

Media Communications for Advocacy Campaigns

NATIONAL TRUST FOR
HISTORIC PRESERVATION®

A Chapter from the *Advocacy Training Manual*
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Partnership with *Parade* magazine reaches a broad audience to “Tell America’s Story.” Photo courtesy of National Trust for Historic Preservation.

An advocacy campaign benefits greatly from a well-run media outreach program. A media campaign represents an organization’s single best opportunity to be in touch with its intended audience. Communicating through the media can be an excellent—and low-cost—advocacy tool. However, because many advocacy campaigns rely on “earned media”—as opposed to ads and other “paid media”—an organization should plan carefully to ensure that the message that appears in the newspaper or on the evening news is the one that it wants the target audience to see.

WHY A MEDIA CAMPAIGN IS IMPORTANT

The goal of a media campaign—like the objectives of the overall advocacy effort—should be to change people’s behavior in some way. Ideally, an organization will communicate with the target audience in order to inspire people to undertake a specific action—whether it’s writing a letter to an

elected official, attending a planning meeting, or raising awareness in the community that a particular building is threatened.

Communicating via the news media allows an organization to tell members of the public how an advocacy campaign will directly benefit them. News coverage of a specific preservation issue will also help an organization attract the attention of policy makers or other decision makers who will ultimately determine the outcome of the organization’s advocacy efforts.

IS MEDIA COMMUNICATION ALWAYS A GOOD IDEA?

When contemplating a media campaign, the first thing an organization should do is ask itself some preliminary questions. Will the issue actually benefit from receiving media attention? Then what happens if you get it? Too often, there is a tendency to simply fire off a press release about whatever issue the organization is currently engaged in, assum-

ing that whatever media attention it gets will be a good thing. This is not always the case. In some instances, the issue may not rise to the level of something a reporter would cover.

An organization should also consider the intended audience. If it only needs to convince a legislator or a key staff member to support an issue, a media campaign may be a distraction or a misallocation of the organization’s resources. Media relations take time and effort, so decide in advance if a full-scale media campaign is the right approach.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Fortunately, getting started on a media campaign can be a relatively inexpensive endeavor. With a word processor, a phone, access to the Internet, and a media outlets list, a media campaign has all the tools it needs to get underway.

Appoint a Spokesperson

Organizationally, a critical first step is to choose *one person* to serve as the primary media contact. This is especially important if there is a coalition of groups working together on the advocacy campaign and it may not be apparent to a reporter which group to contact for comment. From the perspective of the reporter, having one person to turn to with questions or to get comments greatly simplifies the job (especially when a story is breaking and there isn’t time to make several calls to find the appropriate person). And from the perspective of the organization or coalition, it is far easier to stay “on message” when just one person delivers it. Ideally the primary media contact should be the board president or coalition chair that is empowered by the board to speak for the group. For most issues, having a volunteer spokesperson as the media contact, rather than staff, reinforces the grassroots nature of the advocacy effort.

Set an Action-oriented Goal

What do you want people to do with the information you are putting out there? This question is especially important. An organization should always include an action item in its communication that asks people to take a concrete step. If the purpose of the campaign is to “raise awareness”—a ubiquitous goal in the field of historic preservation—try and drill down beyond this somewhat vague goal to ask: “Let’s assume we raise awareness, then what?” What do you want people to do? Sign an online petition? Visit a website? Write their elected officials? There should always be an action item that suggests real, measurable ways to support a specific goal.

Identify the Target Audience

With limited resources to allocate toward a communications campaign, the organization’s communications strategy should focus on the people who are best-positioned to take action on the issue. Who are you trying to convince? If, for example, you want to convince people to attend a local planning board meeting to voice support for a preservation ordinance, the intended audience would obviously be local residents.

Develop a Message

The message is the heart and soul of any communications campaign. It should be as specific as possible, and it should be delivered in the clearest possible language. The message should contain no more than three or four points and be no longer than one paragraph.

Above all, the message should be designed to resonate with the public. The organization should use the message to demonstrate how its advocacy efforts apply to the lives of the intended audience. Do not talk to the already converted. Instead, ask what message would resonate most strongly, and most widely, with the people you are trying to convince. Why should people care about this issue? What messages would make people see this issue from the organization’s point of view?

It is important not to overcomplicate the process of message development. One

good way to develop a message is to brainstorm with a handful of people who know the issue best, throw out ideas for awhile, and see what kind of pattern emerges. In all likelihood, the best message will tie together the ideas that emerge from this kind of discussion.

One rule of thumb to keep in mind when developing and disseminating a message is SRR: Simple, Relevant and Repeat. Keep it simple, make it relevant to the intended audience, and then repeat it as often as possible.

PLANNING A MEDIA CAMPAIGN

The actual day-to-day strategy and tactics of the media campaign will vary greatly depending on the overall objectives of the advocacy campaign. Some stories are great for television (including “visual” events, such as rallies, vigils, or protests), whereas others are more conducive to print media (a speech, testimony at a committee meeting, etc.). In some cases, you may want to target specific online journalists and bloggers.

When planning the media campaign, the bottom line consideration should be to ensure that the media tactics that you employ (such as press releases, letters to the editor, press conferences, op/eds, media advisories, and even staged media events such as rallies and speeches) serve the overall strategic goals of the advocacy campaign. Tactics are the day-to-day, on-the-ground actions and activities that advance the strategic goals of the media effort, which in turn advance the overall aims of the advocacy campaign. At all times, think about what types of media outreach will most effectively reach your target audience. For example, if you are running a petition drive to oppose a zoning change in your neighborhood, the local neighborhood paper may well be a better venue than a newspaper with a statewide focus.

TYPES OF COMMUNICATION TACTICS

Press Release

The press release is the most common form of communicating with the media, and it should include the following basic elements:

- Name of the issuing organization at the top—preferably accompanied by a logo.

- Name and contact information for the organization’s principal media contact.
- **Headline.** The headline is a critical part of the news release. It is the first thing that reporters read, so it should grab their attention and compel them to read on.
- **Dateline.** To ensure that reporters know that the information in the release is new, put the current date at the top, along with the words “For Immediate Release.”
- **Body of text, with a quote.** This is where you tell the story of the event or issue you are promoting. Lead with the biggest news—the item most likely to catch the reporter’s attention—and follow it up with a punchy quote (either from the lead person in your organization, or the person who knows the issue best) that fleshes out the issue.

Consider putting together a “content rich” press release with links to additional information. If you are sending a press release electronically (and these days, almost all press releases are disseminated via e-mail), consider embedding it, for example, with links to a YouTube video that your organization put together or a link to a PowerPoint presentation that reinforces the message in the release.

Media Advisory

Media advisories are generally sent to inform reporters about an event that you would like them to attend. An advisory should be short and to the point. An advisory can be a simple listing that explains the importance of the event and when and where it will be held.

Op/Ed

Op/eds—a term that means “opposite the editorial page”—are a great way to help shape public opinion on an issue. The longer word lengths that many newspapers permit for op/eds (generally 500 to 800 words) allow your organization to go into greater depth—especially important for complex, nuanced issues.

Editorials

Because they are written by a newspaper’s editorial page staff, editorials are effective



Reporters wait for the announcement of the 2008 list of America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. Photo courtesy of National Trust for Historic Preservation.

ongoing one-stop shop to check on new developments within the organization. Recent surveys find that reporters get more story ideas from blogs than any other single source.

HOW TO PITCH A STORY TO A REPORTER

All reporters are different, and their preferences vary widely as to how they like to receive information. The best way to find out how to pitch a story idea to reporters is to simply ask them; call them up, introduce yourself, and ask if they prefer to hear from you via phone, e-mail, fax, or another method.

If that is not possible, simply contact a reporter with a brief phone call, and then send your story idea via e-mail (though, for some reporters, the reverse is true, which is why it is always good to ask up front). In general, reporters have more time to talk in the mornings than in the afternoons when they are usually on deadline to file that day's story. Whenever you call a reporter, always ask at the beginning of the conversation if the reporter is on deadline or if he or she has time to talk.

TALKING TO REPORTERS

When speaking to a reporter, always assume that everything you say is "on the record," even if it's a casual conversation that may not feel like a formal interview. Reporters' definitions of "on the record" and "on background" and "not for attribution" tend to differ, so to be safe, always assume that whatever you say to a reporter can show up in the news.

Talking to a reporter can be a delicate balancing act. While you want to convey your message and stick closely to your talking points, it's also important not to sound canned and wooden. The reporter is looking for a good quote, and if you sound overly scripted, the reporter may not turn to you again.

In the end, keep in mind that reporters, by and large, are just looking to get the story right, and they want to work with the people they are writing about to make sure that the information in their story is accurate and informative to their readers. If there are questions you do not feel prepared to answer, it is perfectly acceptable to say you

don't know but will get back to them with an answer.

If there are certain reporters who will be covering your issue on an ongoing basis, work hard to establish a good relationship with them. In addition to being a good source, try to cultivate them in other ways: call or e-mail them to thank them for a good story, and send information they might find useful, even when it may not relate directly to a story idea.

CONCLUSION

As the adage goes, if you don't define yourself, your opponents will do it for you. Too often, preservationists find themselves in public debates with opponents who seek to depict the preservation movement as stuck in the past, averse to change, and/or unwilling to recognize the market forces that want to tear down a historic building. And all too often, our opponents are better funded and able to spend their resources on paid media campaigns.

The media represent the single best way to counter these arguments and communicate a positive message to the target audience. ■

Virgil McDill is the communications manager at the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The National Trust Center for State and Local Policy is helping preservationists influence policy-makers in their own communities, through training, technical assistance, and promotion of effective advocacy tools. This publication is part of the Center's *Advocacy Training Manual*. To get assistance with your policy issue, the latest information about advocacy techniques, or to order additional copies of this chapter of the manual, e-mail the National Trust Center for State and Local Policy at policy@nthp.org, call (202) 588-6167, or visit www.preservationnation.org/take-action/advocacy-center. This project is made possible in part through the generous support of the Jessie Ball duPont Fund.