

IMPACS MEDIA COMMUNICATIONS TOOLKIT

Here are a few ideas about some of the common media tools you can use to help increase the public profile of your non-profit organization. I would love to get feedback from you about the approaches that have worked for you, ideas for improving this list or tools you think should be added. Email donnab@impacs.org.

ADS — NEWSPAPER, RADIO & TV

What is it? Ads refer to paid advertising in places where the population gets their news. Ads are, generally, quite expensive in media outlets that reach a broad base of the population. See **Public Service Announcements** on this list for notes about free advertising opportunities.

What does it do? It provides your organization or issue with a public profile in the mainstream press. In some case, a provocative ad by a group campaigning on a specific issue, can actually be the motivator to get the news media to pick up your issue as a story. Environmentalists and health advocacy organizations have successfully raised the news coverage of issues by running well-placed ads in newspapers and on radio.

When do I use it? When earned media can't or isn't delivering your message in your words, purchasing advocacy ads may be a good option to help you reach target audiences. In general, because of the associated cost of running ads, the number of times an individual must see, read or hear a message to actually register it, and the difficulty in evaluating success, paid advertising is best used when you need to lobby a large group of people around a specific action, such as sending a letter to a politician.

How do I use it? Most importantly, plan paid advertising into your campaign at the start. If you have a large enough budget to run ads, the ads should be developed as part of your overall media or communications strategy. Too often, groups resort to ads when their other outreach approaches have failed. In these cases, messages are rarely well-developed, there is often not enough time to fully penetrate the target audience (for example, in radio, it is standard to run 40 ads in a one week period to ensure each listener hears your ad/message more than once).

COLUMNISTS

Who are they? Staff writers of newspapers who supplement editorial pages with their opinion pieces about timely issues.

What do they do? It provides an additional space for you to have your issue expressed.

When do I use them? Follow the columnists in your paper. If you notice one shares your values, or position on other issues, they may also be allies to your issue. If you don't have hard news, if the editorial staff don't share your point of view, approach a columnist with your story idea.

How do I use them? Call the columnist and tell them who you are, what your story idea is, why the issue is important and why it would make a good column for him or her to write.

GIMMICKS & NON-NEWS ITEMS

What is it? A creative hook by providing a visual, funny and/or provocative element. (This might include outlandish costumes or props, a stunt of some kind, or a “teaser” campaign that arouses curiosity.)

What does it do? It can sometimes draw attention to a story that you’ve had difficulty getting media interested in, or it might make up for a lack of hard news content, generating coverage by virtue of its quirkiness. Television news producers, in particular, often like to “balance” hard, serious, stories with softer, more colorful ones. If your timing is right, and your hook original enough, you could benefit.

When to use it? When you can come up with an idea that is both relevant to your issue and innovative or crazy enough to attract media attention. When you’ll be happy with superficial or spot coverage, as opposed to an in-depth discussion of complex issues.

How to use it? It depends on the gimmick. If it’s humorous and *not* visual, but lends itself to disc jockey patter, you might make the rounds of the morning or afternoon drive shows on local radio stations. If it’s a once-only stunt that you want the TV cameras to come out for, pick a time when they’re least likely to be occupied and send a teaser or two in advance that gives enough away to persuade them it will be worthwhile.

Don’t send gimmicks to news reporters! The best target for gimmicks are the soft news sections of the paper (food, fashion, and new homes), and the morning and drive shows on radio.

EDITORIAL BOARD MEETING

What is it? This is an opportunity for you to present a newspaper with a particular viewpoint or to raise general awareness and understanding about your issues among the paper’s decision-makers.

What does it do? It provides you with a number of very important opportunities: it allows you to meet, in person, the editors of your paper, which helps you develop personal relationships with these people; it allows you to speak, one-on-one to important decision-makers about the issue that is important to you; it allows you to build personal and organizational credibility as a valuable source of information on your subject.

When do I use it? Try to plan editorial board meetings at the beginning of your media campaign. By meeting with these key newsmakers early in your campaign you increase your odds of achieving your media goals. You will likely pick up

tips about how the paper would be most interested in covering your issue. For instance, if you work with drug addicts, you may find out that the paper is *not* interested in running stories about the impact on family members, but would like to know how business in your community suffers as a result of addiction issues. If you work on an issue that has social baggage, such as sexual abuse, a meeting with the editorial board early in your campaign will allow you to educate the press about the potential societal harm of using terms such as “fondled” to mean “molested” or “sex without consent” to mean “rape”.

In general, it is best to approach an editorial board meeting when you are not in a defensive position. Your tone will be friendlier, and the media will be more willing to invite you to speak if they know you wish to provide information, not berate them for your perception of their poor coverage of the issue.

How do I use it? Contact your media’s editorial page editor and request a meeting. Establish how long you will have to make your presentation, how many reporters and editors will be present. Do not approach the meeting with any anger toward the media. This will not work to your benefit. Do not condescend to the media. Simply explain your perspective in a professional and informative manner. You are trying to establish yourself or your group as a credible and informed source of information, not marginalize yourself as a crank. They will ask you difficult questions, perhaps even play devil’s advocate — it’s their job to test the validity of your position.

Know the how the paper has been covering the issue — and know whether or not they ran an article on the day you meet with them!

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

What is it? A letter you write to the newspaper commenting on a current news story being addressed by the paper. The letter may criticize some aspect of the paper’s coverage or bring additional context to a particular story. It may also respond to a previously published letter. Letters to the editor appear on the Op/ed pages and are one of the most highly read segments of the paper.

What does it do? Like the Op/Ed piece, a letter to the editor can allow your comments to be presented with minimal mediation or interpretation by the paper itself. (Although in practice, this requires you to keep the letter as concise as possible, since all papers reserve the right to edit letters for brevity.)

When to use it? When you want to comment on a current story and/or its coverage without mediation and an op-ed piece isn’t warranted (because you don’t have enough to say on the matter; because you don’t think they’ll print an op/ed piece from you; or because you don’t have enough time to research and write one).

Don't overdo it. People who write more than one a month are dismissed as crackpots.

How to use it? Notice how long the published letters to the editor usually are and try and stay within those boundaries to avoid having someone cut your comments. If you must criticize the paper itself, do so in a calm and objective manner, backing up any claims you make with facts and concrete examples; expressing yourself angrily can sometimes undermine your credibility and position you as a crank. Make sure you sign the letter and provide the paper with your name and address, otherwise they will generally not even consider publishing the letter.

MEDIA BRIEFING

What is it? A media briefing is just that: a meeting in which you brief reporters about your issue area. Media briefings are different from editorial board meetings in a few ways:

- they are designed to provide relevant information to reporters, not editors
- they are usually held in your office, not at the media's
- they will often bring together reporters from a variety of media, including TV and radio

What does it do? Like the editorial board meeting, a media briefing provides you with the opportunity to inform media about your issue. It also gives you a chance build your credibility with reporters, give them a face, and build relationships with the folks you will be counting on to get your name in the news. Like in fundraising, it's easier to say 'no' to someone you've never met. You don't want to become friends with reporters (necessarily), but you should develop a friendly, professional relationship with as many reporters as possible.

When do I use it? It is useful to hold media briefings at the head of a campaign, at regular intervals during a long campaign, and when you perceive that the media may not fully understand the complexities of your issue.

How do I use it? Call on the reporter you know best first. Get that person to agree to attend a briefing, then call others. Try to get a group of six to ten together. Provide food and drink, but don't go overboard! Have a Media Kit for each reporter. Bring in experts if you believe they could add to your presentation. Keep your presentation concise and leave ample opportunity for the reporters to do their job: ask *you* questions.

A tip: if you don't have a great deal of experience with the media, it would be advisable to do some media training before putting yourself into a situation like a media briefing. You can expect to get difficult questions. And, you should be prepared with your key messages so that everything you say follows a thread.

MEDIA CALL

What is it? A phone call to a reporter, editor or producer to pitch a story idea or to follow-up a news release.

What does it do? Press calls let the media know that you have a story they may want to cover. They also help you develop important relationships with reporters, help you establish a presence in their minds and in their files.

When do I use it? There are a number of different strategies you could use with respect to making press calls. Some organizations call reporters, columnists, editors every month or so, to update them on relevant changes in the issues the organization addresses. Some organizations only call the press when they are actively promoting a story. Some organizations never call the press — they should!

Even if you don't have a story to pitch, reporters who are interested in your issue will appreciate being kept up-to-date on changes to the issue. This contact will help you build your credibility as an information source, not just an organization looking for free media coverage.

At the very least, every time you send a press release to your local press, you should follow up with a quick call to the editor to see if he or she is interested in the story, if you can add any more details, or arrange an interview for a reporter. It is amazing how often this call will turn an 'story idea' into a story.

How do I use it? The very first rule is to ask, "have I got you on deadline?" Never launch into your pitch before determining whether your contact has time to talk (or listen) to you. If the contact doesn't have time, arrange a time to call back — and stick to it. Remember that every contact you have with the media is building your reputation as either a reliable, professional and credible source, or not!

When you make the phone call to follow up the press release and the editor says they aren't interested in doing a story, find out why not. Be polite, not indignant. Say that you'd like to know why so that you can pitch them better stories in the future and avoid pitching them ones they don't care about. Sometimes it's just timing, a busy news day, or a perception that your news isn't new. This feedback in and of itself is not only invaluable as a learning experience and as an insight into the way the particular editor thinks, it will also help enhance your relationship with the media outlet.

Be careful, however, with follow-up phone-calls to big media outlets, which get literally dozens of releases a day. "It's My Name from This Agency calling. Did you get the news release I sent you?" is a bad way to ask the question. Try "It's My Name from This Agency. We sent you a news release about whatever the topic is and the reason why the editor should find it newsworthy. Are you interested in doing a story?"

If you have a news idea that doesn't warrant a full-fledged press conference, a reporter might be persuaded to cover it if you call him/her and say that you

haven't told anyone else about it—basically, you're offering a scoop or exclusive, but don't call it that, they're overused terms.

MEDIA KIT

What is it? A package of information designed specifically for media. It could include:

- press release
- fact sheet on the issue
- history of the issue
- quotes or comments by experts and contact details
- selected press clippings
- charts, visuals or photographs
- background biography on your organization's spokesperson
- one-page description about your organization

What does it do? It provides detailed issue information to the editors, producers and reporters of the media. It gives you an opportunity to educate the media about your issue in a non-confrontational manner.

When do I use it? Hand out press kits to all the media who attend your press conference; provide kits to the individuals who attend your editorial board meetings; send kits to reporters who express interest when you make your press release follow-up press calls.

How do I use it? Be selective about the messages you want the media to take from your kit. Keep to two or three. Include only the information that is relevant to those messages: avoid the temptation to include every piece of printed material that exists about your organization or issue area.

MEDIA LIST

What is it? Probably, the most valuable tool in your media communications toolbox, your media list contains the contact names and numbers of all the media you would wish to tell about your news.

What does it do? It allows you to react quickly to news opportunities.

How do I use it? If you have the ability, develop your list in a database that allows you to keep notes on contact you, or others in your organization, have with the media. Keep track of stories that reporters cover which are related to your issue area. If you do not use your list regularly, have a volunteer update it every six months or so, so that when you need to react to news, you will have a reasonably accurate list.

NEWS CONFERENCE

What is it? A news conference is an event that, with any luck, brings all the media that you would like to know about your news, together in one room.

What does it do? The benefit of a news conference is that media and your spokesperson are together at one time—if there is controversy of any kind in your news, a dialogue between the two is simple. A news conference is good when you have several people who need to speak, but it is also a gamble; you can't ensure the press will attend. Call reporters and invite them.

When do I use it? News conferences take a great deal of time and energy to pull off. In some cases, they are also very expensive; however, they don't have to be. You don't have to rent a conference room at a hotel; you can conduct it at your office. Better still, conduct it "on location" where your agency does its work or at a site that relates to the issue you're dealing with. TV will be more likely to give more time to what you say if you say it in front of a visually interesting and relevant backdrop.

A news conference should only be called if you have an announcement which you are certain has important hard *news* value.

How do I use it? Send media an Advisory up to a week before your press conference. Follow-up with a press release that details highlights of the news you will release, a strong quote from your spokesperson and conference details. Two days before the conference, call the media you've sent printed material to. Be prepared to resend the press release—many will not have seen it.

If your news is big enough, consider a strategic leak to one newspaper the day before so that the story will appear as an "exclusive" on the morning of your news conference, or tell a radio station a few hours before the news conference. If done properly, this will ensure more widespread coverage.

Don't give away every element of the story (e.g. if you're releasing a report, don't give them the full report but just key findings, just enough for them to write a 300-word story or do a 30-second news item and make sure there's something left for them to report the next day). Make sure the reporter knows that you are giving them an exclusive. The major risk of using this approach is alienating the other media outlets, so don't always favour the same one.

Try to find an "ordinary" person who is affected by or whose situation illustrates the news you're releasing and who is willing to talk to the media.

Other Tips:

- The best time to hold a media conference is mid-morning or early afternoon—and no later than 2 pm if you can help it. If you hope it will create follow-up stories, never release late in the day or late in the week.
- Give advance notice and then again the morning of the conference.

- Give away enough information in the advance notice to show you have a credible story, but not so much that there's no need to attend.
- Have more than one speaker, each one fulfilling a different role (spokesperson, person suffering effects of story, etc). However, don't have too many speakers, and ensure each one is a genuine expert on the subject being addressed.
- Keep each presentation short (1-2 minutes).
- Keep the conference to 45 minutes or less, including reporters' questions.
- Allow plenty of time for questions.
- Be prepared to arrange individual interviews following the conference.
- Provide a decent sound system or a place to set microphones, and have all speakers' trade places to be in front of the microphones.
- Avoid placing your presentation area against a window (for photo and video)
- Provide handouts (press kits) with key details, contact names, bios and photos of spokespeople
- Have the media sign in. Follow-up with reporters who did not attend.
- Monitor coverage and evaluate success of the press conference in relation to the time, energy and money it took to hold.

NEWS RELEASE

What is it? Also referred to as a *Press Release* or a *Media Release*, the press release is a written document that outlines, generally in one page, the news you would like the media to cover.

What does it do? It lets the media know that you have information that they may/should be interested in.

When do I use it? Send a press release out when you have something newsworthy to tell people; when something status quo has changed that people will be interested to know.

How do I use it? Write in active voice, emphasizing anything new, active, focused on people, having broad impact. Make sure your story is in the first sentence. Write a headline that can help grab attention. Keep the release to one page and make sure your *accurate* contact details are on the page.

To distribute, faxing is easiest. You can choose to either "broadcast fax" your release to every reporter or media outlet in town, and hope that one will pick up your piece. Or, you can target the release to specific reporters, from one (an exclusive) to any who you've noticed have an interest in your issue area. How you approach distributing your news release will depend on the nature of your news, your media strategy, and the relationships you have developed with the media, and target audiences.

OP/ED PIECE

What is it? Some say that op/ed is short for ‘opposite the editorial’ pages, others are adamant that op/ed is short-hand for opinion editorial. Both are accurate. An op/ed refers to commentary material that appears on the pages in the newspaper that also contain the article by the editor (usually near the back of the first section). This material is distinguished from news articles in that it is not required to be “objective” or neutral, but is allowed — indeed expected — to embody the author’s personal (albeit informed) opinions.

What does it do? It allows you to present your perspective on an issue unmediated by a reporter who is interpreting your views in the context of a news story, which usually includes other sources and uses your comments only selectively, often editing or juxtaposing them in ways that don’t serve your interests. There is also a certain degree of prestige and legitimacy conferred by having your views published on the Op/ed pages, which are usually read by those people in a community who wield influence.

When to use it? When you have an informed perspective on an issue that is currently in the news, or about to be in the news. When you want to present an in-depth or complex analysis of a situation without being mediated by the reporter. When you want to build profile of your issue and raise awareness of aspects of the issue that are not being discussed fully elsewhere. When you think it’s important to go on record providing an alternative perspective to the ones currently dominating the press coverage.

How to use it? If you have a relationship with the newspaper and/or the person who edits the Op/ed pages already, you might want to call first and indicate that you have an informed perspective that you’d like to submit in the form of an opinion piece. This gives you the opportunity to find out if they’re likely to run it, and/or to convince them to retain space for it, and find out what length they’d prefer and when they need it by. If you don’t have an established reputation and/or relationship and don’t want to call first, you can write the piece and submit it with a brief cover note, and keep your fingers crossed that they’ll use it.

PHOTO RELEASE

What is it? A hopefully arresting photograph that tells a story and features a person and/or event that wouldn’t otherwise be available to the newspaper but that might be of relevance and interest to its readers.

What does it do? Capitalizes on the inherent interest value of a visual image to generate attention to your event or issue. Can compensate for the fact that the newspaper may not have deemed your event worthy enough of attention to have

sent a photographer in the first place. If supplied photo is engaging enough, can sometimes transform a C12 story into a section cover.

When do I use it? When your news event or issue lends itself to a visually arresting image (something that embodies drama, surprise or human interest, for instance), or incorporates the image of a famous person. When newspapers fail to send photographers (or reporters, for that matter) to your event and you can come up with an image that's interesting enough to incite them to use it despite not having been there themselves.

How do I use it? Attach a professional quality photograph to a piece of paper on which you have written a lively caption or cutline, explaining the significance or relevance of the photograph, and clearly identifying who's in it and when and where it was taken.

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT — PSA

What is it? PSAs are free advertising. The only hitch is that since they are free, you have little or no control over how often they are printed or broadcast, or at what times.

What does it do? PSAs help groups publicize their events and services.

When do I use it? Whenever you have an event you want the public to know about; when you have extra time and money to dedicate to crafting public outreach materials. (!) In many cases, a clever TV PSA, which simply introduces a group without referencing a specific date, can run dozens of times over months or even years. OXFAM-Canada produced a series of three 15 & 30 second PSAs featuring two famous Canadian comedienne (Mary Walsh and Cathy Jones) which have been run on CBC TV for a number of years.

How do I use it? Find out various media outlet policies, lengths, and timing by calling their advertising department. For broadcast, a general rule is to write 15 and 30-second pieces. Contact your local community television station to see if they could assist in producing a TV PSA. Many radio stations will produce PSAs free of charge since they are obliged by their CRTC license to broadcast a minimum number of PSAs each month.

RESEARCH

What is it? Original research conducted by or on behalf of your organization can be a very effective means of generating attention to your issues. Research on a matter of public interest that is methodologically sound (and seen to be presenting valid,

unbiased information) is usually considered newsworthy, especially if it uncovers data that challenges previously held perceptions. If you don't have the resources to conduct your own research, sometimes it's possible to make use of recent research undertaken by another organization that pertains your issues and has not already been covered.

What does it do? The release of a current study constitutes news in and of itself; it avoids you having to piggyback on an existing news story or event. It can also help to position your organization as a credible source of information on a particular issue. (Because of the expense and expertise usually involved, research is generally not undertaken by fly-by-night operations, and conducting a study demonstrates that you have access to funds and alliances with experts.)

When to use it? When important, unanswered questions exist about some aspect of your issue, and you can afford to conduct research that will answer those questions. When you have reason to believe that although your opponents and/or the news media do not believe your cause or issue is important, the general public is very supportive of the position you and your organization are taking.

How to use it? Ideally, it's useful to think carefully about the research's potential to generate publicity in advance of conducting it. Some strategic planning can increase the likelihood that the research will address issues or uncover information that will be seen to be newsworthy. If your group is characterized pejoratively as a "special interest group," (implying that the study results are suspect) look for a way to ensure that the validity of the research can be defended (by having a credible, independent body conduct it for you, for instance). If the results of the research are groundbreaking enough, you may be able to justify releasing them at a press conference, especially if you're able to involve independent experts.

STAGED EVENTS —RALLY, PUBLIC DEMONSTRATION, FUNDRAISER

What is it? A staged event can take many forms: one type (the rally, public demonstration) endeavours to bring a large portion of the public out to state their position on a certain issue. Another type of staged event can draw on fewer people, and is meant to draw attention to an issue that is otherwise being ignored.

What does it do? If it works, the staged event draws attention to your issue. You could be looking for media attention, to translate to a story, which you hope will draw more supporters. You could be hoping to capture the attention of your elected official, to show her that her constituency supports a particular position that you (and her constituency) would like her to act upon.

When do I use it? Staged events, like news conferences, can be very risky. If you organize a rally with the goal of showing the mayor that the community is opposed to putting a highway through the middle of town, and only thirty people

show up, the mayor will legitimately be able to say that the public is, in fact, not opposed to his plan. Road blockades, a BC favourite for staged events, can also backfire if they aren't properly managed.

Rallies, or any staged event, in and of itself, is usually not 'news' and should always be pegged or hooked to something that is, such as a new report about the issue in question.

How do I use it? Plan well in advance. Try to work in coalition with other groups that support your position. Rallies and demonstrations, sit-ins and vigils, roadblocks and celebrity appearances must be well managed. One aggressive volunteer or protester could alienate the media, send the wrong message to opinion leaders and policy-makers about the goals of your group, and negatively impact your reputation.

Hold your event on a day when you can expect the largest number of people and the most media coverage. Sunday is usually the best bet.

VIDEO NEWS RELEASE — VNR

What is it? A VNR is a tape of broadcast-quality images that you send to television stations to use in their news broadcast. It can be as simple as four minutes of unedited raw footage, or it can be up to three minutes of edited material. Most TV stations prefer to receive ¾ inch tape of raw footage which they can edit themselves.

What does it do? It provides the media with the images you would like them to use to represent your story. It provides media in locations such as Vancouver with images of "remote" areas that they otherwise would not have the budget or time to shoot themselves. A VNR can move an otherwise non-visual story, like the release of a report, into a TV news piece. If, for instance you release a report on the state of grizzly habitat in Northern BC, images of bears in the habitat would improve your chance of making BCTV News.

When do I use it? When media can't (or won't) send cameras to cover your story.

How do I use it? Go to your local Shaw Cable or Rogers Cable station and ask if one of their crews or independent producers would be able to shoot the footage you need. In general, TV news will not broadcast video shot on home cameras. The quality simply isn't good enough. This is not a cheap way to get TV news coverage, but if you have a great visual it may be worth the investment.