

# ADVOCACY INSTITUTE

MAKING SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP STRATEGIC, EFFECTIVE, AND SUSTAINABLE

## USING THE MEDIA TO ADVANCE YOUR ISSUE

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### LEARNING ABOUT THE MEDIA

Simply by calling local media outlets or checking at the library, gather information about the operating policies, audiences, deadlines, and key personnel of local media that might be interested in covering your story. As you put together an overall picture of the media in your community, begin to read, watch, and listen. Note who is writing or reporting about your issue and where. See which media outlets -- newspaper, radio, television -- spend the most time on legislative issues. Identify the particular journalists who cover issues related to your issue and become familiar with their style. This background will prove helpful in your efforts to contact the media.

### GAINING ACCESS TO THE MEDIA

Media outlets daily receive a deluge of story proposals and information from special interest groups pushing a wide range of important issues. Therefore, if you want the media to do a story on your issue, the information you present must be significant, interesting and new; it must stand out and be “newsworthy.” You need to be searching continuously for new pegs, angles and hooks for your issue.

Here are some guidelines to increase the chances for media coverage of your issue:

1. **Make sure the information is timely.** Initiate stories when your issue is timely; relate your issue to a local event or news story in your community.
2. **Localize the issue.** Stories about broad national issues or distant locales may be important but, from a community newspaper’s standpoint, they are less likely to increase circulation and viewership. Try to use local examples and statistics when presenting the issue, instead of -- or in addition to -- broad national statistics. Explain how your issue would affect your hometown or community as well.
3. **Accent the human interest angle.** Explaining how your issue affects real people. Use personal stories to get the message across.
4. **Demonstrate support for your issue** by quoting or having someone of prominence in your community or state as a spokesperson.
5. **Always make sure that your sources are credible** and your information is correct and consistent with the facts.

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## FRAMING YOUR ISSUE

Framing, or shaping the image of the issue to your advantage in the media, is crucial if your efforts to promote legislation are to be successful. Labels and symbols, the building blocks of framing, can shape public attitudes about administrative license revocation. Many labels and symbols capture and reflect widely shared public values. Positive concepts such as health, freedom, legitimacy, and common sense, and negative ones such as extremism, paternalism, and illegitimacy all have meaning to the public and the media.

The way an issue is framed may determine who joins your effort. If you choose the right symbols and associate sound public health and safety objectives with them, you can solidify support and even win new converts to the cause. Frame your position positively; negativity and defensiveness make your message less appealing and identifiable. Present yourself and the issue as pro-safety, pro-health, and pro-freedom from public hazards and death. Speak on behalf of the “public,” “citizens,” and “community,” not “supporters of specific action or legislation.” Come across as representing the community, not a special interest group. Do what you can to frame opponents in a negative context.

## ORGANIZING MATERIALS ON YOUR ISSUE

It is useful to collect a kit of materials that can easily be sent to reporters to inform them about your issue. Materials supplied by state or national advocacy organizations can be helpful. Naturally, these should be supplemented with local facts and data where possible.

The media kit should supply basic information, emphasizing the positive without being deceptive. A cover letter, perhaps containing a “pitch” for a particular story angle, is a helpful addition to the packet. The kit contents may include:

- \* Background information and position papers.
- \* Fact sheets and Q & A brochures.
- \* Quotes or endorsements on your issues by prominent legislators and authorities.
- \* Biographies of issue spokespeople and organizational contacts.
- \* A news release.

Enclose a sample of these materials within a folder with the organizational name on the front.

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## **PITCHING A STORY**

You don't have to wait for reporters to come to you. If you have a new take on your issue or can piggyback on a recent event, it is worthwhile to call (or write) a columnist or reporter (or talk show host) and pitch your idea. Get to know who would be likely to do a story covering these issues. Explain concisely why your issue would make a good story or column right now -- why it is interesting, important, and timely. Introduce yourself, or your experts. This is a selling piece, so spare most of the modesty!

If you call, be particularly sensitive about time. Media people, especially on deadline, don't have much of it. It's a good idea to start out a three or four sentence pitch by asking whether the call comes at a convenient time, or whether another time is better. Get right to the point. Don't argue if there's no interest in the story; go on to pitch someone else. Leap on expressions of interest with offers of more information, then and later. Don't linger unless you feel a strong invitation to do so. Follow up immediately on anything you've promised.

## **NEWS RELEASES**

News releases are short, clearly written accounts of an event, accomplishment, or report. Ideally, the 5 "W's" and an "H" -- who, what, when, where, why, and how -- should be covered in the first two paragraphs.

A news release is typically built like an inverted pyramid: the important (or "thickest") part of the story up front, acting as a foundation for the rest. Releases are structured this way so editors can cut stories from the bottom, without missing critical points; likewise, the releasing organization has some control over its information. Also, it makes it a whole lot easier on editors, who can tell at a glance whether they're interested or not.

### **Basic Pointers**

- \* Put the time for release on the left, organizational contacts on the right, just below the news release letterhead.
- \* Use a headline, bold and centered, summarizing the contents of the release briefly so that journalists can decide immediately whether they are interested.
- \* Be brief. Use short words, short sentences, short paragraphs.
- \* Make the story factual and accurate. Proofread until the release is perfect.
- \* Use active verbs that move the reader forward.

The news release should generally be no longer than a page and a half. If you use a second page, don't split paragraphs between pages. Center "more" at the bottom of the first page. Write an abbreviation of the headline and the page number at the top of the second page.

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## EDITORIAL BOARD MEETINGS

Meeting with editorial boards, the movers and shakers at a newspaper who determine editorial positions on community and other issues, may be an effective means of affecting the media slant on your issue. These points will help you organize a meeting and your approach to it.

1. **Develop a thorough knowledge of what stand the newspaper has taken** and the stories that have been written about your issue. Be sure to read the paper the day of the meeting. Be prepared.
2. **Timing may be important.** A supportive editorial to open a campaign may not be as effective as an editorial released on the eve of an important vote on your issue in the State legislature. On the other hand, an early editorial may also help to rally public support and encourage legislative sponsors, as well as generate media coverage of the issue.
3. **To make an appointment, simply call the editor of the newspaper.** The meeting may be with a few or several board members; if possible, find out who will be there, and advise who will attend from your side. If you can arrange to have a reporter present as well, you might get coverage of the issue even if no editorial is published.
4. **Remember to bring summary fact sheets,** other written materials on your issue, and the names and numbers of experts to contact for more information. Bring enough copies for everyone.
5. **Keep the number of “delegates” to the meeting small,** usually no more than three. A good mix includes a community person, an expert, and a respected community leader.
6. **Prepare an opening statement** summarizing your organization’s position on your issue, the evidence that supports that position, and responses to the most frequent criticisms of your issue.
7. **At the meeting, present your statement and defend your position** as counterarguments are presented. Board members may ask questions that seem “hostile;” don’t take this as a sign that the paper is necessarily opposed to your issue. More often than not, the editors will be testing you and their potential defense of a supportive editorial position.
8. **If the board decides not to run an editorial,** or comes out on the other side, suggest that they publish an op-ed piece or letter to the editor from your group. Avoid offering such an alternative until you are sure you’ve lost their support.
9. **If the board does publish an editorial supporting your point of view,** send a note congratulating the writer on a good editorial. Follow up the editorial with supportive letters to the editor.

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## HANDLING INTERVIEWS

### Broadcast

Identify radio and/or television programs -- news programs with interview segments, public affairs shows, talk shows, call-in shows -- that might cover your issue. Consider the target audience, who you want to hear your message, and the audiences of the various programs. Send a pitch letter to the program's producer introducing your organization, your spokesperson(s), and the issues that s/he can discuss which will interest the given audience. Follow this letter with a phone call. Here are some helpful hints for broadcast interviews:

1. **Before the interview**, watch or tape several shows and study them for interviewing style, setting, and degree of audience participation.  
Organize your information, writing a script if necessary, to develop a strong lead point. Practice giving responses in 30 to 60 second "sound bites" (or shorter) that can easily be quoted.  
If there will be a panel, find out who the other members will be and plan how best to respond to their likely concerns.
2. **Several days before the interview**, send briefing materials to the interviewer or producer.
3. **If the interview is to be done in your office or home**, make sure the setting is quiet and pleasing; turn telephones and paging systems off.
4. **If there is a pre-interview** to establish procedures for the interview, use it to tell the interviewer which points you hope to stress.
5. **During the interview**, assume that the camera and microphone are on from the moment of arrival. (Remember what happened to several presidential candidates!)
6. **Give clear answers, phrasing them to suit the audience.** Use vivid language, examples, and statistics. Answer questions honestly. If you don't know, say so. Keep the time frame of the interview in mind in order to ensure that all topics are covered. Select two or three basic points or themes to stress and keep going back to them. Tell the story you want to tell, not someone else's.
7. **On a panel, use interruptions strategically.** Remember, *you're* on the air; get your message across, and don't allow an adversary to either hog your time or distort the facts or your position. Be assertive but avoid outright rudeness. Smile modestly, where appropriate; be natural and likable.
8. **Thank the interviewer and producer after the program is over.** Offer to provide assistance whenever needed. If the show comes out well, don't hesitate to send a note thanking the producer for the opportunity to express your point of view. There's always the possibility of a next time.

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## Print

Interviewing with print reporters involves similar skills. Here are some additional pointers:

1. **Learn as much as you can about how the interview will be used** and where and when the story will be run. Ask how long the interview will be and whether others are to be interviewed for the same article.
2. **Before the interview**, send the reporter written materials.
3. **During the interview**, stop to think through the answers carefully. Rephrase or clarify statements when necessary. Provide background information that will set comments in context, rather than assuming that the reporter can do so. As much as possible, keep the reporter on your track. If s/he wants to go into issues that are off your point, help if you can, but try to stay focused on your story.
4. **Ask the reporter to check facts** and quotations with you after the interview. Do not hesitate to refer the reporter to others, even issue opponents, who might help with the story. Refer only to credible spokespeople. A good, tough story is always better than one that is confused by incompetents, on either side of the issue.
5. **After a helpful article appears**, even one in which you're not quoted, send a note thanking the reporter, offering to serve as a resource in the future.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A good way to share your viewpoint on your issue is to write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper. The "Letters to the Editor" section of a newspaper is among its most highly read parts; it appears every day and is intended to, and often does, reflect the mood of the people or a current debate within the community.

You can take the initiative to alert readers or respond to a previous letter or article advocating the "other side." Even a letter applauding another letter writer, journalist or editorial position may be appropriate and successful at times.

Generally, one responds to a letter, article or editorial that omits important facts, gives false or misleading information, or makes key points that need clarification. Exposing the private or special interests of the author of a published letter or of a source in an article (if his or her true affiliation funding, or allegiance was not identified) is also a good reason to communicate with the paper and the public.

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Newspaper editorial policies for deciding which letters to publish vary widely. Major dailies may place a greater emphasis on publishing letters from credentialed authorities, while smaller papers are generally more inclined toward publishing letters from grassroots citizens. Take this into consideration when deciding on a strategy that will improve your chances of getting published. Pursuing both approaches simultaneously might be the best technique.

A barrage of letters can help set a community agenda, stimulate editorial and news coverage, and help educate community leaders and politicians on your issues. This can be a very effective tactic to build pressure under state legislatures to pass the bill.

Never bombard a newspaper with multiple copies of the same “form” letter. Each person’s viewpoint should be expressed individually and originally. Each letter writer must be clear on the facts and issues so that the letters don’t contradict each other. An organized group letter, listing a number (usually two or three) of prominent community or organizational leaders, can also work to get your message to voters and legislators.

After determining a strategy, be sure you know the newspaper’s letter requirements and how it should be submitted. Many papers have restrictions on length, require the letters to be typed, and signed with a phone and address, etc. Looking in the “Letters to the Editor” column or calling the letters editor of the newspaper should provide the necessary information.

Here are some guidelines to keep in mind in writing a letter to the editor:

1. **Be timely.** Make sure your letter is relevant to current news by relating it to a recent news event or published article or report.
2. **Be concise and to the point.** You will have a far better chance of getting your letter published if it is brief and gets to the point of your message quickly. Keep in mind the concept of “tight-writing” by being succinct and eliminating extra words. Spend time editing and fine-tuning your letter.
3. **Use facts and examples to back up your opinion.** A few important facts and brief examples will naturally strengthen and illustrate your point. If responding to a previous letter or article, be sure to bring up facts or details that were overlooked or misleading.
4. **Be sure to explain the subject to the reader first.** Don’t assume that readers will know what you are writing about. If you are writing in response to an article or previous letter to the editor, begin your own letter by naming the article or letter and the date it appeared.
5. **Use a local angle for the most impact.** The “Letters to the Editor” column is the section where the newspaper interacts most directly with the community. Letters with a local angle therefore have a better chance of publication.
6. **Be creative and original.** Don’t hesitate to make judicious use of humor, irony or outrage. Try the unexpected, be provocative, help the reader gain a new perspective on the issue.