

BIODIVERSITY

Communications Toolkit

Media relations: a beginner's guide

What is the Media?

The media includes all newspapers, magazines, television channels, radio stations, community newsletters, and online newspapers and e-zines, which is a publication distributed by e-mail or posted on a website.

Understanding the Media

Understanding the media means you can more effectively plan and implement successful communications.

The media aims to stimulate, interest and entertain its readers, listeners and viewers. But the media is big business and has to make money. The number of people who buy and read newspapers, and watch or listen to TV and radio has an impact on how much the media makes from selling advertising space. So it's crucial the media provides content people will want to consume.

Although journalists are responsible for producing stories, it's the editor who has final say on what ends up in the paper.

Journalists work to tight deadlines, especially news journalists, who will appreciate some consideration of their time pressures.

What is Media Relations?

Media relations is a specialist area of PR that focuses on promoting key messages about your organisation or cause through editorial coverage in the media. Editorial refers to the parts created by journalists, whereas advertisements and advertorials are paid-for sections.

Media relations can help:

- Raise media awareness of biodiversity which in turn raises awareness among your target audience
- Increase understanding of what you offer
- Create a positive profile of the organisation through good news stories and ongoing achievements

Media relations is an effective part of any communications plan because:

- Editorial tends to be 'believed' more than advertising
- Editorial provides scope to expand on topics and provide more in-depth information
- You can be more targeted with your communications

Editorial coverage is not guaranteed though. Even sending a news release to a journalist doesn't mean coverage. This largely depends on how interesting it is, what else is happening in the area, how much editorial space is available and the stories you are competing with. Don't be too disappointed if for any reason your story doesn't make it to print/production – there's always next time.

However, issuing news releases encourages local journalists to take an interest and it is worth regularly keeping them up to date.

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What makes news?

Before approaching the media, it is important to consider whether the information you have is newsworthy. This avoids wasting time: yours and the media's.

News is ... (or should be) any or all of these:

- Something that is happening now
- Different, unusual, unique
- Controversial, confidential
- Relevant to many people
- Extreme – very sad, very happy, very serious, very inspirational etc
- Conflict – 'A row was brewing last night...'

How to handle your own media relations

Below is some guidance on how to approach the media with news stories.

Writing a news release

Start dating. It's good practice to place the date at the top of a press release. You should also number your pages.

Gotcha! Develop a headline that sums up the message in one snappy sentence or phrase. Within reason, be bold, original and creative with your title. Your headline – and indeed your news release - is likely to be changed before it is printed, but a good headline will help grab the attention of a journalist.

Who? What? Where? Why? When? How? After the headline, the most important feature of your press release is the introductory paragraph. It must attract the readers' attention and summarise the story.

What are you trying to say? The rest of the news release should expand on your introduction. Remember your key messages. They're included in this toolkit. You should include details of any partners or sponsors and their involvement. Prioritise facts too, leading with the most important information.

Short is sweet. Make your news release short and certainly no more than two pages. Keep it simple and avoid long sentences and jargon. See the Useful Definitions section for some guidance on this.

Say it with words. Include a comment from a relevant person or persons, e.g. your chief executive or that of a partner/sponsor and ensure they approve this before you issue your news release.

Don't be a stranger. Provide your contact details so journalists can get more information – and make sure you are available for calls.

Snap. Include photo call information if there is opportunity for a picture. For example, if you are unveiling a new facility, you may wish to invite the media to take photos of your chief executive, a local MSP or local school children opening it.

News extra. 'Notes to Editors' should include any information on the organisation that is not entirely relevant within the main section. For example, background information on your organisation or further details of a research project mentioned in the news release.

A sample news release is included in the Toolkit for your guidance.

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Plan your approach

Timing is everything. Think about what else is happening at the same time and likely to be on the news agenda, particularly in a local context – is there a big local event you know about that could bury your story? Hold photo calls early in the day and week to target the media in advance of their deadlines.

Target your story. Develop a media list. What publications and radio/TV stations will be interested in your story, and which journalists do you want to approach? If you don't know who to contact, phone the switchboard and ask for the newsdesk.

Smart insertions. Is there a regular special section or supplement that is relevant for your story? E.g. the recruitment section or pages or supplements aimed at young people.

Plan your call. Find out your local press deadlines by phoning and asking – and avoid contacting journalists during these times

A good send off. Most journalists prefer emails. Send the news release within the body of an email, rather than as an attachment.

And just to re-iterate – you should always ask yourself 'is it newsworthy?'

Case studies

Case studies are an excellent way of bringing a story to life. Local media are usually keen to speak to local people to support a story.

Offer case studies to the media by drafting, with their permission, a profile of a member of your organisation. The draft can then be offered during your follow-up call (see below). If the journalist is interested, they will request an interview with the individual, and may arrange for a photograph to be taken.

'Selling' your story

After issuing a news release, you should make a follow-up call. Journalists receive many news releases every day so it's worth calling to ensure they've picked up on yours. A follow-up phone call will allow you to sell the idea verbally, and supply the journalist with more information and/or photographs. Make sure you have something extra to offer during a follow-up call, e.g. more information or an interview opportunity, otherwise the journalist may be frustrated by your call.

As we've already covered, journalists are working under pressure to meet tight deadlines, so don't be offended if they appear to be short with you.

Ensure you are calling at a convenient time, not just before they have to submit their stories for print / production, and make your point quickly and calmly. You should have a copy of the news release in front of you and highlight the key points you want to make. If the journalist requests additional information, send it to them as soon as possible.

Monitoring coverage

During your follow-up call to journalists, it's useful to ask when they are planning to run the story. You can then ensure you obtain a copy of the article or watch or listen to the broadcast.

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Boost morale and encourage new ideas by telling your colleagues and volunteers within your company or organisation about successful media coverage. It's also an effective way of motivating other organisations to generate their own local media coverage.

Please note, if you want to copy and distribute newspaper content to colleagues or employees, you will have to obtain a license from the Newspaper Licensing Agency (NLA). If you copy and distribute newspaper articles without a license you could be breaching publisher's copyright. Further information can be found at www.nla.co.uk.

Building successful press relationships

Remember that press communications is a competition. Newsrooms are flooded with press releases, so yours is one of many. Even a small local newspaper receives over 20 press releases daily.

Building relationships with journalists and being selective about where you want coverage to reach those you are trying to communicate with will go a long way towards getting your message heard. In Scotland, there are three tiers of press:

- Local press, including free newspapers, weekly titles and some dailies like the Greenock Telegraph and Paisley Daily Express
- Regional press, such as the Press & Journal and Dundee Courier
- Nationals: The Scotsman, Herald, Daily Record and Scottish Daily Mail

Be Prepared – read up

Know and understand the media you are targeting. Get a feel for their agenda and audience by reading the press regularly. Note the names of journalists who write stories about biodiversity and the environment.

Establish contact

Identifying journalists who may be interested in your story is crucial. So every time you have a new story, think about the media you want to target. Then call each newspaper/radio station and ask the name of the best person to speak to. You should phone as far in advance as possible, and be prepared to call back.

Try to meet journalists face-to-face, and have a story prepared so you have something concrete to talk about.

Maintain contact

You should speak to journalists about your current activity, future plans and to let them know there may be more stories in the pipeline. Tell them about your events and invite them along, giving them plenty of advance notice.

Newspapers need you to fill their pages as much as you need them to promote your message, so press relations should be viewed as a partnership.

Always check that a journalist has received a copy of your press release and ask if they need more information.

If a journalist calls with a question, conduct the necessary research and get back to them – ask them when they need to receive the information. If you miss their call, try and return it immediately or they'll be less likely to take an interest in your stories in the future.

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If more than one person deals with the press, establish who does what. It is important that everyone is briefed on how to deal with press enquiries, even if it's as simple as directing all enquiries to you. Preparation is everything, so brief the relevant representatives on certain issues. Never presume a conversation with a journalist is 'off the record' and don't say anything you would not be happy seeing in print.

Many journalists work on stories at weekends and out of hours, so arrangements should be made for a member of your organisation to be on-call. That person should have contact names and numbers for colleagues, in case the journalist wants more information. Keep a record of all media messages, friendly correspondents, any previous media contact (content and timing) and save any press coverage for reference, remembering to ensure you are within NLA licensing laws (www.nla.co.uk).

Think widely – not just the news pages. Even though they're the most obvious place to communicate your messages, other sections can prove useful:

Business pages

Is there an angle that gives the newspaper a new type of story?

Lifestyle pages

Does the organisation have access to case studies that demonstrate help and advice they can provide to real people?

Sports pages

Is there an angle that might interest a sports journalist? They are often on the look-out for something unusual.

Letters to Editors

Respond to a recent article by writing a letter or sending an email to the newspaper's editor.

Local radio phone-ins

These cover a multitude of topics. Approach radio producers with ideas for phone-ins. Arrange to contribute when the shows are aired.

Construct a press pack

Save journalists time by giving them all the information they need to write a story. Press packs are especially useful when holding press conferences, where you invite the media to attend an important announcement and they have the chance to ask questions.

Press packs should contain:

- A press release
- Relevant statistics
- Quotes/comments from participants in the announcement
- Background documents, e.g. speaker biographies
- Case studies
- Photographs or imagery
- Contact details so any queries can be swiftly dealt with

Adhere to deadlines

Establish a journalist's deadline and work towards it. If you miss it, you risk not having your story used, or not having your side of the story included. Local newspapers often have different deadlines to nationals and to each other, so check for each one.

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It may not be convenient to talk to a journalist as a deadline approaches. As a general rule:

- Don't routinely contact national dailies after midday
- Don't call weekly newspapers on days they go to print
- Don't call radio stations less than 15 minutes before a news bulletin
- Whatever time you're calling, it is always a good idea to ask journalists if it is a good time to talk

The reception desks of most media outlets will usually offer advice about when best to contact journalists

Get your timing right

- Target your stories for slow news days and months. These are specifically: Monday, the holiday season (July/August) and the Christmas and New Year periods.
- Use an embargo – only when required as it can irritate journalists. This means supplying a story well in advance of it actually happening but placing a lock on the content, so that it cannot be released into the public domain until the date specified. This gives the journalist time to put a story together and do their research. An embargo is illustrated in the Samples and Templates section of your Toolkit. Please note that journalists will not always adhere to an embargo.
- Don't phone the editor or journalist when they are finalising the latest issue. The response will not be positive.
- Tailor how you submit information to different journalists' requirements. Although most prefer email, don't assume. Establish their preferred method and stick to it.

Managing press interviews

Taking part in an interview can help inform the public about your role. It can help promote understanding and create trust among your community and others in the field. Press interviews can also raise awareness of the positive steps you and your organisation are taking.

Interview preparation

Preparation is everything. You don't want to be stumbling over questions in the interview itself. Be prepared with facts and figures and rehearse your messages/answers. Set your own agenda for the interview and stick to it.

- Decide on your 'headline' – the thing that you absolutely must get across in the interview
- Identify a maximum of three core messages
- Think of examples and anecdotes that are short and relevant, and ensure you know all the details
- Remember to keep it simple – and don't be sidetracked
- Prior to the interview, ask for a list of the questions the reporter will ask (but bear in mind, they may not supply it), or a note of the broad areas for discussion. In the case of TV or radio interviews find out if it is a live or recorded interview
- It's a good idea to think about the difficult or challenging questions that could be asked and prepare a response for how they could be tackled.

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The interview

This is not an informal conversation, but at the same time, it's unlikely to be a severe grilling so try to relax. If you have nothing to say on the subject or it's not your area of expertise, it's probably best not to take part in an interview.

The key points to remember are to:

- Get your message across
- Say your thing and add no more
- Don't get trapped in the journalist's agenda. Give the responses you've set out to give; this will not (necessarily) be what the journalist wants to know
- Do not read off cue cards – it makes you look unprofessional and unprepared
- Never say 'No comment'. It sounds evasive. Always try and turn a situation around into a positive
- Maintain control – if the journalist asks a question that strays from what you are trying to communicate, follow this formula:
 - Acknowledge the question
 - Bridge – move the conversation from what they've asked back to what you want to communicate
 - Communicate your message
 - Don't use jargon or acronyms – you will not be understood and could confuse people.

Unplanned 'interviews'

There may be occasions when you are asked for comment without having the opportunity to prepare. If a journalist calls and asks for your thoughts on a topic, we suggest the following course of action:

- Acknowledge you are happy to comment and establish the exact nature of their enquiry, i.e. what exactly they want you to comment on
- Ask to call them back shortly – remember to ask their deadline
- Use this time to gather your thoughts and check facts on the subject in question
- Note down your key points and have them to hand when you return the call
- When being interviewed or giving your comments, remember the advice given in the Interview section of your Toolkit