them – but by sticking to some simple guidelines anyone can learn to make a story attractive. Small organisations can benefit enormously from some well-placed publicity.

Identifying good stories

Generally speaking, local journalists like charities and volunteers, and will report them fairly. They know that people want to read about good as well as bad things happening in their community, and they like stories about real people.

For many dedicated voluntary sector workers, it can sometimes be difficult to understand why a story which seems important doesn't make it into the press, when something less significant gets lavish coverage. The trick is to recognise when a story has a wide appeal to the general public, and when it doesn't.

While journalists probably won't bother to come along to your AGM (boring), they will turn out for your celebrity soccer match or pancake tossing, or when you present your cheque to the hospital or open your new day centre, or launch your new lifeboat. Especially if there's the chance of a picture.

Here are some classic 'hooks' which will grab the attention of a journalist:

Uncovered injustices. Can you show that people have been treated unfairly? Can you pose questions and offer solutions?

Numbers, stats and records. How many people are involved? Is it more than last year? Will records be broken? Journalists love a new record.

Anniversaries and milestones. Can your story be associated with a local, national or historical event? Is it your own anniversary? It is the anniversary of significant legislation being passed – what difference has it made?

Breakthroughs. This could be a scientific breakthrough, or new area of work, or a change in legislation. Make sure you present what it means in practical terms, with examples.

Celebrity-backed events. A famous face will always make your event more attractive, but make sure the person involved is appropriate for your cause. If you are promoting healthy lifestyles for example, don't involve someone who is regularly photographed smoking and drinking. Journalists will pounce on the irony!

Local angle. Why is this story important or meaningful to a local readership or audience? You might have a purely local story – or you might be able to offer a local perspective on a national story. If you can be relied upon to explain what national developments mean for local people, you will become a valued source of quotes. Think creatively about this, it doesn't just have to be about legislation or government policy – for example EastEnders might be running a storyline on an issue that you could comment on.

Seasonal events. For example, what does Christmas mean for local homeless people? Are you helping children in need enjoy the summer holiday?

Money. How much money will you spend/raise? How does this compare with last year and with what's actually needed? Will it buy a guide dog, or rebuild a church tower? Graphic examples make the story real.

Controversies. Be careful here – people in the voluntary sector sometimes assume they have the right to the moral high ground, but a journalist will be sure to present both sides of a controversy. Always remember that your good idea and noble cause will be a bad idea - a waste of money or a spongers' charter - to someone else. Anticipate their arguments. Journalists will gladly stir the pot. Once your story is out in the public domain, it's out of your control.

Most importantly, think of human interest: Real people doing real things.

Selling your story

Now you've identified your story, how do you get it onto the media's radar?

When army officers are briefing soldiers for a mission, they repeat the message several times: tell them what you're going to say, say it, and then tell them what you've just said. It's much the same with news desks.

- 1 Phone up and tell them you're about to send them a story for their diary. Give them a brief idea of the most interesting points.
- 2 Post, or preferably e-mail your press release.
- 3 Phone up later or the next day to make sure they've received it.

The diary

All media keep a diary and a file of future events and ideas. Local media staff teams will have a weekly planning meeting (daily for bigger operations), at which they'll go through the diary and decide which stories to cover. They could choose yours - if only they knew about it!

Making contact

Reporters often say they're only as good as their contacts. That's not some shady character in a sleazy bar: it's you. The minute you call with your story, you become their contact. If you know what you're talking about, they will keep your name and number and value your help this time and in the future. So, look up the number and dial.

First, make sure you're through to the newsroom (it's possible you've been put through to the small ads department by mistake). Introduce yourself. Ask if they have a moment - they might be up against a deadline or a big story might have broken. Ask calmly when would be a good time to call back.

Once you're through to the news editor or a reporter, say you're advising of a story for the diary, and you want to send some details. To whom and exactly where should you send it? Get e-mail and postal addresses, and the number of a direct phone line. If they have time, they might ask for a few details - so make sure you're well briefed. At least make sure you give them a date, time, your phone number and a rough idea of what's coming.

The press release

This is the original source for much (if not most) of the news we see and hear. The best are often published virtually unaltered. The rest are re-written, often inaccurately; the worst are binned. Mercilessly.

Here are some tips on getting your press release right:

Length. Brevity is the key. Never allow a press release to run on longer than a single side of A4. Keep paragraphs short – most paragraphs written by journalists will contain only one or two sentences.

Write a gripping first sentence. The intro, or the opening sentence of any story, is vital. It's what makes the reader want to read on - or look elsewhere. Reporters will often put more effort into their intro than the rest of the story. Your opening sentence should ideally be no longer than 15 words, and sum up the 'meat' of the story succinctly. You need to lead with the news, then explain the background – just as you would naturally if you were telling a story to a friend.

So if you write that your committee had their monthly meeting last week and approved the minutes of the previous month's meeting and discussed several interesting items and decided to give further consideration before responding to the county council's proposed amendments to their traffic management measures.....your efforts will be in the bin before the reporter has finished yawning.

But if you say that children will risk death from speeding motorists if the local lollipop patrol is sacked - the reporter will be eager to read on.

The body of the story - remember the five Ws

- **Who** is doing it? (eg, your campaign group, a celebrity supporter, a politician)
- **What** are they doing? (eg, launching a new campaign, making a major announcement, calling upon people to do something)
- **When** when are they doing it?
- **Where** where are they doing it?
- **Why** why are they doing it? (eg, to save a local landmark, to improve roads, to fight for justice)

When you've written your press release, go back over it and check that you have covered the five Ws.

Quotes. It always helps to include at least one juicy quote from a named individual, usually a leading member of your organisation, or perhaps a celebrity supporter. It's one thing to report that Councillor Bloggs expressed concern about the behaviour of certain elements in the town. It's something else to hear 90-year-old Elsie Smith say, in her own words:

“We're terrified to open our doors. We've been sworn at, spat at and had our windows broken.”

Always give first and surnames; ages if possible.

Straightforward style. Most journalism requires short sentences and words, plain language, with no jargon at all, and little use of the passive. Beware of jokes. You should write as if you were talking to someone with no knowledge of your subject area.

Accuracy. If your release has any spelling mistakes or grammatical errors, that will undermine its credibility. Journalists will spot these, so double-check!

Note to editors. At the end of the body of the press release, Write 'ends'. After this you may include a 'note to editors'. This is where you include background information that is useful or interesting, but not vital to the story.

Contact details. Every release should contain at least one contact person, and preferably two. Your contacts should be easy to get hold of, confident about talking to the media, and fully briefed. Few journalists work nine to five, so out-of-hours contact numbers are essential. Include mobile phone numbers too, and the address of your website.

Add a date. Always display the date prominently on the page.

Targeting the readership

Don't send the same press release to everyone. The needs of local papers are different from those of the national or trade press. Write in a way that will appeal to publication's readership. This might mean producing three or four different releases, but it's worth it if it secures more coverage for you.

A release to the national press would aim to create a good general read. One to the trade press might focus more on specialist matters. Clearly a release to the local press would require a local angle - a story about Totnes children is fine for the Totnes Times, but call them Westcountry children for the Western Morning News.

Making it look right

Your press release will look professional if you stick to these conventions:

- Use a straightforward heading. Don't try and write a newspaper headline.
- Keep releases single-sided.
- If you must use more than one sheet, use your A4 headed notepaper for the top sheet, but plain white paper for continuation sheets.
- Avoid fancy formatting – do not use underlining, bold, italics, capitals etc
- Never split a sentence from one page to the next.
- Staple pages together – it's easy for paper-clipped pages to get separated in a busy newsroom.

Using e-mail

If you can, send your press releases by email. This means less work for the reporter who won't have to re-type the whole thing. Phone the newsdesk and find out the personal email address of the reporter most likely to be interested in your area of work. Emails sent to the general 'news' address stand much less chance of being picked up.

Don't send your press release as an attachment. Newspaper and magazine offices use specialist programmes and won't appreciate having to convert your text from a Word document. Always send the text of your press release in a plain email.

Photographs

A good photo can really make your story stand out. Don't rely on a newspaper to send a photographer to your event – today, staff photographers are in short supply and if they do exist on your local paper, they will be very over-stretched.

Make sure someone at your organisation is available to take pictures, preferably digital. Email these with your press release, clearly titled. Remember to include a caption in your email. Phone ahead to find out what format and resolution is required. If you must send a print, type the caption on a slip of paper or address label and tape it firmly to the back.

Avoid using photographs of children unless you have written permission from the parent of every child in the picture.

Radio and television

The basic idea is much the same - get your story on their diary, with a press release. But they have additional needs. Radio loves a good talker: who in your group can speak clearly, authoritatively, and succinctly? For radio news you often need to put your case in a sound bite of ten seconds or less.

Television also likes good talkers. Most importantly, it needs pictures. You might have to think laterally here: if you want to promote your conference on affordable housing, it won't want to film the conference - it'll want to see families who need houses. This takes planning and negotiation.

If you are aiming to get your story covered by the broadcast media, don't phone them on the hour or the half hour – they may be about to go on air and won't give your story their full attention.

Monitoring

Keep a list of where you sent your press release so you can monitor the results and keep cuttings. An impressive cuttings file can be an invaluable promotions tool and a great morale booster for staff, volunteers and clients.