Reporters are people too.

Developing Relationships with Reporters

One of the most effective things a nonprofit leader can do to promote her organization’s work is to cultivate relationships with reporters. In his book, *Making the News: A Guide for Nonprofits and Activists*, Jason Salzman quotes a reporter from a major daily whose sentiments are probably echoed by journalists everywhere: “A lot of what gets covered depends on personal relationships at the paper.” Can’t get more explicit than that.

Here are some tips for strengthening relationships with individual reporters and expanding and prioritizing your media database.

News Is a Two-Way Street: Be a Resource for Reporters

Reporters need you just as badly as you need them. You need them to cover your issue and carry your frame and message. They need the fresh information and real stories you can provide. Develop a reputation as someone who has accurate information, meets deadlines, can provide additional contacts and sources, and is always good for a clever quote or a much-needed fact.

Make sure reporters know they can trust you. Help them feel the information that you provide—and that they need—about your issue is accurate and up to date, and that you are playing fairly and squarely with them.

Respect their professionalism. Even if their media outlet has a different opinion about your issue than you do, all parties can engage in the process respectfully. Provide other contacts for the reporter, even from the other side, if requested. Once or twice a year, offer to “do lunch” and use the time to brief the reporter on upcoming news.

Think Like a Reporter

Reporters (and people in general) won’t listen to you just because you’re right; they pay attention when you’re relevant. Think in terms of what a reporter and her boss, the editor, would consider newsworthy. Everyone thinks their issue is the most important, compelling subject and should be covered all the time, but reporters are faced with hundreds of issues and stories. How is yours interesting? What sets it apart? What hooks make your story particularly relevant right now?

Be Accessible to Reporters

Reporters will usually try to get you on one phone call. If they cannot find you, they will often move on to other sources. Give reporters your direct line and a cell phone number—plus your home number if appropriate. Carry a pager or cellular phone, especially at media events, where a reporter might be calling you to get the news as it is being made. One group scored extra television coverage simply because an editor, scrounging for news on a slow day, phoned a nonprofit leader at...
a rally to get a quote. Before the leader hung up, she had persuaded the editor to send a news crew to cover the event.

Always be prepared to say something about an issue when a reporter calls. A reporter never likes to hear, “I’ll get back to you later today.” They may not have ten minutes to spare or you might not get back to them on time. Be prepared to spin off a soundbite at will. It takes practice, but you get good at it.

If you absolutely do not know the answer to a reporter’s questions—especially technical or factual inquiries—say the following: “I don’t know that information. I will find out and get back to you immediately. What is your deadline?” Then get back to the reporter on time. You may also offer one or two other expert sources for the reporter’s Rolodex.

Know Your Facts
Your reputation rides on the accuracy of the information you give reporters. Never give reporters inaccurate or even questionably accurate information.

Do Not Call Reporters Just to Be Quoted
Sometimes you may be a major source for a reporter and still not be quoted. It is frustrating, but those are the breaks. If you feel the omission of you or your group substantially affects the story, call that to the reporter’s attention. But remember, reporters are wary of sources who whine about not being quoted all the time. Be a resource even if it means you might not be in the story the next time you will.

Do Not Waste Reporters’ Time
In other words, don’t be a schmooze hog. This is tacky and will tarnish your reputation. Only contact reporters when you have newsworthy information, a good pitch, or are responding to an inquiry or a story. Some reporters keep a mental list of news pests and other obnoxious non-sources who aggravate them on a routine basis. Do not make that list.

Many reporters loathe the caller who says, “Hi, did you get my press release?” Reporters do not have time to call everyone back to say whether or not they received the release. If you call a reporter, do so to pitch your story. In the course of the pitch, you can remind him or her about the media release and offer to send another.

Do know when to call.
 Sometimes a successful pitch is as much about timing as it is about framing. The most important thing to remember is not to call reporters when they’re on deadline. For newspaper reporters, this usually means after 3:30 pm for the next morning’s edition. For television, reporters are often unavailable for the hour before the newscast airs. If you’ve got breaking news, none of this applies, of course—call!

A good time to call is usually mid-morning, around 10:30. Reporters have had their coffee, finished with their daily planning meetings, and aren’t yet deeply involved in another story. The earlier in the week you make contact, the better.

Do Not Exaggerate
You can spin your news, but check the hyperbole. Be reasonable. Not every story pitch will be jaw-droppingly important. Reporters are primarily looking for facts, additional contacts, or your quotes to convey a sense of importance or controversy. They do not want Oscar acceptance speeches, a salesperson’s “act now!” pitches, or screaming drama queens on the other end of the phone.

Everything Is On the Record
Enough said. Even if you feel you have a great relationship with a reporter, don’t say anything you wouldn’t want to see on the front page or the evening news. If you talk with a reporter for an hour about the need for your services but utter one aside about how your organization is having a dispute with neighbors, guess which part of the conversation is likely to make a headline?

Never Say “No Comment”
Like it or not, your audience and journalists will take “No comment” as an admission of guilt. If you don’t know the answer to something or don’t feel comfortable answering a question, it’s perfectly acceptable to respond
with, “Can I get back to you on that?” But remember: if you promised more information, deliver it on time.

**Don’t Take It Personally if You Get “Bumped”**

If you have the unfortunate luck of having an arts opening or book party right when some huge national story breaks and your event is missed because all the media are covering the big story, those are the breaks.

**Be a Media Consumer**

Many people dislike or ignore television and other important media outlets. If you want to reach the audience you’ve targeted, however, you have to know the media they use. Watch the news shows in your city, taking notes on the reporters. Read bylines and remember who covered what issue. Research your issue on Google News, Nexis, and websites of relevant publications.

**A Word About “Exclusives”**

Giving exclusives—the first and only shot at important news—can have both positive and negative repercussions. On the positive side, a well-placed exclusive to a key media outlet can result in a major, in-depth story that will spark other news coverage. In addition, you develop a stronger relationship with the reporter. On the negative side, be prepared to take the wrath of reporters who did not get the exclusive. In that case, make sure they know you will contact them the next time. Never give an exclusive to a reporter and then feed the story to another reporter. Both will be furious. If you get into a “bidding war” for a story, take the audience size of the media and your relationships with the reporters into consideration.

**Be Organized: Create a Media List/Database**

- Purchase media directories such as the Yellow Pages, Bacon’s, Burrelle’s, New America Ethnic Media Directory, or Green Media Toolshed
- Exchange media contact lists with your colleague organizations
- Capture information on reporters who contact your organization—download the

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**Checklist: Tips for a Perfect Pitch**

- Pitch your story
- Don’t call to confirm receipt of releases or advisories
- Treat this as an initial sales call, not a follow-up
- Keep it brief
- Pitch to reporters with whom you have a relationship
- This means first building the relationship!
- Have a back-up pitch – if they don’t like your first idea, they might like your others
- Have multiple hooks
- Provide more than one reason your story idea is interesting
- Ask questions and anticipate and answer questions
- Be knowledgeable about reporter’s prior work
- Ask for referrals
- If this reporter is not interested in the story, which of her colleagues might be?
- Visualize your story for TV and print photos
- Reporters are human beings too
- Respect their schedule, deadlines, priorities, and humanness
- Personalize your story
- Offer compelling spokespeople to tell the story
- Pass the “brother-in-law” test
- Would an outsider who is not in the nonprofit world understand or sympathize with your story?
- Tell your story and control the message
- If they ask you a question outside of your message, guide them back to the message
- Don’t be a diva
- Don’t exaggerate facts or the importance of your issue
- Avoid “sweeps week” in television
- Check with your local stations to see when “sweeps,” the ratings period, occurs. Avoid pitching TV reporters during sweeps so reporters can focus on the gory/bizarre stories that boost ratings during those weeks.
- Consider exclusives
- Know the media outlets your target audience consumes
Sample Database Forms for an example of what information to capture.

- Remember alternative, independent, ethnic, and community media
- Continually expand and update your database
- Prioritize the reporters who can help you advance toward your goals

Navigate the Newsroom

The most savvy nonprofits understand that you have to reach out to the right reporter, because you want your story to go to the most appropriate contact in the newsroom. Knowing whom to call and where to go in the newsroom is important information for identifying reporters who might cover your story and for responding to media coverage. Of course, each newsroom is different. Some newsrooms are evolving out of the traditional “beat desk” layout and creating a team approach in which several reporters cover multiple issues.

On the next page of this tutorial is the layout of a typical newspaper newsroom. It is a fairly streamlined, hierarchical arrangement, with the publisher at the top, senior editors right below, followed by reporters and copy editors.

Television stations are similarly organized, except an executive news producer will be near the top “editor” position, with associate producers and correspondents below. In television, the beats are often less defined—except for key beats, such as “city hall” or the state legislature. One correspondent may cover a number of different stories in one day. Radio newsrooms are usually much smaller, with a news director at the top and individual reporters making up the ranks.

 Bonus Points:
If You Really Want to Start a Great Relationship

- Take a reporter to coffee or a meal
- Call or e-mail a reporter who writes about your issue and comment positively about a recent article.
- Tour a newsroom or make other personal contact.
- Go to City Hall, a local trial, or other places where media are already gathering.
- Capture essential information about reporters from other staff or colleagues at other nonprofits.
Rasmuson Foundation is a private family foundation located in Anchorage, Alaska that works as a catalyst to promote a better life for Alaskans.

Founded in 1955, the Foundation invests approximately $26 million annually in both individuals and well-managed nonprofit organizations dedicated to improving the quality of life for Alaskans primarily in the areas of arts and culture, community development, health, and human services.

Our grantees are passionate about their work. Given today’s crowded media environment, their ability to effectively advocate on behalf of their constituents and tell their story is of critical importance to their success. The Foundation supported the development of this toolkit to provide a comprehensive and accessible resource for its grantees both to build internal capacity and to work more effectively on a day-to-day basis with strategic communications.

In today’s crowded media environment, organizations working to build a fair, just and equitable society can scarcely be heard. Organizations hoping to shape debates and shift public policy must embrace strategic communications to achieve their goals. The SPIN Project strengthens nonprofit social justice organizations, small and large, to communicate effectively for themselves.

The SPIN Project provides accessible and affordable strategic communications consulting, training, coaching, networking opportunities and concrete tools, such as this online communications toolkit. Our skills and expertise are blended with our commitment to strengthening social justice organizations and helping them engage in communications to achieve their goals.

We develop communications skills, infrastructure and leadership, strengthening organizations to achieve their social justice goals.