

DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of relationship with the media: when they come to you; and when you're chasing them for coverage of some story or event.

Most of us spend so much time doing the latter we often fail to recognise when the former is happening. In our excitement - and feeling a little flattered at being rung up or pursued - we often fall into traps and become our own worst enemy.

There are a few ground rules therefore to be borne in mind. They also apply when you are trying to generate coverage.

WHEN THE MEDIA COMES TO YOU

1. Don't be rushed. If a reporter rings you up in 99% of cases it's a good idea to say you are a bit tied up and can you ring back in five minutes. Ask for the gist of her/his enquiry before you ring off. Then spend a few minutes composing your thoughts, deciding whether its appropriate for you to answer and assembling any information you may need. Of course you must ring back if you said you would - even if just to refer her/him to someone else.
2. It sounds obvious but is one of the easiest things to forget in the excitement: TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU KNOW. IF YOU DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER - SAY SO. DON'T MUDDLE THROUGH. Don't speculate or get drawn on issues which your organisation would not wish to comment on. Remember, even if you give a 'personal opinion', the reporter is talking to you as a representative of your organisation so the opinions you give are bound to reflect on the organisation you represent.

It's always best to rely on first hand experience. You'll still be safe with 'second hand' experience if your sources are reliable. But if you're not confident about their reliability don't repeat hearsay or lapse into generalisations. Let the journalist do the generalising on his/her own responsibility.

3. Remember that you, the interviewee, are the most important element of the interview. Without you, the story doesn't happen. You don't need to be rude or temperamental about it but you can decline to be interviewed if the terms aren't right.
4. The terms? If it's a radio or TV interview, nine times out of ten you will have the opportunity (and you should always take it) to discuss the questions you will be asked before the interview starts whether it is live or recorded. Find out how long you've got - 1 minute or half an hour? Select the number of points you want to make accordingly. If it is recorded and you are unhappy about anything you can always ask to redo it.

Similarly, with a press interview discuss the questions and proposed length of piece before you start. Find out whether the story is all about you/ your organisation/your event or you are just a small part of another story. Remember, though, that when you start to answer everything you say will be being noted. Don't talk 'off the record' unless you know the reporter well and trust him/her. In other words, don't say things you shouldn't say and then try to take it back.

People often complain that they've been misrepresented by journalists. Often, however, they have been fairly represented but said too much (or too little) - or just disagree with the journalists' conclusions.

DEALING WITH REPORTERS

Be honest, accurate and factual.

1. Remember that no matter how important your item may seem to you, it is only one of dozens of stories competing for space that day. Depending on what else is happening you may get a big story or a one-inch story at the back of the paper. But you can make your story more appealing.
2. Don't telephone the newspaper or radio if you can write a simple press release. The best thing is to visit with it to see your contact, but if you can't do that, send it in good time.

Rough guidelines: Weekly paper, a week before.
Local Radio/Daily Paper: Two days before.

3. Don't lecture or make speeches at editors or reporters. They want the facts. Your opinion or position on a matter may be part of the facts, but don't talk as if you are trying to persuade a reporter that you are right.
4. Don't be provoked. Don't lose your cool and don't take things personally.

It's always useful to try and identify the reporter whose responsibility it is to cover your particular interest. If you can develop a friendly relationship in which your confidence grows and he/she understands that you're not wasting his/her time you'll derive the benefit in the future. You'll always have a name to send your press releases to.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Get to know the format of your local papers/radio/TV so you know exactly what kinds of stories they normally carry, where and when. The letters pages of papers are often excellent places to publicise events, comment on behalf of your organisation, etc.

The basic aim of a letter to local press is to:

- a. state the problem
- b. say what your organisation is doing to help solve it
- c. emphasise that readers can do something - i.e. support your organisation by attending a special event.

Therefore the basic letter could be as short as three paragraphs.

The letter should be tailored to fit in with the length and style favoured by local newspapers. Analyse the correspondence column before you write the letter.

For newspapers that favour longer letters each point (especially a and b) can be expanded to two or a maximum of three paragraphs which help illustrate, amplify or identify it in the mind of the reader. But keep it simple, direct and accurate. Few letters should be much over 300 words.

PRESS RELEASES.

These are probably the most effective-- and reliable-- way of getting across your message.

From a journalist's point of view, press releases present all the facts in a clear, simple form. That means less work -- something which will make most journalists happy. From your organisation's point of view, a press release means that your statement is down in black and white -- so it won't be misunderstood or misquoted. And you can think carefully before committing yourselves to words.

You can use Press releases for different functions:

to give advance notice of an event.

to provide a report of a meeting.

to announce new campaigns -- such as boycotts -- and provide progress reports.

to give background information on an event/dispute.

to give details of a report.

As stated earlier, there are numerous benefits in putting out a press release. But to obtain maximum benefit, you have to make sure they are complete.

Firstly to make life easier, give your press release a heading. If workers at a factory go on strike, and you release information on the strike, headline your press release "Wilson-Rowntree workers go on strike over pay" or "Wilson-Rowntree workers strike". But keep it simple -- all the headline serves to do is give the journalist an idea what your release is about.

Then make sure you have what journalists call the "five w's" -- what, who, where, when and why.

Right at the beginning of your press release, you must make sure you have:

WHAT is happening

WHO is doing it

WHERE it is happening

WHEN it is happening

WHY it is happening

Here is an example:

Workers

At Wilson Rowntree

went on strike

yesterday

because of bad pay.

WHO

WHERE

WHAT

WHEN

WHY

These "rules" apply to all issues. If you're a community organisation fighting for lower rents, and you decide to protest outside the rent board offices, your press release has to have the five w's.

WHO you are

WHERE you are

WHAT your're doing about the rent

WHEN you're going to do it.

WHY you're going to do it.

This means:

Members of the Cradock Residents' Association
have decided to demonstrate
outside the East Cape Administration Board office
in Cradock

WHO

WHAT

WHERE

tomorrow

WHEN

in protest against the recent 50 percent rent increase

WHY

It's easy. Just state the obvious facts.

And once you've drawn up your press release, check you've answered the five W's.. just to be sure.

Once you've spelt out the main issue, give more detail. Say how many people are involved; what they are asking for; how long they've been negotiating with the authorities, what the response has been; what the workers feel; what future action they're likely to take. Make sure you have all the facts.

There are several other fairly obvious "rules" regarding press releases.
+Use simple language. Short sentences, short words. Don't use cliches - phrases like "the apartheid regime" tend to lose their value after a while -- and don't use jargon -- particularly in trade union news.

+Use vigorous language. Make it easy for the journalist -- use words like accuse, blame, challenge, reject, warn.

+Don't use abbreviations. You and all your members might know what Cradora, Peyco or Ayco stand for, but a good number of journalists won't.

+Use quotes. If your organisation is protesting against an issue, have someone quoted in the press release, such as a president or organiser. Use direct quotes from that person as much as possible. They brighten up a statement, and journalists like to use them in their reports - they personalise

an issue. For example, it's weak to say: Mr. Sisulu said the workers would only go back when they had forced management to pay R3,50 an hour. It is much stronger to say: Mr. Sisulu warned: We won't go back until the bosses pay us what we deserve -- a decent wage."

THE EMBARGO

This is one of the most useful aspects of a press release. It enables you to delay the release of your information. For instance, if your union intends calling a strike, you can send a press release before the time giving the background to the strike. This allows the journalist to do research, find illustrations etc. Or, if you intend releasing a very complex report, say, on allegations of police brutality, with complex interviews and affidavits -- it is helpful for the journalist to be given time to study that information. Then, when he or she writes a report on your document, it will have been fully researched.

Another benefit of an embargo is that it allows you to choose who you release your information to. If you embargo a report until noon, it will be just right for an afternoon newspaper. If you embargo until midnight, it is ideal for a morning paper. It is up to you how you use this, though -- you could upset good contacts if you mess them up with your embargo. Also, don't embargo just for the sake of it. Only use one if it's essential.

Finally make sure your press release is neat. If possible, print it on your organisation's letterhead. Try to have it typed. Number the pages. And avoid making mistakes -- the neater the press release, the more impressed a journalist is likely to be. Don't forget the date and the name of whoever's issuing it, with a telephone number if possible. The journalist may have a query, and they must be able to contact SOMEONE to solve their problem.

NEWS can mean two things.

It can mean the lifeblood of a newspaper/magazine/radio station/TV station. But it can also mean an excuse for denying the people information. "It's not news ---" is a common excuse from those who do the information gathering. By this they could mean:

- + Your information is old, and thus no longer of interest.
- + Your information is commonplace. It has happened often before, and therefore, is again no longer of interest.
- + Your information is too "dangerous", too controversial or too "radical" for whichever publication the news-gatherer works.

As a prospective "Supplier" of information, you will have to guard against these "excuses". You will have to make your information "Newsworthy"---in other words, present it in such a way that the journalist you are speaking to feels he or she has no obligation but to pass your message on.

There are several ways of doing this:

- + Put your "news" in perspective. If it's the first time your organisation is tackling an issue, say so. If it's the first time an issue is being challenged -- such as bus fares, workers' maternity rights etc. say so. If it's the biggest action of its kind, say so. All this helps the journalist see things in perspective.

- + Putting things in perspective also means outlining what sort of strength you have. If your action involves ten community organisations, say so. A bus boycott called by one tiny body means nothing to the cynical journalist. But if it involves all ten civic organisations in one area, it's "news".

- + Make whatever you have to say seem new - even if it isn't.

If you're stating your organisation's viewpoint on an issue, come up with a fresh approach. If the State suddenly bans an organisation, don't come with the predictable "condemnation". Look for new ideas, ideas that will take your response further than other organisations --- such as calling for a day of protest or a poster campaign. Always be on the lookout for something different --- not only will your action be more appealing to apathetic members of your community, it will tickle the imagination of tired journalists, people who are possibly --- understandably -- sick to death of the predictable statement which starts:

"The People's Action League notes with concern"

Finally, remember what "news" means ---it means "new".

That means new ideas, new approaches --- an indication that you have something new to offer the cynical civil servant-types who often have the power to decide whether an issue is "newsworthy" or not.

PRESS CONFERENCES

(urgency)
- the fresher a story,
the more ok.

What is a press conference?

A press conference (or news conference) is an occasion when an organisation invites a number of journalists from different media to hear what the organisation has to say AND to ask questions. IF USED WISELY, press conferences can be a tremendously useful tool for an organisation to gain positive publicity. Some organisations, however, overdo press conferences by holding them when they have little newsworthy to say, wasting both their own and the journalists' time.

What are the advantages of a press conference?

If a press conference is properly organised, it gives a number of strong advantages. The holding of an important press conference can be a news story in itself. A well-run press conference also allows an organisation the opportunity to

- get its message across to a range of media outlets all at one time, saving work and time.
- provide more detailed information and explanation of your organisation's case than you can give in a press release. (Please refer to the separate briefing sheet on Press Releases.)
- present your organisation's case on YOUR terms and at a time and place of YOUR choosing.
- meet face-to-face with reporters, some of whom you may not have met before or only have dealt with over the telephone.

CAUTION

DON'T hold a press conference unless you have something 'newsworthy' (something really quite important) to say. For if you don't have a strong news story for your press conference, journalists who turn up will consider they have wasted their time - or you may risk no-one turning up at all! Either way, you damage your organisation's reputation in the eyes of journalists. You also waste your own organisation's time and money in preparing for and arranging a 'non-event'.

One rule-of-thumb: if you can get most of what your organisation wants to say on a press release, then don't hold a press conference - concentrate your energies instead on distributing a release.

When to call a press conference?

There is no definite or infallible rule about when to hold a press conference but here are some examples of situations where press conferences can be called successfully:

- when your organisation launches a new campaign, starts a new service, takes a new initiative or direction, makes an important new appointment or publishes a new report or survey.
- when your organisation wants to comment in detail on a major issue already in the news e.g. when your organisation is involved in a

controversy or dispute which is attracting media attention and you want to present fully your organisation's side of the case. (N.B. This last situation may require you to set up a press conference very quickly indeed to catch newspaper deadlines.)

What to do?

Holding a press conference usually involves a bit of preparation, though it can be speeded up if need be.

In advance

- 1) Get an invitation out in time to all the relevant journalists you know, giving the basic information about the conference (WHO will be speaking WHEN and WHERE) and some brief information about WHAT the speaker(s) will say and WHY the conference is being held.

You can invite journalists over the phone but it is better, if you have the time, to produce a short release (please see a model invitation at the end of this hand-out) several days before and distributing this by hand delivery, mail or telex so that it arrives in good time.

Generally speaking, the more advance warning you give reporters or their newsdesks the better - unless, of course, it's a real emergency or crisis when you can let journalists know at the last minute that you are going to hold a snap press conference - for example, in half-an-hour's time at somewhere convenient.

- 2) Give careful thought to the timing of the press conference. The best time is often to hold it mid-morning if you're going for the next day's morning paper (avoid clashing with the times of other important events which could reduce attendance at your conference) and the right length of time is generally 30 to 45 minutes. Stick as far as possible to these times (though you may start a few minutes late to wait for late-comers) and try not to over-run as journalists are busy people with other stories to cover or deadlines to meet. Work out the amount of time to allocate to each of your speakers, allowing 10 or 15 minutes for journalists' questions. (N.B. You will need someone to chair the press conference whose job will be to introduce the speakers, take questions from journalists and wind up the conference.)
- 3) Choose a suitable room for the conference in an accessible place and with enough seating. Make sure it is reasonably quiet so that the conference is not disturbed and that any radio reporters present can make a clear recording.

If you have the time and resources

- 4) Plan to make available at the conference a written statement or extract from the speeches and any other background paper you think useful e.g. information about your organisation. Arrange for an exhibition or picture display if you have the material.
- 5) Telephone the key journalists you want to attend just a day or two before the conference to check that they received their invitation. They may not have decided whether to come or not, so have your

arguments ready to persuade them of its importance.

On the day

- 6) Arrange the chairs seating your speakers as a panel (preferably behind a table) at the head of the room facing the seats for the journalists. If you have any relevant posters, placards, banners or other similar material arrange them in a way that will make a strong visual background for photographs.
- 7) Keep a record of the journalists who attend by asking people to write down their name and newspaper on a sheet (see below) which you will provide as they come in.

e.g. 6th JUNE PRESS CONFERENCE LIST

<u>NAME</u>	<u>MEDIA</u>

Make sure your chairperson also asks journalists to identify themselves in the conference when they ask questions. It is useful to have a complete list of the journalists you invited and then after the conference tick them off to see who is missing.

- 8) Be generally helpful and hospitable. For instance if reporters/photographers want a special session to interview/photograph one of your speakers, try to help set this up and find a suitable place for this. If it is possible to lay on tea or coffee after the conference this can provide an excellent opportunity to meet journalists socially and get to know each other better.

- ① Urgency
- ② Invite everyone
- ③ Tape Record conference
- ④ Never answer in hostile way.
- ⑤ Write announcements not up. absolutely
- ⑥ Don't give whole story away in invite
- ⑦ Visuals - eg. banner.
- pics
- ⑧ Have community people/experts

You

Reporters:
Writes story on basis of what you've said.

Other news Source
Press agencies.
Correspondents.

NEWS EDITOR
Checks stories, sometimes changes them.

CHIEF SUB-EDITOR
Designs pages, decides where stories go.

SUB-EDITOR.
Checks grammar, sometimes changes structure of stories. Writes headlines
Checks law.

EDITOR
Oversees all stages, can change and over-rule at all stages.

PRINTER

Story can be changed at any of these three points, without the reporter knowing.

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