

Media 101

What Makes News?!

It's not enough to just tell reporters that an event or campaign is happening. You must convince reporters that it is news, either because it is a new event, has a compelling local angle, or challenges traditional assumptions about a subject.

- **Untraditional subjects.** Media have featured substantial coverage of budget protests and environmental justice campaigns in large part because these new angles on traditional faith values lend a fresh feel to coverage.
- **New and unusual coalitions and alliances.** Broadening alliances makes a story more interesting than the traditional coalition issuing yet another public statement. This has proven particularly true in regards to involving the evangelical community in social justice campaigns. The media continues to be extremely interested in the broadening of the evangelical public policy agenda.
- **A new perspective on a hot news topic.** Stay current on the most recent developments on issues relevant to your work. If a public official makes a decision, the legislature passes or rejects legislation, or a high profile opponent takes newsworthy action relevant to your work, be prepared to respond publicly in the media. Your response will likely get covered because reporters are covering the news topic anyway.
- **A local angle.** Media will be more likely to use your story if you spotlight people from the area that they cover.
- **An irresistible story.** If you can offer a compelling account of one person's unique journey: reporters will want to share the story with a larger audience.
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The Mechanics

Identify a Media Contact

- Identify a media contact from your group who can be available to quickly respond to all media requests. Calls from members of the media should be returned within an hour. This person should have full contact information (ideally work, home and cell phone numbers) for faith leaders/spokespeople who are available to talk in depth about the project or topic that you want to publicize to the media. They should also be able to provide basic information about Gamaliel, your individual organization, and the project at-hand. This person should be articulate, available and comfortable talking to reporters. They should also be OK with having their phone number and email address on all press releases.

Identify Faith Leaders/Spokespeople

- Identify a spokesperson(s) from your group who is knowledgeable about Gamaliel, your individual organization, and the project or topic that you want to publicize to the media. This person should be articulate, available and comfortable talking to reporters. This person should want to get quoted, so they should be prepared ahead of time with what they want to say. They should also be OK with giving out their phone numbers to reporters. Your spokespeople can change depending on the project, but it's good to have one consistent voice.

Prepare Spokespeople and Media Contacts

Determine what your spokesperson's central "message" should be, draft talking points, and rehearse **staying on message, and repeating that core message**. Also try to think of a couple sound bites — spokespersons should want to get quoted. Give reporters something worth quoting! Also draft potential questions (especially the difficult ones) that may be asked and prepare draft answers. None of this means that spokespersons should be scripted. In fact, reporters will lose interest quickly if it sounds like they are. Spokespeople (and faith leaders especially!) should have their own voice. Being prepared and on message is different from being scripted.

- Media contacts and spokespersons should **mention Gamaliel and the name of your specific organization repeatedly**. You want to ensure that the organization's name (not just the spokesperson's name) is mentioned in the article.
- Media contacts and spokespersons should be **friendly and helpful**. Reporters who find you pleasant and helpful to deal with will come back to you for future stories.
- Media contacts and spokespersons should use **short, concise answers**. Going on and on and taking you off topic and off message. You wanted to be quoted on topic and on message.
- Media contacts and spokespersons should **tactfully correct inaccurate facts or misconceptions** stated. Don't argue or appear hostile.

Media Advisories and Press Releases

- Use media advisories to announce upcoming events and entice reporters to attend and cover them. Media advisories should catch reporters' attention with an interesting angle, be concise (maximum 1 page) and give reporters all the who/what/where/when/why/how information that they need. If basic facts (like names of places, people, dates or times) are missing, or if you fail to include a phone number where they can reach you, they may pass on the story altogether because it's too much of a hassle to track down the missing information.
- Use press releases to announce news. (Whereas a media advisory is used to get reporters to come to an event, a press release is distributed on the day of the event to announce the substance of the news of the event. A media advisory announces that there will be interesting news. A press release announces news.) Press releases should be forceful (take a stand!), concise (no more than a page and a half), include all the necessary facts, and make very clear why your news is in fact news. They should also include at least one (but no more than three) quotes from a faith leader/spokesperson(s).
- All media advisories and press releases should include complete contact information for your media contact.

Distributing Advisories and Releases, Making "Pitch Calls"

- Media advisories and press releases should be distributed to reporters and producers on your press list. Media advisories should be distributed about a week or a week and a half before an event is to take place. Press releases should be distributed the day of your event or launch of a campaign or initiative. They should be emailed directly to reporters and producers, preferably individually, if there are not too many contacts (less than 30 or so). It's best to email advisories and press releases first thing in the morning. Don't distribute them on Fridays.

Faith in Public Life

Rev. Jennifer Butler and Ms. Katie Barge

- Emails to reporters should be followed by follow-up "pitch calls". These calls should be made by the media contact person, as well as others knowledgeable of your initiative. The best time to call reporters or editors is between 10 and 11 a.m. Call the day after you send an advisory, as well as the day of your event or the day you send out your press release. When you call, ask if they got the release. This is also an opportunity for you to give a "pitch" about what you are doing, why it is important and why it is news/why readers will care about it. When a reporter seems interested, follow-up with background information and offer them contact information for faith leaders/spokespeople. When a reporter tells you they do not plan to cover your event or initiative, politely ask if there is someone else with their publication/station that you should contact.

Build a Good Press List

- To create a local press contact list, research who covers religion, as well as the political, policy, cultural, and other issue areas relevant to your event or campaign at each publication and station. You can research who these contacts are and find their contact information by looking through newspapers' websites (their masthead section). If you can't find this information online, call the general news room line and ask.
- One very important way to keep an up-to-date press contact list with the best contacts is to keep a close eye on which reporters and columnists write on topics relevant to your work. When you see a relevant story, add the reporter or columnist and their available contact information to your press list. Also make note of the story they wrote so you can reference it when you contact them about your next event or initiative.

Cultivate Relationships with Key Reports

- **Engage.** When a key reporter or columnist writes a good story for your organization, write them to say thank you. When they write a story that is relevant to your work and you think readers would have benefited from owing about your organization's perspective, contact the reporter to let him/her know. Be polite, specific and offer to provide contact information for relevant spokespeople and any further background information. They will be grateful for the information if you give it to them tactfully and thoughtfully.

Also, call them when you aren't pushing a story just to introduce yourself and tell them about your area of expertise. Offer to be a resource providing contact information for sources or background information relevant to your work. When you do have a good story to pitch, they will be likely to listen.

- **Visit editors/editorial boards.** Contact the editor's office to request a meeting. Arrange the visit in advance. Mornings are usually the best time to contact editors. Keep your visits short. Max 30 – 40 minutes. Be prepared. Present your case concisely and keep your visit professional. Present the local angle. Give them fact sheets, relevant background material and copies of other papers' editorials or columnists with whom you agree on the subject. Provide good contacts for more information.

Holding Press Conferences/ Other Events

- Make the site of your press conference visually appealing. Avoid the four-people-sitting-at-a-table-with-no-attractive-decor set-up. Pick a site in with the conference or story. Put a sign with the name of your organization on the podium. Place a larger sign behind speakers.
- Be sure to have your press release and background material (speaker bios and photos, organization and initiative or campaign descriptions), presented neatly and professionally (ideally in a folder with your group's name on the cover) available to give reporters upon their arrival. This is called a press kit.