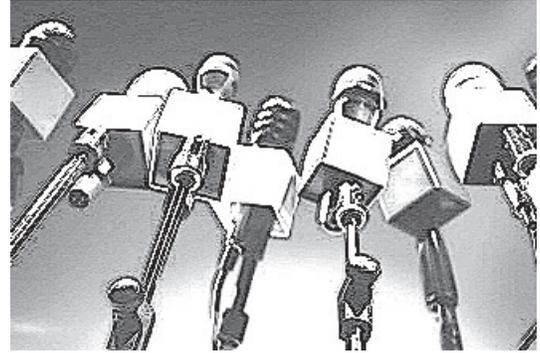




Getting the message out: Working with the media



The best organized event or the most eloquent speech will do little to bring about positive change if no one knows about it. Getting the message out to the general public through the media is a critical part of grassroots organizing. That's because the media shape the general public's perceptions about almost any issue.

Yet working with the news media can be intimidating for some activists. It doesn't have to be. Turning the media into a channel for getting your message out requires mastering only a few tools: staying on message, writing letters to the editor, staging a press conference, and arranging and attending editorial board meetings.

Staying on Message

When working with the media, it's important to know what to say and how to say it. Many organizations, including the Texas Freedom Network, spend a lot of time developing the "message" on an issue. The message is what you want your audience to remember when they are done listening to you or reading your comments.

People are bombarded daily with messages on everything from why a candidate deserves their support to which soap detergent is best for their dirty clothes. Key to making sure your message is heard in this crowded marketplace of ideas is, well, staying on message. The Texas Freedom Network provides talking points on a list of issues important to supporting public education, religious freedom and individual liberties. Those talking points help keep the focus of your audience on the message you want them to hear.

Remember that the attention span for most people is fairly short. Your audience can get lost in long arguments. So the simplest talking points are the strongest. For example:

- *Why are private school vouchers bad for Texas?*

- o "Vouchers take money from our neighborhood schools and give it to private and religious schools that are not accountable to taxpayers.
- o Even worse, private and religious schools that get vouchers don't have to meet the same standards as public schools."
- *Why should we support stem cell research?*
 - o "Stem cell research is about hope for families struggling with serious medical conditions like diabetes, Parkinson's disease and spinal cord injuries.
- *Why is teaching evolution important in public school science classes?*
 - o All parents want the best education for their kids. They know that giving Texas schoolchildren a 19th-century education in their 21st-century science classrooms won't prepare them to succeed in college or the jobs of the future.

TFN Tip

Don't worry when you find yourself essentially repeating your talking points to reporters. Repetition makes it more likely that your message will get through to the audience. You often will get only one quote in a story – make it count by ensuring that your quote is on message.

Before you talk to a reporter, anticipate some questions he or she might ask. Think of ways to turn those questions into opportunities to state your message, not simply respond to the other side's talking points.



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Writing a Letter to the Editor

Studies show that letters to the editor are among the most-read parts of a newspaper. Elected officials – or their staff members – read those sections regularly. In addition, letters to the editor are free and relatively easy to submit to newspaper editors. As a result, those letters can be effective ways of influencing public opinion and the votes of policymakers who pay close attention to public opinion.

Don't be discouraged if your letter isn't published. Numerous letters on a particular topic can alert editors to the importance of a particular story and improve the chances that at least one of the letters will be published. In fact, encourage family members, friends and others who share your concerns to write their own letters. Don't be shy! Offer to share your talking points and suggestions to help out. All of this helps ensure that the audience will get your message and remember it.

Writing Your Letter

- Make sure your letter is timely. Try to tie your point to a recent news story, editorial, letter or event.
- Follow the newspaper's guidelines for length. Ideally, keep your letter shorter than 150 words. The shorter, the better!
- Focus on one point and state it clearly at the beginning of your letter.
- If you are responding to someone's comments, don't waste your limited space by repeating their words. Focus on your own point.
- Keep it simple. Avoid using complicated sentences and big words.
- Avoid personal attacks, offensive language and political name-calling (e.g., "far right," "extremist"). Such language will turn off the average reader.

TFN Tip

After your letter is published, clip it the header of the page on which it is printed – including at least the name of the newspaper and the date. Then photocopy the letter and header together on one page and fax your copies to your elected officials. Include a personal note indicating that you are a constituent.

Submitting Your Letter

Newspapers typically list on their editorial pages or Web sites the postal and e-mail addresses for submitting letters to the editor. Submit your letter by e-mail (preferred) or by fax. If neither is possible, send by postal as soon as possible to lessen the time between possible publication and the event or story about which you are writing. If you don't find an address, call the newspaper's main phone number for the information. Include your contact information (daytime and home phone numbers, postal and e-mail address and e-mail) so that the newspaper can verify that you sent the letter.

Staging a Press Conference

Sometimes a press conference is a good way to get your message out. You might attract reporters from a variety of newspapers as well as televisions and radio stations. That helps spread your message to different audiences. Also, reporters like press conferences because they have access to many of their sources in one location. The Texas Freedom Network can help provide the tools for staging a press conference, but the basics are fairly simple.





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***TFN Tip***

Avoid calling reporters who are on deadline. Deadlines for morning newspapers tend to be late afternoon or early evening. It's best not to call a television reporter or editor less than two hours before a scheduled news broadcast.

The Media Advisory

A media advisory alerts reporters to a press event they might want to cover. You can see a sample media advisory on the next page. Advisories commonly include a few key parts:

- The name of your organization (if you have one)
- Your contact information, including your phone number and, if you have one, your e-mail address
- A short headline about the topic
- A short paragraph (no more than three or four sentences) that explains why reporters should be interested in a topic and then invites them to attend a press conference about it
- A listing of key information about the event:
 - o What: A press conference about such-and-such
 - o Where: The specific location of the press conference
 - o When: The exact time of the press conference



- o Who: A list of who will speak at the press conference – generally no more than four people, each giving a statement of less than 2-3 minutes

The Pitch

Create a list of reporters and editors who might be interested in your issue by scanning your newspaper to identify reporters who have written stories about similar topics. Visit the newspaper's Web site or call the newspaper to get contact information for those reporters, including the phone number and, if possible, an e-mail address. You will also want to identify the main contact information for the news or assignments desk at your newspaper as well as television and radio news offices.

Once you have sent out your advisory (preferably by e-mail, although some television and radio newsrooms prefer faxes), follow up with phone calls. Politely identify who you are and the purpose of your call. Inform the reporter or editor that you sent over a media advisory and briefly explain why this story is important to readers/the audience. Keep your pitch short and make sure the reporter or editor has contact information for you.

Newspapers and television and radio newsrooms receive numerous media advisories each day. Remind reporters and editors about your event with a follow-up advisory and phone calls the next day. The day of your event, make sure to send your advisories again and before 8:30 – television and radio reporters get their daily assignments at a staff meeting usually by 9 a.m.

The Press Conference

Generally, a press conference should have no more than three or four speakers, each with a statement of no more than about three minutes. If possible, have copies of those statements for reporters. Choose your speakers carefully, perhaps having individuals who can represent specific groups or constituencies important to your issue, such as parents, teachers, health professionals or people of faith. Keep in mind that television reporters want images that will be visually interesting for their audience. Signs, posters and other props can provide those visuals.



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***TFN Tip***

Don't treat reporters as if they are your enemy. Be clear on your position, but don't engage in an argument or debate. Doing so is likely to hurt your credibility in their eyes. Remain polite, friendly and respectful, clearly and firmly answering questions that reporters have.

Your press conference is an opportunity to get your message out to a wide audience. So it is important to ensure that each speaker is familiar with your talking points and stays on message. When each speaker is finished, open the press conference to questions from reporters. In most cases, your press conference will be over in less than 30 minutes. Reporters, however, may want to conduct one-on-one interviews with speakers afterward.

The Press Release

When reporters come to the press conference, distribute a press release about your issue. The press release should read something like a news story, with quotes from one or two speakers at least. Ideally, the quotes in your press release will be based on your talking points. After the press conference, e-mail or fax your press release to the same list of reporters and editors who got your media advisory about the event. Then follow up with phone calls to check whether reporters have other questions. You can read a sample press release on the next page.

TFN Tip

Keep your press release short – not more than one page. Reporters typically won't spend time reading through a long press release. Put your main point and a good quote near the beginning of your press release.

Arranging an editorial board meeting

A newspaper editorial can be an important tool for persuasion. The credibility an editorial gives to a particular position can help influence readers who were previously undecided. It can even change minds. Moreover, you can bet that elected officials and their staff members keep a close eye on the opinions expressed on editorial pages. Along with letters to the editor, editorials can provide a way to monitor the tide and direction of public opinion.

Most newspapers have an editorial board made up of key employees, such as the publisher, the editorial page editor and editorial writers. The board decides what editorial positions to take on issues of the day. The board also often agrees to meet with community leaders, activists and others who are concerned those issues. So one way to get your message out to the general public is to meet with your local editorial board and persuade it to take offer an editorial on your issue.

Keep these points in mind when trying to set up an editorial board meeting:

- Find out whether a newspaper has recently editorialized on your issue. If it has, you might want to wait a few weeks before requesting a meeting to pitch another editorial.
- Identify no more than four or five individuals who will attend the board meeting. As with press conferences, try to put together a group that includes respected or well-known individuals from different constituencies, such as – depending on the issue – parents, clergy and health experts. Remember that the group's job is to persuade the board to take an editorial position on the issue.
- After you have identified yourself, briefly explain the purpose of your call and the importance of your issue. Tell the editor who you plan to bring with you to the meeting. You might follow up with an e-mail about the others in your group, including a little information about each and their contact information.



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***TFN Tip***

Avoid calling an editorial page editor on a Thursday or Friday to ask for a meeting with the board. Newspapers prepare their weekend editorial pages on those days.

- Don't be late for the meeting. The board is likely to have limited time, and you want to use that time as efficiently as possible.
- Invite members of your group to introduce themselves and explain why the issue is important to

them. They should not prepare long statements. In many cases, the meeting may flow better as an informal question-and-answer session.

- Don't engage in a debate with the board, but do politely answer questions even if they appear critical or probing. Remember that you are asking the newspaper to take a public stand on your issue. The editors will understandably have questions about your position.
- When your meeting is over, thank the board for meeting with you. Leave behind contact information should board members have further questions.

