

## Tips for

# WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

### Relationships matter.

Simply put, if a reporter trusts you, knows you, knows your face, or has previously spoken with you, it can make a real difference whether that reporter will cover you again. Journalists are like the rest of us, they like to talk with people they feel comfortable with, have a relationship with, and trust. In short, get to know the journalist before you do the pitch. Pick up the phone and set up a time to meet with relevant journalists for coffee or lunch. You can talk about your issues and the journalists can talk about what will help bring your issues alive.

### Know your audience.

Before you do your pitch, you should have already taken the time to learn about who you are pitching to, who they are trying to

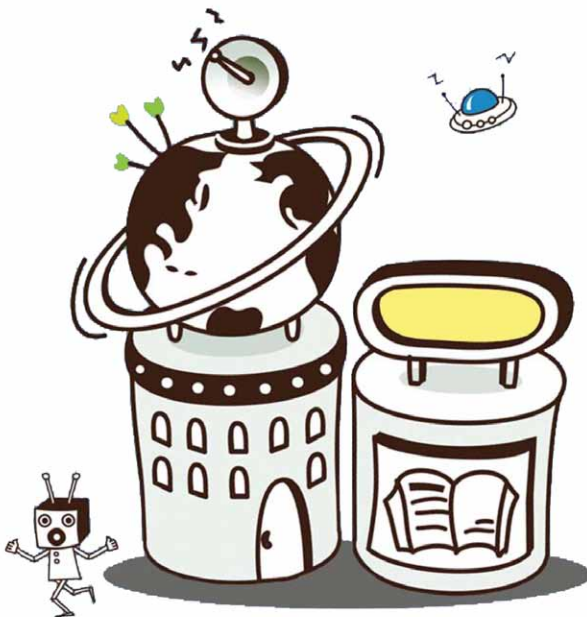
appeal to, and what are some of the restrictions under which they work. For instance, What are their deadlines? When is their morning editorial meeting where media generally set their coverage for the day?

Your local television station is different from your community newspaper and your community newspaper is different from USA Today. Each has different needs and audiences and each probably wants something different from you. Television, for instance, often responds to visuals while the reporter for your state's leading newspaper might appreciate spending an hour doing a one-on-one interview with the head of your organization discussing your issue.

### What's your "Hey Martha"?

What is it about your story that will make it stand out from the pack?

- Do you have some counter-intuitive information?
- Do you have a local angle on a national story?
- Do you have a surprising or shocking statistic or poll finding?
- Do you have a trend to report or a change from the previous year?
- Can you sell your story in a creative way (like gender gap, glass ceiling, brain drain)?
- Do you have an unlikely partnership or a prominent figure involved?
- Do your visuals make the event? Sometimes it's not what you say it's what you show.
- Think carefully about the story you want covered, do you have any gee wizes in there?



## Capitalize on existing opportunities.

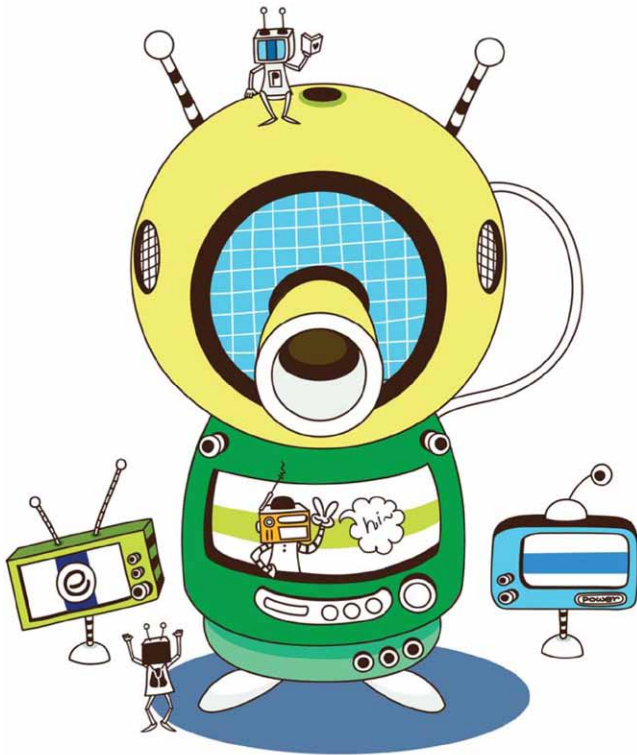
Keep a close eye on stories that are already receiving news coverage and consider how you might become part of that story. For example, do you have a local angle on a national story? Does a popular TV show plan a storyline on your issue?

## Who is going to do the talking?

Before you find yourself in front of the camera or on the other end of the phone with a newspaper reporter, carefully consider who will talk to the press. Do they have media training? Are they well briefed? Will it be your President or your spokesperson? How will you prepare a Board member who may not be as familiar with the day-to-day operations or your organization? Remember, even the most grizzled media veteran needs to be well briefed.

## Simplify your message.

A common complaint we've all heard time and time again is that the media always gets it wrong. That is why we have to make sure that our messages are simple and simply understood. While our



issues may be complicated, it is incumbent upon us to pare them down to their core. Quite simply — simple messages are less likely to get lost in the translation.

Remember too that people are busy and those in the media are no different. Television news ratings are calculated not by the show, not by the hour, not even by the half-hour, but by minute-by-minute fluctuations. These folks have very short attention spans. That is why it is incumbent upon us to make our case quickly, succinctly, and get out.

- When writing a press release, keep it short — one page is best, more than that is not likely to be read. Consider too how a journalist wants to receive your pitch—email? a phone call? Both?
- Develop messages that can be contained in one phrase.

## Be prepared for what is likely to be the first question you face: Why should I care?

Unless you are ready to answer this — convincingly — you shouldn't bother to try to sell your wares at all. For example, if you are concerned about teen pregnancy prevention, remember that there are countless others pushing bicycle helmet safety, correct pre-natal nutrition, or the dangers of smoking. Most journalists do not know your issue so, before you do anything else, you must convince the person you're speaking with that you are credible, that your problem is real, and that it deserves special attention.

## Personalize, personalize, personalize.

A booker for a national morning talk show has been quoted as saying: "Do not send me your reports. Tell me your stories." This is not to say that research numbers don't matter — they do matter — a great deal.

But, think for a moment how the media does their job — they tell stories. Generally, they prefer to tell the story of Suzie Smith, rather than the story of 700,000 teen pregnancies or millions of cases of STDs. So, when pitching the media remember, for the most part, journalists respond to images rather than data, story lines over studies, anecdote rather than statistic. This is the coin of their realm. More often than not, these compelling personal stories are what rattle the chains of the media.

## Choose your timing wisely.

While it is impossible to guarantee that a competing event will not steal your thunder, there are things you can do to maximize your coverage.

- It's best to stage your event Monday through Thursday between 10am and 2pm — this is the time when, generally, the most journalistic resources are available to cover events.
- One exception — if you have a very visual event — you might consider staging it live during a late afternoon or evening television newscast.
- Avoid busy news days. The slower the day, the better your chances of being covered.
- Avoid TV “sweeps.” These are the months (May and November) that television sets their ad rates and are least likely to cover events they don't consider “blockbusters.”

## Remember the cheap and easy stuff.

Consider what might be described as alternative ways to appear in the media that cost nothing and take just a bit of effort. Consider writing a letter to the editor or an op-ed piece. Perhaps you have a Board member or a state legislator that might sign an op-ed piece before it is submitted to the newspaper.

## Partnership is a two-way street.

If you want the media to pay attention to you and your issue be certain that you are there when they need you not just when you need them. Return phone calls promptly, be ready to assist them at times that may not be convenient for you, offer suggestions and alternatives that are not self-aggrandizing. It is far more desirable to be seen as a source rather than an advocate.

## Keep your issue alive.

One meeting, one phone call, one introduction does not a convert make. You have to think of creative ways of reminding journalists that your issue remains important throughout the year. Quiet persistence you might call it, the ability to remind without being annoying.

One of the best ways to do this, of course, is to play your message or issue off news of the day. For example, when Magic Johnson announced he was HIV positive, AIDS activists and public health educators had a golden opportunity to spread their message. If a new study is released or an article is written pertaining to your issue, make sure that journalist you're trying to impress know about it.

