

How to Work Well With the Media

I. Why Work Well With the Media?

There are many reasons for citizen groups to work well with the media, as follows:

- media coverage increases public attention to the issue/problem you are working on (for example, one appearance on CTV National News reaches 1.5 million Canadians);
- media coverage can help educate the public about your issue/problem, and your solutions;
- media coverage can help build your organization by attracting new members;
- politicians and the heads of corporations watch the news and are sensitive to media coverage of themselves and their organizations, so media coverage can push them to act in ways you want.

The media are flooded every day with appeals to cover various events. As a result, the media has set up processes for getting its attention, such as media alerts and news releases.

You may be thinking: "But politicians and heads of corporations get media coverage for almost anything they say or do, no matter how they say or do it." Because society and the media consider these people to be leaders, whatever they say or do is almost automatically considered newsworthy.

It is rare for a citizen group to be considered in the same way. This may seem unfair, but it is generally the way Canada's current media system works. The media gather and present the news in specific ways, so if you want to receive media coverage your event, report, speech, or new conference should fit with the way the media gathers and presents the news.

II. How to Work Well With the Media

The following are steps citizen groups to follow to work well with the media:

1. **Get acquainted** - The media, like any sector of society, is made up of organizations and individuals. Both have rules they follow, biases and interests. As a result, the first step to working well with the media is to get to know the organizations and individuals in the media. What do they cover? what do they ignore? how do they cover the news? what are their biases? what are their interests?
2. **Keep acquainted** - Reporters are human beings, and like many human beings people they know are on their minds more than people they don't know. Your group's spokesperson should keep in regular contact with the media.
3. **Keep a working relationship** - Getting to know media organizations and reporters does not mean becoming best buddies. In fact, if you become too close to a reporter it could result in less media coverage as the reporter may feel a conflict of interest in covering your events etc. Thank a reporter for their interest, but don't thank them for giving you publicity. Reporters represent the public; they are not your promoter.
4. **Give lots of notice** - Make sure the media know all the details of any upcoming event 1-2 days before it happens, so the media can decide whether to cover your event and how to cover it. Reminding the media the day of the event can help, but don't overdo it.
If you are releasing a large or complex report, give copies to reporters 1-2 days before you plan to make the report public and write "Embargoed until X time on X day". An "embargo" means reporters can look at the report but not make the content of the report public until the embargo period is over.
5. **Respect deadlines** - Most reporters and editors are producing news stories daily, usually right away (especially for TV and radio news) or by a 4 pm to 5 pm deadline.

You can make their lives much easier if you hold your event early in the day, and ensure your spokesperson is easily available to answer follow-up questions.

6. **Make news** - Most reporters and editors are looking for news -- new things that have happened that day. Holding a news conference to tell the media your long-standing position on an issue or problem is not news unless something has just happened concerning the issue or problem. New events, new reports, new coalitions are news.
7. **Make big news** - The bigger the news, the more coverage you will likely receive. The media generally defines big news as things that do one of the following: 1. affect a lot of people; 2. involve human suffering; 3. involve a hero and a villain; 4. involve government waste or savings for people; 5. are very unusual.
8. **Be factual** - Never make a statement unless you can back it up with facts and figures that same day. If you are going to make a claim about anything, prepare brief back-up information ahead of time that you can give to reporters to prove your point. The media generally cover credible people and organizations. If you lose your credibility by making false or outrageous statements, you will also lose your media coverage.
9. **Be simple** - The media, especially TV news, generally do not handle complex stories or issues well. Reporters and editors cover many different stories, and naturally feel more comfortable with stories they understand. Make your statements short (less than 15 seconds), and use examples and comparisons that are easy to understand.
10. **Be clear** - Do not contact the media about an issue or problem if you cannot clearly state your position. If you are confused or change your position during the day, the media will either not cover you, or will make you look foolish.
11. **Be visual** - Print media and TV media love visuals. Photos and visuals in stories also help catch people's attention as they read or watch the news.
12. **Generally don't give exclusives** - An "exclusive" is when you give a copy of the report you are releasing only to one reporter 1-2 days before you make it available to other reporters. In return, the reporter and his or her media organization should give better coverage of your report (for example, on the front page of a newspaper).
Sometimes you may want to reward a reporter who has given you good coverage in the past by giving them an "exclusive" but remember, other reporters and media organizations will not be pleased and in the long-term you may receive less media coverage overall.
13. **Everything is on the record** - Many people believe that telling a reporter what you are about to say is "off the record" will ensure that the reporter will not include your statement in the story. While the reporter may not quote you, they may still summarize your viewpoint. Be careful what you say at all times. Telling jokes or making statements about things you don't know about will likely lead to bad media coverage, especially if your joke or statement offends a reporter.
14. **Respect code of ethics** - Most media organizations have a code of ethics that says reporters cannot accept free gifts of any kind. For this reason, and also because it is unethical, do not try to buy news coverage. It will make the reporter uncomfortable, and hurt your credibility.
15. **Try to get live coverage** - If TV or radio media cover you as your event is happening, it will help you control the images and words that the media broadcasts to the public because the media will not have a chance to edit or shape the story. It is not easy to get live coverage, except for interviews, but it is worth trying to get it.