Handout 15: Dealing with the Media

Using the media is an essential part of the fight or defend public and community interests. At a national and metropolitan level it is often a hard task to try to win media coverage. However, local media is often overlooked when campaigning, and it is here organisations and individuals can make a difference. You should be aware the media will not necessarily treat the story from the point of view you want.

Working with the Media – Some Tips

- Where possible, develop working relationships with the media to enhance your opportunities to have your media releases published and provide interviews.

- Be sure to have a current list of media contacts across both print and electronic.

- Don’t forget the use of the ethnic media or Indigenous Times, – reach all the audience not just some!

- Media Releases: If you decide to issue a media release, there is key information which must be included. This information includes the date it is issued; which groups are involved; and, most importantly, contact phone numbers for follow up phone calls, interviews etc. Make sure the numbers you give will be answered. If you give an office number, back this up with a mobile phone number or an after hours number.

- How do I approach the media? Do it in a business-like manner, either by letter, media release or phone. If, as in the case of the campaign launch, it warrants it, call a news conference.

- Does the story have a new angle? The trick is look for the latest development and publicise that. Different media have different needs - print needs pictures and words, radio needs sound, television needs images.

- Have you told the media about your event? Don't wait until the last minute before sending out your media release. Often papers have deadlines which are well in advance of publication days. A quick telephone call to your local newspaper or radio station will let you know their specific deadlines.

How to Present Effective Media Releases:

The first paragraph should include the "five W's" -- who, what, where, when, and why. Don't forget, your first goal is to get them to come to your event. If you have a high-profile person who will attract media, include his name in this first paragraph. Make sure:

- Source needs to be identifiable (agency letterhead)
• Brief and compact (short and to the point)
• Well presented (neat)
• Read like someone else wants to read it
• Use short sentences. Put your most important piece of information at the top. Each sentence should be a separate paragraph
• Use positive words. Use active voice (We have decided, rather than it has been decided)
• Simple (don’t assume anyone knows anything about your issue/s)
• Quotes (what you or someone else said) Make clear what are direct quotes by using quote marks
• Impact statement at the beginning of the story
• Attractive (appealing) heading
• Avoid jargon or mumbo jumbo. Proof-read (check your text) for errors
• Be accurate and precise
• Write in the third person (for example, "the protest group will hold a rally", not "we will hold a rally").

Other Important Points

• Be aware of when the paper goes to print – timing is everything
• Don’t clash with other significant events (you won’t be prioritised over the Prime Minister’s visit or a violent event)
• Develop contacts with the media – work up a good reputation
• Appoint, support and train One key spokesperson: It’s important to have one key spokesperson who can do any follow up interviews on your subject. By picking a spokesperson you make sure you get a consistent message across.

Media Interviews

Prepare yourself for the interview before the interview by jotting down the most significant points of your issue.

• Stay focused – don’t be drawn into other conversations
• Speak clearly – avoid workplace jargon
• Be selective – don’t raise too many issues
• Be dramatic – theatrical to maintain audience interest
• Don’t use statistical information – you will lose your audience
• Be on time
• Select your program – don’t provide interviews with known non-sympathisers
• Be clear on how much time you have
• If you don’t know the answer to a question – repeat your story in a different way – if challenged you can always say your issue was more important
• Where possible ask for the questions before you go on air – then you can consult with other colleagues for an appropriate response
• Be firm – don’t get angry
• Speak in understandable language – remember you are in other people’s lounge rooms, cars, etc.
• Always remember that your story is in competition with many others. Only seventeen minutes of each half-hour news show is actually news. When you consider time spent on sports, entertainment, weather, and other items the time is even shorter. Your event needs to be interesting enough to capture a few of those precious minutes

• If you have a story, get it out with your own spin instead of waiting for the other side to do their twist on the truth. If you know there is going to be a negative story, counter it someplace else first.

Creating A Media List

It is important to develop and maintain a list of print and electronic media outlets. The press mailing list should contain the name of the publication, station, or network, its address, and the names of people that you know at each location. While it is important to mail releases to the assignment desk, it is also important to target specific reporters with whom you may have already developed an ongoing relationship. It is all right to send multiple releases to the same place. Your story may not interest one person, but “hook” someone else.

If you have a computerized press mailing list, organize it according to type and reach of the media organization (i.e., local, national, religious, women, etc.), so that you can target specific areas when necessary. For instance, your story may be strictly a local story, and sending a press release to all of the national media outlets is inappropriate.