

# Tips for Hometown Media Success



Municipal Association  
of South Carolina

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## Essential steps for getting As in media coverage

- **Ability to recognize a good story.**

Look for local angles to a national story/program. Think about connecting your story to a national observance (i.e., National Safety Month). What's a new and interesting angle to your story? Consider what kind of "third party endorsement" of the event or observance you can get from someone who isn't a city official.

- **Acquaintance with area media.**

Be familiar with the local editors, reporters, website editors, feature writers, bloggers, producers and news directors, and what they produce. Tailor your material to meet their needs. Because reporters' beats change constantly, keep a file of who is currently covering what issue at each news outlet. Also, find out how every reporter or editor likes to receive material – e-mailed, faxed or mailed (some still prefer releases this way, believe it or not!). Stay in touch even when you don't need something.

- **Anticipate their needs.**

Be familiar with deadlines. Know what kind of visual material can be used. Work with photographers and camera crews to give them good material to shoot; facilitate the media's work in any way possible. Suggest photo opportunities or artwork, and make your events visually appealing.

- **Attention to detail when preparing material.**

Keep your style simple. Put the facts up front. Follow The Associated Press' style rules. The Association has a sample style guide cities can adopt for their own use. Make your work as easy to edit as possible; this will increase the chances of having your release appear the way you wrote it. Bullets are always a good way to keep things simple.

## Essential Steps

The media can be a critical partner to advocate on behalf of your hometown and promote the value of your city. Stories are free, the paper, station or website reaches a wide, diverse audience and the relationship with your local reporters has a great return on the investment.

Adding social media sites to the mix adds value to your efforts to reach as many people, reporters and editors as possible.

# Essential Steps

## ■ Accuracy counts.

Double check spelling, especially the spelling of names. Double check dates, and make sure that the day and date coincide. Before you send off your release, call phone numbers and key in web addresses and e-mail addresses as they are written in the release to make sure you don't have numbers or letters transposed. Get a second pair of eyes to proof your work. Reading the release from the end backwards to the beginning often helps catch typos.

## ■ Appearance counts.

If you're still preparing hard copies of releases, make sure they're single spaced, attractive and eye-catching. Have a consistent style (typeface, letterhead) so that your release is immediately recognizable.

## ■ Availability.

Be available if the reporter or editor needs to call you to check details in your release. If you send a release and immediately leave town, be sure there's a contact name on the release other than yourself who will be around to take a call. Have instructions on your voice mail as to how to get in touch with you after office hours or in the event of an emergency.

## ■ Attribution Source.

Establish ahead of time (like now) who the spokesperson or people should be at your municipality. It's not a bad idea to have this in writing. Decide who responds to the media.

## ■ Assume Nothing.

Anything you or anyone else says to the media, regardless of whether you specify that it is "off the record," has the potential of being used. Be sure others are aware of this whenever they talk to a reporter. Don't assume a story will run just because a reporter has told you it will. There is always late-breaking news. Editorial space is not for sale. Remember you're competing with hundreds of other news stories every day.

■ **Appreciate the media's efforts on your behalf.**

A sincere thank-you note is one way to do this, although not all reporters appreciate that. Some may feel they don't need to be thanked for doing their job, and a note may imply they did you a special favor instead of impartially covering the news. Of course, if they did do you a favor by covering something that might otherwise have been passed over, a note of thanks is in order. And a note that calls attention to a job well done is probably going to be welcome.

## Essential Steps

# Media Relations

Build relationships with reporters before you want something.

Use letters to the editor and editorials to reinforce your message.

Write press releases and media advisories so they are most useful to reporters.

Deliver memorable sound bites in a media interview.

Prepare yourself for television interviews.

Several elements are important in successful media relations

## **Building relationships with local reporters (before you need them)**

Make regular contact with the editors and reporters at your local newspaper, television and radio stations or blogs. Supply them constantly with good background information and source material. Pass on interesting bits of information even if you aren't looking for a story. All of these proactive opportunities will help establish your credibility as a good news source when the big story breaks and you need to make certain your message is heard.

To ensure reporters can always get in touch with you, send each local reporter a card with basic information about your city or town and your contact information. This is a great way to make sure that you are the "Number One" information resource for your local media.

### **Information for your Hometown Contact card**

Name of municipality

Form of government

Town/City population

Mailing address and telephone number of town/city hall

Mayor and contact information

Manager/Administrator contact information

City/Town Councilmembers

City/Town Clerk

Public Information Officer

Primary media contact

City hall hours

Regular council meeting day

## Use letters to the editor and editorials to reinforce your message

The editorial page can be a powerful tool to get your message out exactly as you want it.

### Submitting editorial columns

Editorial, or opinion, columns are bylined by the writer and generally address a single topic. Often this type of column is used to communicate details about an issue that might not be included in a regular news story. Editorial columns can also be used to rebut or clarify an issue.

Carefully target the newspaper, website or publication where you initially submit your editorial. Some will want the exclusive to your column and will not publish one that has been sent en masse to all in the state. It's often helpful to contact the editorial page editor before submitting a column to gauge that paper's interest in running it. Identify the newspaper where you have the best opportunity of having it published and submit your editorial, then send it to the others. Most newspapers like columns to run between 500 and 1000 words.

### Writing letters to the editor

Letters to the editor can be valuable tools to reinforce public interest in an issue. If a resident has something nice to say about a city service or program, encourage her to put it in a letter to the editor. If you want to thank a community organization for a job well done, a letter to the editor is a good way to do it. For most papers, letters should run no more than 200 words (*The State* newspaper limits letters to 200 words). They must be submitted by mail or e-mail with a name, address and phone number included. In general, newspapers won't run anonymous letters.

# Media Relations

### A few writing tips

- ◆ Keep sentences and paragraphs short
- ◆ Eliminate words such as “there,” “it,” and “that”
- ◆ Say “no” to passive voice (ex. “The proclamation was passed by council.” Instead, use “The council passed the proclamation.”)
- ◆ Use one- and two-syllable words
- ◆ Avoid excessive “-ion” or “-ness”
- ◆ Use a positive tone
- ◆ Write news releases to sound like an objective newspaper article rather than a self promoting fluff piece.

# Media Relations

## Framing your argument for letters or editorials

- Try to reduce your point to a single opening sentence.
- Make sure the sentence passes the “WOW test” or “HMMMM test.” Avoid starting your letter or editorial with “I am writing about...”
- Prepare to defend any point worth making. Gather together your best three or four supporting arguments and make each one the point of a paragraph. Use active voice (“He bought the car” not “The car was bought.”).
- Raise your opponents’ best arguments and challenge them with facts that disprove their arguments, any potential ironies, etc.
- Ask yourself: What is the minimum background information a reader absolutely has to have to grasp this point? Write two paragraphs (at the most) to summarize this information.
- Does your letter or editorial raise questions, surprise or intrigue? Does it make the reader want to go beyond the first paragraph?
- All papers have a maximum word limit for letters and editorials.
- Don’t forget to include your name, title and affiliation at the conclusion of the piece.
- Be patient! It could take weeks for the letter or column to run. Continuously calling the staff of the editorial page may not help and may actually hurt your chances of it making the paper.

*Taken from Op-eds: Framing the Debate by Communications Consortium Media Center*



## Writing press releases and media advisories

Press releases and media advisories can be useful tools to get information out about events or programs.

The press release is written in a narrative format and helps write the story for the reporter.

# Media Relations

### Points to remember about writing press releases:

- Use a strong headline – keep it short and “punchy”
- Write your release so it reads like a newspaper article – don’t fluff it up with adjectives, useless quotes and self-serving praise
- Back up the headline with statistics and sources
- Tie your story into a trend
- Be specific
- Don’t be too promotional
- Don’t be boring
- Include quotations only if they add value to the story
- Provide contacts and sources
- Include a headshot or relevant photo from your hometown

Try changing up your format and including a “10 Ways to…” or “5 Ideas for…” tip sheet that includes useful information on a timely subject. Here are five tips for writing tip sheets for the media.

- Use a numeral in the headline (ex. Ten Tips to Stay Safe During Hurricane Season from the City/Town of [insert name]).
- Don’t offer more than ten tips or fewer than five.
- Don’t bother with an introductory sentence. Just jump to the first tip.
- Include ways to contact you or your city/town for more information.

# Media Relations

Get added value from your press releases by posting them on your hometown website when you release them to your local media. Don't forget to link back to your website from your city Facebook page or Twitter feed. Here are seven easy tips.

- If you're posting a press release for an event, the release should be removed or moved to your archive folder as soon as the event is over.
- Post press releases about nationally recognized days that are associated with your organization.
- Provide a link to your press release or media center on your home page.
- Time your releases with appropriate events or time of year.
- List press releases by date/newsworthiness and archived releases by year then date.
- Don't forget to include contact information on all releases.
- Check your spelling. Spell check doesn't always catch everything.

*From the Nonprofit Communications Report*

## **Media Advisories**

An advisory is a "save the date" notice for the media. Sending this basic information release ahead of time will get the event on the media outlet calendar and help reserve a space for you in a publication or on a news program. A media advisory contains contact information and answers the five important basic questions: who, what, when, where and why.

## **Delivering memorable sound bites in a TV or print media interview**

- Work on your sound bite. Know your message and frame the answers to your questions to always circle back to your message.
- Avoid “no comment.” Be honest and say, “I don’t know the answer to that, but I can do some quick research and get back to you immediately.” Your honest answer and quick research turnaround are great ways to establish yourself as a reliable source.
- Make statistics understandable. Social math is a great way to communicate your message when numbers and statistics might cloud your message or make it hard for the average person to understand. Social math communicates the point of the statistic using an emotional edge. Using annexation in South Carolina as an example, a social math statistic would say, “There are more doughnut holes in the City of Spartanburg than in a dozen boxes of Krispy Kremes.”

# **Media Relations**

# Media Relations

## **Broadcast interviews are nerve-wracking to even the most seasoned professional**

Use these tips to prepare yourself for a television interview.

- Don't be intimidated by the camera. Talk to the interviewer, not the camera.
- Don't let your appearance distract from your message. Wear a dark jacket; avoid a white shirt or busy pattern. Take off your glasses, if possible, to avoid a glare from lights.
- Control the situation. Know the venue of the interview and avoid being set up with distractions behind you. Ask the reporter in advance for the type of questions you will be asked.
- If possible, watch or listen to the show on which you will be interviewed. Know the interviewer's style – is he combative, friendly, knowledgeable?
- Remember the microphone is always on – even if the reporter says it's not. Assume anything you say – even off the record – will be recorded.
- Don't let silence intimidate you. If you complete your answer and the reporter doesn't move immediately to another question, don't feel like you have to fill the silence.

# Social Media

## Issues to consider

The word “media” no longer refers to traditional sources for news like television, radio or newspapers. Social media is becoming the norm, and cities and towns should consider these new tools as viable opportunities for reaching out directly to residents, visitors and others.

## Before jumping on the social media bandwagon, consider these points.

- 1. Strategy** - Before deciding to make any of these social media tools part of a city’s marketing and community outreach strategy, consider whether they further your mission and goals. If engaging residents in two-way conversations or soliciting feedback online is the goal, then Facebook may be a good choice. If communicating information in real time is important, then Twitter probably is your best bet. If gathering and posting photos is a priority, then Flickr could work. Consider how these tools fit into the city’s overall marketing and community outreach strategies. Let that rule the decisions. Do not rush to use these tools just because everyone else is.
- 2. Community** – The whole idea behind social media is building community and engaging in conversations – moving from monologues to dialogues. This puts city leaders out there for criticism and negative comments. It can be managed . . . as long as the reason behind using these tools is part of the city’s marketing and community outreach plan. Make sure you have weighed the pros and cons, and you are committed to staying on top of your message and what is being said in these virtual conversations.

Build up your fans and friends, and make them “evangelists” to help spread the news about the city. Let them be part of the conversation on a Facebook page to tell the story of a great program you have or the great service you gave them. A “third-party endorsement” by a satisfied resident is worth more than you can put a dollar amount on.

# Social Media

3. **Capacity** – Once you decide whether social media tools can help you reach your goals, next consider how you will manage these tools. While they are free in terms of a dollar outlay, they are not free in terms of staff time investment. Manage social media tools the same way you would manage any other marketing or communications tool – strategically and deliberately.

Everyone involved with communicating on behalf of the city should understand how these tools support the city's goals and reinforce messages. Plus whoever is managing the social media tools needs to make it a priority responsibility and not a “sometimes” task.

4. **Monitor** – Even if the city is not participating in the virtual conversations that take place using these social media tools, it is still important to know what is being said in these online forums. In reality, these conversations are probably already happening in other places like the grocery store parking lot, by e-mail or on the telephone. This way you get to see what others are saying.
5. **Measurement** – You would not invest time and effort into a television ad campaign if you did not have a way to measure results. The same is true for using social media. Decide what you want to get out of the tools you choose then measure whether they are working. Maybe it is a survey that residents can take when they use a particular service. Possibly, it is a coupon delivered through the social media tools that offers a discount on admission to an event.

**Bottom line:** Do not treat social media as a passing fad. It is here to stay and should be treated as a legitimate and valuable tool in your marketing plan.

## Snapshot of top-used social media tools

- **Facebook** – Exchange messages person-to-person or through a group. Great for building “buzz” on an event or service. Allows you to maintain some level of control over what visitors can see or post on your page.
- **X** – Share messages of up to 280 characters. It is easy to monitor what’s being said about your city through programs such as Hootsuite or Tweet Deck.
- **YouTUBE** – Upload and share videos. Works well for getting around the expensive process of posting and storing video.
- **LinkedIn** – Share individual information with others in a similar trade or profession. Good for establishing yourself as an expert in a particular field.

# Social Media

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