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"Placing Progressives in the Press"

Taking Precautionary Action: Roadmap for Success
Interactive Media Training Workshop HANDOUTS
Sunday, June 11, 1:15 pm - 3:15 pm
Sarah Massey, "Placing Progressives in the Press"

1. Interactive Media Training Workshop Agenda
2. Media "How To" Guide – Simple Steps to Press Success
 - A. Press Conferences
 - B. Media Advisory
 - C. Press Release
 - D. Pitch Calls
 - E. Reporters and Producers
 - F. Camera Call
 - G. Letters to the Editor
3. "Win Over With Opinion Editorials" Article by Sarah Massey
4. Helpful Web Sites

Taking Precautionary Action: Roadmap for Success

Interactive Media Training Workshop AGENDA

Sunday, June 11, 1:15 pm - 3:15 pm

Sarah Massey, “Placing Progressives in the Press”

1:15 – 1:25 PM: Introduction Q&A “What is the media? Why use it?”

**1:25 – 1:30 PM: Ground Rules: Criticism Sandwich
Positive, Negative, Positive**

1:30 – 1:35 PM: Refresher on Messaging on Precaution

1:35 – 2:00 PM: Preparing for Media: The 10-Second Sound-Bite

2:00 – 3:15 PM: Interactive Media Interview Sessions

- 1. Staying on Message in a Hostile Interview.*
- 2. Live, Action: Staying Focused When the Interview is Live.*
- 3. Taped Action: Take Your Time When Taped, but Remember the Editor.*

Media “How To” Guide – Simple Steps to Press Success

By Sarah Massey, www.sarahmassey.com

As a social justice activist with expertise in media relations, I’ve put together *Media “How To” Guide – Simple Steps to Press Success* to empower conference participants with the basic skills to make media relations successful. Progressives need to translate complex policy programs into persuasive language that speaks to journalists, producers, and editors. Sparkling prose delivered with enthusiasm and professionalism is the key to unlocking the media and gaining coverage. As a companion to the Precautionary Principles Frames and Talking Points memo, this guide offers the tools to launch press work. Please note that this is not an exhaustive guide, but a must-do list of top pointers. An excellent resource for further information is *SPIN Works!*, published by the Spin Project.

A. Hosting a Press Conference

Press conferences are contrived events for making news. The purpose of a press conference is to attract media attention and give the press news stories. Hold a press conference to announce a new initiative, to describe the findings of a study, or to launch a new campaign. Another form for the press conference is the press conference call, which is popular for all parties but misses out on the photo op. The press conference or conference call structure is designed that a reporter can walk or call in, get the background information they need, quickly understand the players and the issues, ask questions, and go back to their desks to write-up the story.

Press conferences take preparation time, such as identifying and preparing speakers, pitching the press, and writing press materials, so use this tool when you have the capacity. But, just because it takes a lot of time to pull a press event together doesn’t mean the press conference has to take long. Keep it between 30 and 60 minutes.

Be Creative!

A picture is worth a thousand words. Pick a photogenic backdrop, like green space that exemplifies environmental stewardship or outside a building developed to be non-toxic. Keep in mind that you will have different audio/tech needs outside, like a microphone and mult box. If the event is in-doors, make sure to create a visual for the press cameras, like a simple graph, signs with media slogans. You can also hand out graphics and photos on CD for media to use with stories.

To Do List for Press Conferences:

1. Send out a media advisory as soon as possible, at least a week in advance, and start calling the media. Call the local Associated Press Bureau and make sure the advisory gets placed on the “Daybook.”
2. Create an agenda and speakers’ bios.

3. Make a press sign-in sheet to capture press information.
4. Call back all media on the press conference day to invite again.
5. Write a press release about the press conference.
6. Double check audio equipment.
7. Prepare your speakers with media messages. Practice the press conference!
8. Consider hiring your own photographer to capture event for organizational media products, or even to offer to AP wire or publications.
9. Create a press kit. The kit should include the press conference agenda, speakers' bios, press release, relevant background such as previous press clips, or report summaries. All of these pieces should echo the message.

Press Conference Media Notes:

The media loves victims. If it bleeds, it leads, but don't fall in this trap. Audiences can be cynical and conservative. Make your photo op about changes that will make the future better for our communities. Choose doctors, workers, scientists or community leaders to deliver your message.

B. Writing and Issuing a Media Advisory

A media advisory serves as an invitation to the press conference or event. Be sure to include the date of the event and a contact person at top. The key elements of an advisory are: an eye-catching headline, a paragraph that seeks to answer why a reporter should attend and what is the news of the conference, and the "who, what, where, and when." Use the paragraph and headline as an opportunity to issue launch your media messages. Try your hand at writing catchy headlines. You are helping the TV producers and headline writers, in addition to enticing reporters.

If there is a photo op, mention that at the bottom, such as "Photo op: community activists, families, and local politicians cut ribbon at 'green' manufacturing plant."

Build your media contact list with e-mails and faxes for the relevant media. Double check the list prior to the media event crunch.

To Do List for Media Advisories:

1. Issue advisory a week out, if not sooner, from the event and start pitching.
2. Call TV and radio planning desks and make sure they have the information.
3. Build your press list. Must haves include local Associated Press bureaus and "newsroom" for each local television and radio station.
4. Don't assume that anyone has seen your advisory over e-mail or fax. You have to make calls.
5. Call radio and TV news desks around 8:00 AM on the day of your event to talk to re-pitch prior to the daily news planning meeting. This keeps you fresh in the mind when the producers and planners convene to discuss how the day will unfold.

Media Advisory Notes:

Clear writing and a readable format are more important than filling the page. Make sure to state what the news event is about.

C. Writing and Issuing a Press Release

A press release is used as a tool for informing the press. It's your opportunity to write up the issues and messages the way you would like to see them in the media. A press release should follow the form of a news story, an inverted pyramid, with the most important details on top and least important at bottom. In addition to the catchy, action headline, the first sentence should grab the reader and inform the "who, what, where, when, and why" of the story. In the first paragraph or two, describe the news, using your frame and media messages.

Starting right after the explanatory paragraphs, drop in a quote from your spokesperson. This is another opportunity to be eye-catching. The quote is subjective view and it answers the question, "so what?" The quote should communicate passion or even a sense of humor, such as, "Adopting a precautionary approach is our best chance to insure that our grandchildren thank us rather than curse us." Remember, catchy phrases and sound-bites are the language of the media.

Then, finish off the release with the information that rounds out the story, such as background information on the issue or organization. Be sure to include date and contact information at top. Try to keep it all on one page.

Another way to use a press release is to chime-in on news, especially if you can find a regularly scheduled event to have an opinion about. Might there be an FDA report on bio-engineering on the horizon? Create a press release that offers an alternative voice and send it to the FDA beat reporters. Some papers, like *The New York Times*, insist on having two opinions in an article so reporters will be seeking controversial quotes. It could be yours! If the local city council is about to vote on an environmental issue, create a release and get it to the city politics reporters. Go to City Hall and pass it out. Protests and pickets get covered in the news for exactly this reason.

Be Creative!

Develop your creative writing skills, such as alliteration and use of action verbs. Steer clear of passive voice. Again, reporters are writers, and a press release communicates that you understand their needs.

To Do List for Press Releases:

1. Send press release to all media who said they were going to attend press event but neglected to make it.

2. Have press release on hand at press conference to distribute.
3. Call reporters to pitch your release.
4. Double check press release for errors.

Press Release Notes:

Use *Associated Press Style Guide* for writing your press release. It's the standard and writers will appreciate it.

D. How to Make Press Pitch Calls:

Pitch calls can be tough, but they are the top tool for getting attention. Before picking up the phone, educate yourself on the media. Is the paper a tabloid or hard news? Where does the story fit in the paper? What does the reporter cover and what have they written about recently? Think through the different angles that might intrigue the reporter. Is the story controversial, is there a trend, or a local angle on a national story?

When the reporter answers, use your ten-second sound-bite at the top of the call. This is a quick identification and what you're calling about. Pause. Ask if the reporter has a moment to take the call, then launch into the news, your message, and your invitation to cover the event.

Be Creative!

If the reporter doesn't bite, offer a different approach to the story. If nothing appeals to the reporter, ask them what would they like to hear from you.

To Do List for Press Pitches:

1. Be persistent. Don't assume an e-mail, a fax or a voice mail got the attention of the reporter.
2. Take notes on your calls and learn what works or doesn't work in the pitch.

Pitch Notes:

Practice, practice, practice. Smile. When you smile, your voice communicates comfort.

E. The Inside Scoop on Reporters and Producers:

Earning and maintaining media is about relationships. The media is not your friend -- it's a vehicle for an exchange. The press needs stories and activists need coverage. You will get to know the reporters and producers and relationships will become easier. When you're pitching an event, start with the media you know and you can practice your pitch with them.

Some reporters will try to win you over to telling more than you want to. Remember, though, you are never “off the record” when talking to press. Try not to say anything you wouldn’t want to see in the newspaper and never exaggerate.

To do List for Reporters and Producers:

1. Read and watch the media. What do they cover and how?
2. Call back a reporter as soon as possible, way before 4:00 PM. Even if you can’t get to them that day, call back and let them know.

Reporter Notes:

Reporters are smart people, but they usually have only a short time to learn the issues. Honor their intelligence and their needs by giving them all the information and background in bright, easy-to-read format. Be a resource. Help connect the reporters to the experts and they will remember you.

F. How to Get Prepared for Your Camera Call:

When the press is coming, be prepared. Practice media messages. You’ve done the hard work of making your story interesting to the press, and this is your time to shine. If it’s a press conference, practice the agenda with the spokespeople and audio equipment.

When booking the interview, take a moment to discuss the topic with the producer or reporter and then prepare.

To do List for Interviews:

1. Don’t be distracted. Turn off cell-phones or other interruptions.
2. Do dress neatly and simply.
3. Establish whether you’ll be taped or live and adjust accordingly.

G. How to Write and Pitch a Letter to the Editor:

Write a Letter to the Editor to chime in on the news. When there is a discrepancy in a news story or a neglected angle, let the outlet know. Reference the story at the top of the letter. Be fair and direct, argue your point with facts, and use your media messages.

To do List for Letters to the Editor:

1. Go online or call the outlet and find the letter to the editor guidelines, usually 200 – 250 words.
2. Be timely - submit the letter within a day or two.

To learn more on opinion writing, see the following article “Win Over With Opinion Editorials.”

Nuts & Bolts

Win Over With Opinion Editorials

By Sarah Massey

Persuasion is an industry in Washington, D.C., with writers greasing the wheels as they connect ideas to action. Interests all over the political spectrum demand engaging, pithy public relations copy to win the hearts and minds of the public and their elected representatives. Media slogans, press releases, advertising copy, protest chants, speeches and opinion editorials exemplify the variety of writing in demand. Persuasive writing can be a rewarding enterprise both for the paycheck and the experience of crafting messages that move public policy.

For advocates, policy makers and elected officials, the opinion editorial offers a significant platform to articulate and argue their positions. Opinion columns, landing on the editorial pages of newspapers, offer free space to present a position often without the balance of the opposing side. They may be solicited by the opinion page editor or pitched by the author. Like speech writing, ghostwriters are commonly used for opinion editorials. The professional writer's role is to translate goals into understandable language that makes the reader want to do something about them. A successful opinion editorial communicates to the reader what the problem is, how it can be solved and what they can do about it, while being entertaining and newsworthy.

The first step for putting together an opinion editorial is to establish who has the power to solve the issues that the author champions. People with power could be voters, shoppers or elected officials. Invariably, advocates espouse the idea that public awareness must be raised. Influencing the public is too broad a goal for an opinion editorial. With digging, a power broker will be found. For example, who can make the public health system better for low-income families? Is it a state legislator who has not yet stated a public position?

Choose the newspaper the decision-maker reads. While it's truly exciting to run an opinion in *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*, unless the author is a Noble Prize Laureate or a member of the president's cabinet (or ghost-writing for one), the editors of these newspapers will not seek an opinion. If the goal is to fight unrestrained gentrification and the dearth of affordable housing in Washington, D.C., the piece should run on opinion pages at the *City Paper* and the *Dupont Current*.

With a target publication in mind, craft a lead to the piece. The hooks for opinion editorials mirror news stories. Trends, personal stories, controversy and anniversaries are natural introductions. April 15, tax day, is a good day to place an opinion editorial on tax cuts for the wealthy. Personal

narratives make for compelling reading. The plight or experience of the individual is symbolic of a trend or larger experience.

Opinion editorials argue for a perspective and ask the reader to agree and take action. Describing the problem and solution is where the hard work gets done. The story you lay out needs to compel change. Write with clarity about what is at the heart of the issue. For example, homelessness is a complex problem that can be described from a thousand angles. If personal responsibility is the message, will the reader see a way to help? Perhaps community members participating in a local center can solve the problem. As the writer, you should offer a remedy that the reader has feeling for and use language that connects to a positive, even moral, answer. Then, shape the content to appeal to the power broker to be influenced. If the decision maker is the governor, present statewide facts. Avoid jargon or rhetoric.

Take improving unemployment insurance in Ohio as an example. Increasing and extending unemployment benefits during mass layoffs buttresses against economic instability and spurs micro-economic development. In other words, unemployment checks help working families and their communities. Unemployment insurance is about fairness. For a hook, interview a steel worker whose plant closed and describe how hard it is to pay for groceries. While the economy rapidly shifts and companies pull up stakes and move abroad, the governor should do his part to make sure Ohioans can make ends meet.

Lay out the problem and its answer with language that moves the reader and then bring it home with an action statement. It doesn't suffice to explain the issue and let the reader draw his or her own conclusion. A reader can mobilize voters, join a boycott and hold elected leaders accountable. Make it clear to readers what they can do about the problem: Buy a hybrid vehicle, donate time to charity or call Ohio's governor and tell him to increase unemployment insurance.

After doing the work of finding a hook, presenting the argument and laying out what the reader can do about the problem in about 800 words, put the piece down and let it rest. Come back to it later and see if a little literary magic can be added to it. Is there a place for humor? Can catchy phrases or slogans be sprinkled in? Pull from the literary tool-chest and use alliteration, senses, irony and specific description. In addition to informing and persuading, the piece should entertain. Remember, readers are bombarded with images and messages in today's media-saturated climate, and opinion editorials are competing for attention.

Call the opinion editor today!

Sarah Massey is a writer and media consultant who "places progressives in the press."
See: www.sarahmassey.com

Helpful Web Sites for Media Relations

<http://www.ownthepress.com>

* Coming in July '06: Sarah Massey's new blog for progressive media relations with helpful reviews, feedback, and criticism. Because, "Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one."

<http://www.spinproject.org/>

The SPIN Project is for organizations working to build a fair, just and equitable society that want to be heard in today's crowded media environment.

<http://www.newstips.org/>

The Community Media Workshop helps Chicago-area community and civic groups place news and feature stories about community policing, affordable housing, school reform, community economic development, youth development, and other strategies that rely on community organizing.

<http://www.fair.org/index.php>

FAIR, the national media watch group, has been offering well-documented criticism of media bias and censorship since 1986. We work to invigorate the First Amendment by advocating for greater diversity in the press and by scrutinizing media practices that marginalize public interest, minority and dissenting viewpoints. As an anti-censorship organization, we expose neglected news stories and defend working journalists when they are muzzled. As a progressive group, FAIR believes that structural reform is ultimately needed to break up the dominant media conglomerates, establish independent public broadcasting and promote strong non-profit sources of information.