

Working with the Media

By Renee Willis, Vice President for Field and Communications and Jen Butler, Director of Media Relations and Communications, NLIHC

Media relations involves working with the media with the goal of informing the public of an organization’s mission, policies, and practices in a positive, consistent, and credible manner. Honing and building strong relationships with the media are important to any organization’s ability to advocate effectively. To successfully share key messages and campaigns, strategize and consider the communication tactics that will be the most useful in ensuring that the right audience is reached and meaningful allies are secured. Good communication strategies will lead to deeper audience engagement and an increase in media interest.

CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Working on a campaign can be labor-intensive. Advocates may work for months, even years, to develop and implement a campaign. A campaign may involve researching, branding/messaging, sharing, and then measuring success. The success of a campaign could be measured by media hits, social media engagement, and/or member/network participation. Think through the tools needed for a higher likelihood of success before deciding which to use to help share your campaign. Tease the campaign for people outside of your network, including the media.

Media Toolkits

Develop a media toolkit and share it with your partners and stakeholders. A media toolkit compiles top-line information about your campaign into one document and can be used as a quick and handy guide for consistent messaging. Partners can quickly refer to the toolkit for source information. Share your toolkit ahead of the launch of your campaign

and provide guidance for its use. A toolkit may include:

- **National & State Talking Points** – Identify between ten and 15 points of interest that can be referenced in a press release and/or in an interview.
- **Frequently Asked Questions** – Review news stories and social media for what people are talking about related to your campaign. Include popular questions and their answers to assist with messaging control.
- **Social Media Suggestions** – Research shows that reporters and stakeholders use social media as a resource for news. Social media is an important communications tool because it is designed to quickly disseminate information and reach wide audiences. Reporters often use Twitter to identify possible news stories, and stakeholders often use LinkedIn to share company updates. Include five or six sample posts for Twitter and Facebook as these are the most popular platforms for reaching audiences relevant to affordable housing issues. Include a hashtag in your samples so that you and others can track discussions about your issue.
- **Images, Graphs, Factsheets, and Infographics** – Posts with images trend at a higher impression and engagement rate than posts without images. Include approximately three images related to your campaign that may involve a “Coming Soon”, “Now Available”, or pithy tagline from your campaign. Also, if any graphs or charts are a part of your campaign, include them in the toolkit with a suggestion to circulate on social media as a teaser. Use factsheets and infographics to help promote snapshots of your message.
- **Testimonies** – Gather quotes from key leaders and influencers about your campaign. Testimonials from outside your organization or network are preferred. Suggest including

a testimonial in a press release or reference one in an interview with the media. This helps to legitimize your campaign as being relevant beyond your network.

- **Press Release Template** – Include a press release sample/template that includes quotes from key state and organization leaders. Quotes from partnering national organizations could be included as well. Reporters tend to copy and paste press releases, so including quotes will help the reporter write the story and highlight your message. Include no more than three quotes in the press release from three different sources.

INTERACTIONS WITH THE MEDIA

Interactions with the media often start with a cold call or email to a specific outlet to pitch (sharing relevant key points of your campaign to garner media interest) a story. The first interaction is often quick. Regardless of the type of interaction, reporters usually devote about 30 seconds to listen to or read a pitch. Therefore, your initial pitch must be pithy, precise, and honest.

Pitches are sometimes made on Twitter to generate an organic buzz around a topic. Pitching on Twitter is an effective strategy to increase earned media. This strategy circumvents cold calls or relying on one outlet to show interest in covering your campaign. Pitching on Twitter gets your message out using a platform that you control.

When pitching a story:

- Pitch the right news hook: think about current events and how they relate to the campaign. Ask the questions:
 - Why is this story important right now?
 - What makes the story or the angle unique?
 - Why should anyone care?
 - Is this story the first of its kind?
 - Is the event or development the largest or most comprehensive of its kind?

- Pitch the right person: use tools like [Meltwater](#), [Muck Rack](#), or [Google Alerts](#) to track and identify the right reporter for the right beat.
- Include a press release: circulate a press release to all media contacts using tools like email, Meltwater, or a wire service about one week before the campaign starts but pitch the press release to key reporters prior to the wide release. Connect with a few key reporters that you've fostered relationships with or reporters who have recently covered your campaign topic. Share an embargoed copy of a report or highlight new data/research discussed in your campaign. On the date the press release is widely distributed, circulate it on Twitter and tag a few additional key reporters who are active on Twitter.

GENERAL TIPS FOR SPEAKING WITH THE PRESS

It is important to foster relationships with appropriate media outlets to increase the opportunity for leading the narrative. This may require tracking coverage of your issue on social media and through media hits. Stay aware of a reporter's beat and track reporters who may be new to the affordable housing beat. Shift your communication accordingly and respect a reporter's preferred method of communication. If you are interested in fostering a relationship with a reporter, share relevant new research with that reporter ahead of a wide release.

Media relationships are reciprocal and should generate benefits for both parties. Before initiating any relationship, it will be important to determine your overall goal in reaching out to press and to identify your key messages around ending homelessness and increasing housing affordability. Gather background on your key press contacts to determine if they are the right press contacts for your campaign. Determine if they are currently on the housing beat and if they work for traditional newspapers, online media, television, or radio. If you encounter difficulty generating national press, utilize your local press to generate interest on a national level.

Once you've successfully managed to schedule a phone or in-person interview with a member of the media, be prepared with talking points, citations, and testimonials. Other tips for an interview are:

- Review your main points before the interview: decide on two to three key messages to convey.
- Remember that everything is on the record.
- Steer reporters toward the big picture: this is a systemic problem.
- Learn to pivot.
- Connect local issues to national problems.
 - Share affordable housing challenges specific to your community,
 - Share examples of what life is like for extremely low-income renters in your state, or
 - Use data to emphasize the importance of state or local housing initiatives and funding.
- Make your points brief and simple and avoid jargon.
- It's ok to say, "I don't know."
- Always end the interview by repeating your key messages or the one key takeaway.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The OpEd Project: <https://www.theopedproject.org/>.

HubSpot 22 PR Tools for Monitoring & Managing Media Relations in 2021: <https://bit.ly/2EiUOzr>.

Extraordinary PR on Ordinary Budget: <https://bit.ly/2qauZf3>.

Nonprofit Tech for Good: <https://nptechforgood.com/>.

