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Working with the Media: Strategies and Tips for Success

Consider the following when identifying opportunities in the media to get your message out:

If funds permit, do what commercial advertisers do: **buy space or time in your local media**. Paid advertising allows you to control the placement and timing of your message, which may be critical in cases such as an election. Friends of the Library, a business or other partner may underwrite the cost.

Consider the **community publications** where your target audiences get their information. Ask your partner organizations if they would be willing to carry news or feature articles about the library in their newsletters or magazines. Offer to supply articles for legislators' district newsletters, the campus newspaper, alumni magazine, PTA and other publications.

Endorsements from influential newspapers can be powerful both with officials and voters. To seek an endorsement, you may request a meeting with the editorial board of your newspaper. The editorial board generally consists of the editorial page editor and other key staff. See the paper's Web site for contact information. These meetings—usually about an hour—are an opportunity for you to make the case for support and to answer questions. You will want to take two or three of your most articulate and influential advocates, fact sheets and other briefing materials. Be prepared to make a brief—about 15-minutes—presentation and to answer difficult questions. Some radio and TV stations make endorsements too.

Feature stories do not have a strong time element. These are generally longer than new stories and can explore an issue in more depth. Feature stories might profile noteworthy people or report on the local impact of a national trend or issue, e.g. shrinking tax dollars. Watch for national news stories on topics such as literacy or censorship that you can tie into. National observances such as National Library Week may sometimes spur a feature story on the library.

Writing a **letter to the editor** is an easy way to show your support. Most newspapers and some electronic outlets carry letters to the editor as a way for their readers/listeners to voice their views on items in the news. For example, if your library has a referendum coming up, you may wish to write a letter-to-the-editor saying why you think it is in the community's best interest. If the library is being unfairly targeted for cuts, you may ask members of the board or Friends to write letters expressing their concern. Check the paper or Web site for guidelines.

Send an advisory well in advance to alert news/assignment editors to events or developments of wide interest. The media advisory can be a simple outline highlighting the 5W's (Who, What, Where, When, Why—How), availability of spokespeople, photo opportunities and contact information—no more than one page. Follow up with a phone call or e-mail to request coverage and to answer any questions.

You may wish to hold a **news conference** or briefing but only if you have an announcement of such magnitude or urgency that it is best released all at once to all media. This is rarely the case. Exceptions might be the immediate and unexpected closing of a library, announcement of a major fundraising campaign, a ballot referendum or a policy change with major impact. Make sure your spokespeople are ready to answer both the obvious and more difficult questions and have handouts ready.

A **news release** should have the most critical information in the first paragraph with facts of lesser importance in descending order. It should be concise—no more than 2 pages—and include the name of a contact, telephone and/or e-mail. Be sure to cover the 5W's. You will want to have a contact person(s) at each media outlet. These contacts may be different for different topics. You will want to know guidelines, deadlines and whether it is best to mail, fax, or e-mail copy. Most publications and stations post this information on their Web sites. Be sure to mention photo opportunities, especially for television. Some smaller newspapers may accept photos that you submit.

Op-eds are guest columns that appear opposite a newspaper's editorials. Clearly representing the viewpoint of the writer, the op-ed is an opportunity to get your message before a larger audience. While library staff may help draft the piece, it is often better to have it submitted by the board president, faculty member or other respected figure. Check the publication or its Web site for word length (usually around 700 words) and other submission guidelines. Be sure to include your name, affiliation and contact information. Send copies of the published piece to those you are seeking to influence—elected officials, the college president or school board. Some radio and TV stations also will air guest opinions. Check the Web site or call the news or public affairs director for information.

Most radio and TV stations air community calendars and/or **public service announcements** free of charge for nonprofit community groups. These messages generally focus on events or announcements of wide community interest. They are run at the discretion of the station when free airtime is available, which is usually not during prime time. The spots run around 30 seconds (75 words) but may be shorter. Target your message. Don't bother sending an announcement geared to seniors to the local rock station. Be sure to include contact information. Check the station's Web site for guidelines.

Radio and TV Talk show producers are often looking for guest speakers to interview on topical subjects. Send a letter or e-mail proposing your topic, its relevance to their audience and the qualifications of the guest you are proposing. Follow up with a phone call. Make sure your spokesperson is comfortable with the broadcast media, understands the nature of the program, is prepared to adapt the message for a particular audience and can answer any difficult questions. When you listen to talk shows, look for opportunities to bring libraries into the discussion.

Pitching a story simply means suggesting or "selling" a story idea. Journalists are always on the lookout for stories, but they are also bombarded with suggestions. If you know an assignment editor or reporter, simply pick up the phone and call. When sending an e-mail, be sure to include an attention-getting subject line. In either case, be brief. Focus on what is unique or newsworthy. It may help to generate media interest if your story is tied to an issue in the news or a national observance such as National Library Week or School Library Media Month.

It's important that every library have a policy on how to deal with media calls, whether they come through the library's public information office or directly to a staff member, trustee, Friend or advocate leader. There should be a clear understanding of who speaks for the library and when.

If you are being interviewed, remember that you are the expert. You are being interviewed because you have an important story to tell. This fact sheet contains helpful techniques that can help you deliver the message successfully in a variety of settings.

- **Know what media are available to you**, the needs and opportunities each medium presents. Focus on those that reach your target audiences.

- **Assign** one person to serve as media coordinator.

- **Get to know** who covers library, education and related issues for key media. Find out what their interests are and feed them story ideas, fact sheets and articles.

- **Keep track of deadlines.** For radio news, that can be several times a day. Provide information well in advance and don't call reporters when they are working on deadline.

- **Know what's news—and what's not.** News means there is new information. There is generally a time element involved.

- **Have articulate, "mediagenic" spokespeople.**

- **Be available.** Respond to all media calls promptly, even if it's to say "I can't talk right now."

- **Be clear** about who you represent—yourself, your library or library association. If a host misstates your name or affiliation, gently but firmly correct him or her immediately.

- **Know your key message.** Don't feel you have to reinvent the message for every interview. You may have heard the message many times before, but chances are your audience hasn't. The goal is to give a consistent message.

- **Aim to deliver** the key message at least three times to help ensure your audience will hear and remember it.

- **Know your audience.** Find out the name and type of the publication, station or program and the type of readers or listeners it has. Ask the reporter or producer what the "angle" is. Tailor your remarks accordingly.

- **Be prepared** to answer hard questions and develop answers ahead of time. Also be prepared to answer the standard "Who- What-Where- When-Why and How" questions. Identify three talking points, a pertinent statistic, story or example to support your message. Use statistics sparingly.

- **Write your key messages**, talking points and tough questions on note cards. Review them before you do an interview. Keep them in front of you when doing radio or telephone interviews.

- **Talk in "sound bites."** This is especially important with broadcast media when you may have only about 12 seconds to respond. Your key message should be short and pithy. Practice limiting your answers to 25 words or less. If reporters want more, they will ask more questions.

- **Stay in control.** Keep your answers focused and "on message." Learn to use the techniques in the Staying in Control section.

- **Don't be afraid** to say "I don't know." Do not give inaccurate information. If you are unsure, it's better to simply say, "I'm sorry I don't know that. I'll be glad to check and get back to you."
- **Help** the reporter or interviewer help the audience understand. Provide fact sheets and other background materials. Suggest other spokespeople to contact.
- **Practice. Practice. Practice.** Practice talking in sound bites and staying in control at staff and board meetings and in daily conversation. The more you do it, the better and more comfortable you'll be.
- **Remember to smile.** It's important to come across as friendly and likable as well as professional.
- **Stay focused.** An interview is not a conversation. It's conversational. The interviewer has a job to do. Do not let down your guard.

IN FRONT OF THE MICROPHONE: BROADCAST MEDIA

To be effective on radio or TV, you must understand the nature of the medium. For radio interviews, voice quality and expression are critical. Use your voice to project enthusiasm, even a smile. Try to picture the audience and speak directly to them.

Appearance matters to television viewers. A polished appearance and presentation add to your credibility. Keeping your eyebrows raised makes you appear more open and honest. Avoid the "closed body" with arms folded, legs crossed. Keep hands in your lap, palms up so you can easily gesture.

When dressing, avoid harsh colors like black, navy, white or bright red. Rich colors such as bright blues, rust, wine or purple are flattering for most women, as are charcoal gray or brown for men. A suit and blouse with an open collar is flattering to most women. Avoid dangling earrings and necklaces that distract from your message. Both women and men should avoid fussy prints in blouses, shirts or ties.

Be sure to look at the interviewer—not the audience or the camera, unless you are doing an interview by remote.

Summary: An Effective Library Advocate. . .

- Is informed and articulate.
- Is available at a moment's notice.
- Is not afraid to speak out.
- Is well connected.
- Knows the message and key audiences.
- Talks in sound bites.
- Stays in control.
- Tells stories.