



MEDIA GUIDE

About This Guide

Whether you're looking to get your organization's opinion considered in a public conversation, secure press coverage for a new program or initiative that benefits the community, or respond to an incident, it is crucial to exercise proper media protocol and courtesies that make it easier for press of all types to cover your story. This guide is designed to help you understand the best ways to work with the media by providing a set of tips and templates that will help you build rapport and amplify your chances of getting good coverage.

The Changing Media Landscape

The media landscape looks vastly different today than it did just a few years ago. Print media such as newspapers and magazines are on the decline, with coverage being replaced by online content from traditional outlets and digital-only sources. Public broadcasting (TV and radio) are shrinking. Large corporations are buying up smaller independent outlets and reducing the number of local reporters. In fact, more than a third of local newspapers have closed during the past 20 years and continue to do so at an accelerating rate. That means the media landscape is now a combination of fewer consolidated for-profit traditional outlets with less tailored coverage, or hyper-local/tailored news that covers smaller areas. At the same time, there are vastly more digital sources that cover a broad spectrum of focus areas and interests. Varying degrees of news accuracy and journalistic integrity exist across the entire spectrum.

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News or Noise? How to Tell the Difference

With the media landscape shrinking and shifting, it's more important than ever to be picky about the authenticity and accuracy of news—especially local news. “Pink slime” outlets and hedge fund-owned companies are flooding communities with stories that *look* local but are really driven by outside agendas, misinformation, or personal profit—often by people who know nothing about the local community.

How can you stay sharp and ensure the media outlets you are attempting to build relationships with are actually working in the best interest of the community and with journalistic integrity?

Ask questions. Who wrote this? Where are they based? What's their track record for accuracy and comprehensiveness?

Check for transparency. Trustworthy outlets are clear about ownership and funding. No bylines or vague info? Red flag.

Look for real reporting. If it's just copy-pasted press releases or AI content, it's not journalism.

Look for local reporters. They know your community and hold local power to account.

Watch for pop-up sites. If something launches around an election and sounds slanted, be skeptical.

In a world full of noise and spin, **media literacy isn't optional—it's essential.** Finding a media outlet you trust takes work but is always worthwhile to help you build meaningful and effective relationships.

Building Relationships with the Media

The best way to secure the media coverage you want is to cultivate trusting relationships with the reporters and editors who staff the media outlets that serve your community. These could be local newspaper, TV or radio staff, bloggers, Facebook group moderators, podcasters, or others. Cultivating a relationship doesn't start with a story pitch. Instead, identify the people who cover the issues most important to you and invite them to lunch or coffee just to get to know one another and introduce them to your organization. Encourage them to call on you as a resource—and when they do, respond promptly. *If you aren't responsive, they will stop calling.* If you don't know the answer, say so, then connect them with someone who does.

As you build your network of media contacts, make note of their focus areas, typical deadlines, and preferred ways to receive communication and information from you. You also can give reporters a heads-up about important news or concerns (such as issues within a proposed public budget and how those might affect your organization). Depending on how important a particular relationship might be to you, consider offering exclusive interviews, early access to materials, or participation in your events. Helping make their jobs easier will go a long way toward building trust with reporters and editors.

That said, understand that trust is not the same as favoritism. Most journalists strive to be impartial, which means if there is news to report about your organization that is not favorable, you might be able to expect a heads-up as a courtesy, but not special treatment with regard to the story.

Making Deeper Connections

With the explosion of online sources of news and information (and the huge variety in the slants, truthfulness, journalistic ethics, and professionalism among them) almost anyone can position themselves as a purveyor of news and information. When seeking media relationships, consider the following possibilities and review the media's work carefully to decide whether a relationship would be beneficial or something to carefully avoid.

- ▶ **Reporters and/or editors** at traditional outlets, such as print newspapers or magazines, as well as newsrooms or show hosts at television and radio stations, are still go-to contacts. Reach them through press releases, media advisories, and other traditional tools (see page ____).
- ▶ **Bloggers/Social media influencers** follow and feed conversations about topics relevant to the issues that your organization works to address. Include them when you send press releases or media advisories. Follow, like, and share the posts of those who align with your mission. Respond to an author/host's online or social media posts or send a direct email offering your news or general expertise.
- ▶ **Podcasts, Substack E-newsletter publishers, or subscription services** include all types of media. Find those that align with your issues, then send the publisher or host an email offering to provide articles and/or expertise for publications/shows relevant to your target audience(s).
- ▶ **Community documenters/notetakers.** These are local residents who attend government meetings to document proceedings to then share with various local outlets. Talk with them and offer to provide additional information or expertise to support their reporting on government activities.
- ▶ **Social media groups.** Look for groups with moderators and a stated issue of shared interest that aligns with yours (e.g., a parent advocacy group for the local school system). If a group has published rules of conduct, even better. Follow conversations online and contribute when appropriate. Stay focused on facts and avoid discussions that spiral into negativity.

12 Best Practices for Working with All Media

No matter what type of media outlet you are working with, there are several best practices that help you ensure your messages are heard and build stronger relationships with reporters and editors.

1. Plan, plan, plan.

Working with the media should not be a one-off event. Instead develop a communication plan that has defined strategies for meeting your goals and clear messages that effectively get you there. Working with the media can be part of your communication approach. Get started with the [ACS Marketing Communication Plan Worksheet](#).

2. Develop key messages and keep them updated.

Use Advocacy & Communication Solutions' [messaging guides](#) to help develop key messages. Review and refresh talking points, FAQs, media kits, and any other communication collateral at least quarterly to reflect new data and/or changed information. If your messaging references or involves any partners or collaborators, coordinate your message development with them.

3. Translate your messages for real people.

Use the "brother-in-law test" to test your message on people who have no prior knowledge of the industry or field and ensure that you avoid acronyms, jargon, rhetoric, mission-statement talk, and inside lingo. The people you test messages with should be able to understand your key concepts and takeaways. Consider

the ways in which your language might be more inclusive and accessible. For example, are the examples you give relevant to only one part of the community? Do you need to share your messages in more than one language? Could a paragraph of numbers be better shared as an infographic? Learn more from the ACS tool, [Messaging Boot Camp, How to Give Jargon the Boot](#).

4. Identify the best messenger.

Designate a spokesperson and a backup. Both should be able to articulate the essence of your organization, its policies, and what information is/is not confidential. These people should be poised, confident, and clear-spoken. If there is an opportunity for photography or video interview, ensure the spokespersons know to dress the part and are polished and professional. If a media opportunity arises (e.g., press event, community celebration), the designated spokesperson(s) should attend and talk to attending media as appropriate/available.

5. Learn how to frame and pivot.

Media coverage is an opportunity to frame a story in a way that highlights the points you want to make. Your key messages should support your overall message frame and help influence the angle that a reporter applies to the story. If you feel that the report's questions are shifting away from your desired frame, use your answers to pivot back to where you'd like to be. For example, if your frame is public investment in universal pre-K, and a reporter asks a question about whether the local K-12 school system will be ready to accept more kindergarteners, shift the focus back to pre-K with a statement like, "The real question is whether our 4-year-olds will be ready to learn in kindergarten, regardless of where they go."

6. Practice, practice, practice.

Leave nothing to chance. You've gotten the right messages in hand; now make sure you can deliver them clearly and confidently.

7. Make reporters' jobs easier.

Provide what they need to get your news published or broadcast quickly. Plan ahead for audio, video, and photography opportunities, and tell the reporters ahead of time what they can expect to get from you. Have experts on hand and ready for interviews. Include quotes from relevant people when you write letters to the editor, op-eds, media advisories, press releases, or respond to online media. These could be from community leaders or third-party validators. Let the quotes help tell your story.

8. Distribute a media kit.

This packet of information should quickly tell reporters who you are, what you do, why it matters, and why other people will care about it. Press kit contents might include:

- ▶ Brochures or one-page descriptions of your organization.
- ▶ Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)
- ▶ Fact sheets
- ▶ Recent news coverage (press releases or articles written about you)
- ▶ Current impact data or statistics
- ▶ Spokesperson bios, photos, and contact information
- ▶ Contact information to tell reporters how to get in touch with you.



9. Be clear and accurate.

- ▶ Check your written outreach (letters to the editor, op-eds, media advisories, press releases, or responses to online media) for clarity and accuracy.
- ▶ Check carefully for correct dates, spelling, facts, and phone numbers.
- ▶ Double check spellings of names and organizations.
- ▶ Avoid technical terms or jargon.
- ▶ Do not use acronyms to describe the organization, program, or legislation in the first reference.

10. Be honest.

Never lie or intentionally mislead reporters. Honesty and integrity will help you build relationships with reporters and establish you as a credible source.

11. Offer to fact check a story.

Reporters are not under any obligation to send you a story before it goes to print to “approve” it. But you can offer to fact check it for them. They may send you one fact or they might send you a key section for review.

12. Monitor your success.

Designate a staff member to:

- ▶ Monitor media coverage using Google Alerts (or similar); the responsible staff member will keep leadership informed of coverage to help celebrate wins or respond if corrections are needed.
- ▶ Track all media inquiries using a shared internal document (i.e., a Google or SharePoint document that all staff can access); maintain the shared document to ensure that you respond to all inquiries within 24 hours or as indicated by the journalist.
- ▶ Check out the [ACS Media Tracking Tool](#) for a jump start on successful tracking.

Choose the Right Tools

Using appropriate media outreach tools is vital. There are many ways to communicate with the media, and maintaining good relationships with press hinges on your ability to use the right method to reach out to media for coverage. Keep in mind, the steps you take to identify the right outlet, frame your news, and hone your message are nearly the same for all types of media, but outreach methods will vary depending on the situation.

For example, imagine a newspaper published a story about the need for more child care options for employees of area businesses. A child care center with close partnerships with local business might want to reach out to the reporter who wrote the story to gain recognition for filling a community need relative to that story. A press conference wouldn't necessarily be the best way to respond to that reporter, but a letter to the editor and/or a phone call to that reporter with the offer of a site tour might be beneficial.

Tools for Media Outreach

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the Editor can be a great way to get your issue in front of thousands of readers. Not only do you get to make your case—you also have the implicit nod from an editorial body that your message is worth consideration.

How do you help ensure that your letter is published, and is as compelling to readers as possible? Here are seven tips to keep in mind:

Seven Tips for Crafting a Letter to the Editor

- 1. Own your opinion.** Newspapers will not publish unsigned letters, so make sure your letter has your name, as well as any other information requested (such as phone number, address, or email.) You can find guidelines for Letter to the Editor submissions on most newspaper websites.
- 2. Keep it short.** Most papers have restrictions on length, and under 200 words is usually best for keeping a reader's attention.
- 3. Start strong.** Compelling letters usually pull in the reader with a startling fact, a visceral image, or a strong statement.
- 4. Use your own words.** It's fine to use other sources or standard talking points as resources for your letter, but don't simply repeat what others have said or written. Give your letter your own voice.
- 5. Speak your truth.** Readers relate strongly to personal stories, so if you have something to share that illustrates the importance of your issue, add it to your letter.
- 6. Reinforce with facts.** Letters to the Editor are opinions, and yours gains credibility when you clearly state facts (and sources) that support your point.
- 7. Ask for action.** Don't shy away from asking readers to support your cause and give them a specific way to do so in your letter, such as visiting a website to learn more, attending an event, or changing a personal behavior (if appropriate).

Composing Your Letter to the Editor

Editor's Name
Editor's Address
Date

Dear Editor,

The opening paragraph should summarize your issue in a way that captures attention and contain a newsy or timely element, if applicable.

Explain your ties to the issue. In other words, why are you speaking up about this? The subsequent paragraphs should further explain your issue and why people should care about it. If you have data or statistics to bolster your argument, this is a good place to use them.

Follow your explanation with a call to action. What is at stake if no action is taken? What will happen if people respond with action?

Recap your point of view. If applicable, include any information how readers can get involved.

Sincerely,

Name
Organization
Email
Phone number

OpEds

OpEds are similar to Letters to the Editor and a great way to share a longer opinion or perspective about an issue important to your organization. They are typically around 600 words in length, which allows you to go into more detail about your issue and share more data, stories, or other compelling information. Space is limited and the decision to print your OpEd may be determined by who signs it, so think strategically about the author. You will still want to focus on being succinct with your arguments and avoid attacking others.

Like Letters to the Editor, an OpEd comes with the implicit nod from an editorial body that your piece has merit. The submission process for OpEds is usually a little more rigorous than submitting a Letter to the Editor, so before sending be sure to:

- ▶ Familiarize yourself with the outlet's OpEd submission policy. Pay attention to word counts and other parameters such as preferred file formats, deadlines, and how frequently you can submit.
- ▶ Include your contact information when you submit (but not in the body of your OpEd).
- ▶ Know whether the outlet expects your submission to be exclusive to them. Most prefer this.

Give Your OpEd a Short, Compelling Headline

The opening paragraph should summarize your issue in a way that captures attention and contains a newsy or timely element related to your work.

Explain your experience with the issue to establish credibility and why you are sharing your opinion at this time.

The subsequent paragraphs should further explain your issue and why people should care about it. If you have data or statistics to bolster your argument, this is a good place to use them.

Follow your explanation with a call to action. What is at stake if no action is taken? What will happen if people respond with action?

Recap your point of view. If applicable, include any information how readers can get involved.

Sign your OpEd with your name, title, organization, and any other professional affiliation that lends credibility to your position.

Press Releases

Press releases are best for announcing news broadly across multiple media platforms. While the goal with a press release is to secure media coverage, the response will look different depending on the outlets and reports you address the release to. Some may pick up a tidbit from your release and run it without ever contacting you. Occasionally a reporter may pick up the phone and call you for an interview. If you want to increase your likelihood of coverage, proactively follow up with media contacts to answer questions, provide additional context, and encourage timely review and coverage of your press release. Either way, keep track of which outlets showed interest and the resulting coverage with the [ACS Media Tracking Tool](#).

Best Practices for Creating a Press Release

- ▶ **Include key leaders.** To ensure accuracy and alignment of messages, press releases should be reviewed by key leadership and relevant partners, as applicable to the content of the press release. This step reinforces your organization's commitment to thoughtful, transparent messaging.
- ▶ **Have a timeline.** Because press releases contain timely information, give your internal team a deadline. For example, agree that all feedback should be submitted by those reviewing within 48 hours. If no response is received after 48 hours, it is understood that the originator of the press release may move forward with the most recent, approved version.
- ▶ **Assign approval authority.** For the most time-sensitive releases, identify spokespersons who can approve the press release. This should approve anyone named or quoted in the press release.
- ▶ **Check yourself.** To provide the most up-to-date information, content should be fact- and data-checked and align with the organization's talking points and goals.

Press Release Template

{PLACE LOGO HERE}

For Immediate Release
Month Day, Year

Contact: Full Name
Office #
Cell #
Email
Website

THE HEADLINE GOES HERE AND CAN BE UP TO TWO LINES LONG, BOLD, AND IN ALL CAPS. IT SHOULD CAPTURE THE FRAME OF THE NEWS AND HAVE A SENSE OF DRAMA.

THE SUBHEAD CAN PROVIDE MORE CONTEXT AND BE UP TO TWO LINES LONG.

CITY, STATE—"The Lead" paragraph should serve as a summary paragraph that communicates the most important components and outlines the issue in a way that captures attention. This paragraph should not attempt to explain everything you want to share.

Each remaining paragraph should contain information in descending order of importance. The most riveting information should be provided at the top of the press release.

"ACS recommends that one or two quotes be included in the press release from key members of Council or relevant departments," said Rebecca Cohen, senior director, Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC.

The press release should contain a short paragraph that explains any relevant historical information that the press may need.

"The quotes should be direct, passionate, and emphasize the most important aspect of the news being shared in the release."

If the news identifies other organizations or individuals the final paragraph should briefly outline who they are and their role in the news.

###

(This indicates the conclusion of the press release)

Boilerplate language goes here. It is a general description of the organization or coalition should be included following the conclusion of the press release in *italics*. For example:

The COUNCIL is an 11-member body elected by the residents of our neighborhoods. The Council makes policy decisions for the effective functioning of County government, and is a link between government agencies and citizens. It has legislative and taxing authority for the County, and is a co-equal branch of the County government with the executive branch.

Media Advisory

A media advisory is used to invite reporters to cover some kind of event, such as a press conference, forum, or rally. It is different from a press release in that it doesn't share as much in terms of "news" and is much shorter. Your goal is to make the event sound interesting and newsworthy and make it easy for reporters to quickly figure out the details. Send the advisory out one-two days before the event.

Media Advisory Template

{PLACE LOGO HERE}

Media Advisory
Month Day, Year

Contact: Full Name
Office #
Cell #
Email
Website

THE HEADLINE GOES HERE AND CAN BE UP TO FOUR LINES LONG, BOLD, ALL CAPS IT SHOULD CAPTURE THE ATTENTION OF THE READER

Sub-title may be used for additional context

CITY, STATE—A media advisory is used to invite reporters to cover some kind of event, such as a press conference, forum, or rally. Your goal is to make the event sound interesting and newsworthy and make it easy for reporters to quickly figure out the details. Send the advisory out one-two days before the event.

The first paragraph should capture the reporter's attention and provide enough context so the reporter understands the importance of the issue. Include important details such as what will be covered at the event, important speakers, and why the event is significant.

What: Name of event

Who: Name, role, and organization of speakers or important attendees

When: Date and time

Where: Location and address

Leave a contact email and phone if the reporter wants additional information.

A short paragraph may be included to describe the mission of the organization(s) or coalition involved.

###

(This indicates the conclusion of the media advisory.)

A general description of the organization or coalition should be included following the conclusion of the press release in *italics*. For example:

The COUNCIL is an 11-member body elected by the residents of our neighborhoods. The Council makes policy decisions for the effective functioning of County government, and is a link between government agencies and citizens. It has legislative and taxing authority for the County, and is a co-equal branch of the County government with the executive branch.

Tips for Hosting a Press Conference

Press conferences are formal and controlled than media events. They are often called to respond to a news development, such as releasing a report, introducing a new leader, launching a new program or service, or making another newsworthy announcement.

1. Decide if you need a media event.

Press conferences are a lot of work! Hold one only when you have major news that is best delivered by being shared in an open forum and will lend itself to visuals or questions and answers.

2. Identify your target audience.

The audience will determine the kind of event you stage (speakers, location, communication materials, decoration) and what media are invited.

3. Timing is everything.

Date and time should be considered. Time your event so it does not compete with other news events. Mondays are typically difficult because offices are closed over the weekend and it may be difficult to get a hold of reporters. Schedule your event earlier in the day so reporters are more likely to be able to attend and so TV and radio can air it on the same day. If you hold the event on Friday, it likely will be published on Saturday, with fewer people likely to see it. Avoid major holidays and Fridays leading into holiday weekends.

4. Develop a media kit for reporters.

The press kit should include the press release, a report if applicable, statements from allied groups on their letterhead, fact sheets, and contact information.

5. Keep the event short.

The program should be about 30–45 minutes.

6. Find a convenient location.

While the location should be appropriate to the issue, keep it convenient. Bring the story to reporters by sharing photography during or immediately after the press conference. In addition to convenience, make sure that you have access to the necessary a/v equipment, Wi-Fi, seating, and parking.

7. Set your lineup and prepare your speakers.

Choose a host and speakers who are key to the issue. Typical speakers might include an executive director or board member, a person representing the issue, a public official, or an expert on the issue. Limit the speakers to three or four people. Make sure they accurately represent the “faces” of your issue and strive for diversity (age, gender, race, position, etc.). Time out the agenda. Practice your event the day before if possible.

8. Prepare messages.

Identify key messages and answers to critical questions. Prepare remarks for each speaker.

9. Reach out to media.

Send a media advisory three days before the event, then email and call media to ensure they know about the event.

10. Cordon off a special press area.

Have reporters sign in so you can keep track of who attends and provide them with press kits. If it is a large



media event, inform media ahead of time of where the press area is. Consider placing signage at the event for media. This area should have controlled access and may include refreshments.

11. Hold questions at the end of the press conference.

Have the host take questions. When finished, end the press conference and thank reporters for coming.

12. Follow up.

Check the list of reporters that attended. Follow up with no-shows, send them a media kit and photos or clips, and ask if they would still like an interview.

13. Send out press release.

Develop a press release about the event and have it ready to send out shortly after the event concludes.

14. Monitor coverage.

Use the [ACS Media Tracking Tool](#) to keep tabs on all the media activity generated by your event. Re-post any media coverage of the event on your website and through social media.

Digital Media Best Practices

Digital platforms offer unique opportunities to amplify your message, reach broader audiences, and tailor content for specific user behaviors. When engaging digital media outlets or sharing content online, use the following best practices:

1. Hone Your Own

In order to engage news sources and influencers in the digital space, you must first ensure that your own digital house is in order. They will examine the timeliness and accuracy of your digital content to determine if they will engage with you.

- ▶ **Optimize for Search (SEO).** Use clear, keyword-rich language in press releases, blog posts, and website content. Add metadata (titles and descriptions) and use headers and subheadings to improve visibility on search engines.
- ▶ **Adapt content for each platform.** Tailor your message format, tone, and visuals to meet the expectations of each digital platform. Use short, compelling text for X and Bluesky, visual storytelling for Instagram, and more detailed narrative for LinkedIn or Facebook.
- ▶ **Use multimedia content.** Include short videos, soundbites, infographics, or animated graphics to enhance your message and increase shareability. Visuals should be formatted appropriately for mobile viewing.

Create a Social Media Policy

It only takes one mistaken post from an internal source to sink your social media credibility. Protect your reputation and your relationships by instituting a simple social media policy. Key points to include are:

- ▶ Only the designated communication lead(s) or authorized staff may post official statements of organization-owned social media accounts.
- ▶ Authorized staff should refer to the [ACS Communication Channel Guide](#) to ensure your organization is delivering the right message, to the right people, utilizing the right channels.
- ▶ Personal social media accounts should clearly state when views are personal and not representative of the organization.
- ▶ Media inquiries received through social media should be immediately directed to the communication lead.



2. Build Online Relationships

- ▶ Engage digital-first media and influencers. Reach out directly to bloggers, podcast hosts, newsletter publishers, and social media influencers who align with your message and offer to provide content or expertise on your issue.
- ▶ Make it shareable. Include social sharing buttons or suggested hashtags in digital materials to encourage audience engagement. Consider creating pre-written posts or “share kits” for partners, online newsrooms or influencers.
- ▶ Monitor engagement. Use tools such as Google Analytics, platform-specific insights, or media monitoring software to evaluate reach, impressions, click-through rates, and public sentiment. Use this data to inform future outreach.

