

LET THE WORLD KNOW: MAKE YOUR CAUSE NEWS

Dollar for dollar, using the media can be your most cost-effective strategy. Here's how to turn your cause into news and get everyone talking.

BY JASON SALZMAN

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Founded in 1994, Rocky Mountain Media Watch (RMMW) has challenged news media to air stories that inform and connect our communities. As part of its campaign for better news, it has analyzed TV news programs across the U.S. Its latest report, "Pavlov's TV Dogs, A Snapshot of Local TV News in America," focused national media attention on the overdose of stories about fluff ("Bears Eat Popsicles") and mayhem (disaster and crime) on local news broadcasts.

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Making an "event" of your cause is vital to garnering news coverage. The news media, particularly television, rarely cover ideas, isolated opinions, or abstract views. But with some creativity, you can transform an idea or opinion about a cause into an event—with a visual component—that will interest the media.

Eleven Steps & You're News

Here are 11 key steps for organizing a media event:

Step 1: Refine Your Message

First, identify one simple message that you want to communicate. Your message should be one phrase (for instance, "Don't drink and drive"). Build your media event—with images, slogans, soundbites, signs, location—around that phrase. Remember the advice of Henry Thoreau: "Simplify, simplify, simplify."

Step 2: Select the Right Event

Sometimes you know what your event will be (for example, you're releasing a major report), and you need to embellish it with appropriate visual imagery, location, and timing. In other cases, you'll have to create your own event or "stunt" (dropping a banner from a building, dressing in costume, a candlelight vigil) to gain coverage. (For more stunt ideas, see the following section, "Six Ways to Stage Your Own Stunt." For a checklist of newsworthy characteristics, see page 41.) Consider approaching a media outlet to sponsor your event, and remember, few stories without appealing images land on TV.

Step 3: Choose the Right Time

Reporters generally work regular hours. Both broadcast and print media pare down staffs on weekends and after deadlines on weekdays, leaving only a couple of reporters in the newsroom instead of dozens. It's best to stage your event Monday through Thursday between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Plan an event with excellent visuals for 5 p.m. or 10 p.m., allowing local TV news to broadcast live at the scene. Staging an event on Friday is not a good idea because Saturday's paper usually has fewer pages of news. For weekends, try Sunday morning—before professional sports games begin.

You can increase the news value of an image-based stunt by staging it when a major story breaks and local news outlets are looking for

“local angles.” To take advantage of these situations, you need to react quickly: You need to be visible when your cause is in the news—not the following week. Here are some examples of “legitimate” news events that can make a stunt more newsworthy: a public hearing, a court decision, the passage of a bill, a veto, a major speech, an anniversary, or a nomination.

Step 4: Find a Good Location

Your event’s location should maximize its chances of being covered. Select a site close to the downtown area and convenient for busy reporters. Make sure you have a permit, if necessary.

Your location should also help communicate your message. For example, if you are promoting an after-school recreation program to counter gang violence, you could stage your event in a playground, with kids playing basketball in the background.

Step 5: Compile a Media List

Obtain a list of news media from the library or from a like-minded nonprofit organization. Be sure to take advantage of the diversity of the media. Some outlets seek stories that the major media ignore or serve specific audiences that you may want to reach. Don’t ignore wire services, neighborhood newspapers, alternative weeklies, community radio, and others. (See page 42 for more on news outlets.)

Step 6: Write a News Release

“I might have 30 seconds to spend on a news release,” says Paul Day, a veteran reporter for Denver’s CBS affiliate, adding that he has to be “hit over the head with ideas” and that the important information should “leap off the page.”

Keep your news release short and clear. It should explain your event in one page, emphasizing what’s unique and visually interesting. Spend 75 percent of your time writing the headline and first paragraph.

Step 7: Distribute the Release

Often you need not send a press release to all media outlets you’ve got on file. If your strategy dictates that you reach only a segment of your community, target outlets that will reach that group. For example, if you’re sending a message about birth control to teenagers, you’ll want to focus on pop radio, not the newspaper.

Step 8: Reach Out and Call a Reporter

You could have the country’s best event, the planet’s best release, the universe’s most up-to-date media list—and none of it may matter unless you make follow-up calls to journalists. Call well before your event and again on the morning of your event.

Don’t be afraid. Although busy, most journalists are friendly people who want to hear from you. Be aggressive, persistent, and polite. “It’s a lot easier to ignore a piece of paper than a phone call,” says *Albuquerque Journal* reporter John Fleck.

Step 9: Practice for Interviews

Develop different styles for communicating and interacting with television, radio, and print journalists. This will maximize the chances that your central message—not some tangential point—will be delivered to the public.

Practice delivering “soundbites” that capture your message. A soundbite should be short (no longer than five to 12 seconds) and quotable. (See examples on page 43.) Often the best soundbites are connected to the imagery of your event. For instance, activists in Texas were protesting the restart of a nuclear reactor. It was widely regarded as a lemon. So, they dressed as lemons and used this soundbite: “Restarting this reactor would sour the economy of Texas.”

“Reporters have their ears open for a phrase that’s going to ring,” says Rocky Mountain News reporter Bill Scanlon. “There is nothing wrong with practicing.”

Step 10: Hold a Press Conference

Many people think of “publicity,” and “press conference” pops into their minds. In reality, a press con-

Media attention tends to make good things happen.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A NEWSWORTHY EVENT

- Novelty
 - Shock
 - Conflict
 - Simplicity
 - Kids
- Public figure involved
 - Humor
 - Outdoors
 - Action
- Bright images and props
 - New information

CHARACTERISTICS OF A LESS NEWSWORTHY EVENT

- Indoors
 - People reading scripts
 - Complex idea
 - Unknown participants
 - Bad timing (Friday afternoon, for example)

“The sexy and trendy and interesting stuff will take precedence over the long-range stuff,” says *Denver Post* writer Jack Cox. “That’s how news decisions are made.”

ference is usually the wrong way to attract the media. It's often better to stage an event and have a spokesperson available to give interviews as requested.

But a press conference is called for when you expect many news outlets to cover an event or an announcement. Under these circumstances, a press conference should last about 20 minutes, plus 10 minutes for questions, with a maximum of four speakers. Start on time and have a sign-in sheet for reporters. Practice the entire press conference in advance, including questions, and make sure your speakers have prods to hold.

Even if you decide not to hold a formal press conference, you should distribute a fold-

er of easy-to-read information at your event. Don't include more than 10 pages of material in this "press packet," including: your news release, brief biographies of speakers at your event, and two recent articles about your cause, preferably from a national publication.

Step 11: Assess Your Event

Take time to evaluate your media event. Don't take it personally if you received scant coverage. It wasn't your fault that Mayor Blunder broke his leg tripping over a pothole, dominating the day's news. The best definition of news is "what's in the newspaper," and this changes each day with the competition.

Don't give up. But also remember that

eight fleeting inches of ink in the daily newspaper can be next to worthless if it is not linked to a strategy for winning your campaign (for example, reaching decision makers or a targeted audience).

Think strategy first, media second.

Six Ways to Stage Your Own Stunt

Recognize when your organization is doing something visually interesting, and publicize it. Cleaning up a river, removing graffiti, helping a senior citizen find a lost cat—all can be news if presented right. Here are some ideas

HOW TO LEARN MORE

Publications

Most large nonprofit organizations produce media guides specifically about their issue for internal use. Ask a national group that works on your issue if it has one.

You'll also find a stack of general books on public relations—mostly about promoting products and for-profit events—in the library. It's worth perusing them for an hour on a rainy afternoon.

An excellent media guide, appropriately entitled *Media How-to Guidebook*, is available from the San Francisco Media Alliance, 814 Mission Street, No. 295, San Francisco, California 94103.

A series of publications providing in-depth, yet accessible information on public relations for nonprofits is available from the Benton Foundation (1634 I Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006). The titles are: *Strategic Media*, *Talk Radio*, *Voice Programs*, *Op-eds*, *Using Video*, *Media Advocacy*, *Cable Access*, *Electronic Networking*, and *Independent Features*.

A series of communication articles in *Nonprofit World* contains helpful advice on working with the media. See, for example, "When Reality Becomes Image: Dealing with Media Dilemmas of the TV Age," *Nonprofit World*, September–October 1994, and "Take a Stand! Using Issues Management to Market Your Organization," *Nonprofit World*, July–August 1996. Also see Robert Tingle's *Festival Success Guide* for advice on holding an event. These and other publications on working with the media and holding events are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

News Outlets:

First check with local and national organizations, including associations of nonprofit groups, for lists of news outlets. Then try:

Working Press of the Nation, New Providence, NJ: National Register Publishing. This three-volume set contains detailed information on

print and broadcast outlets, including names of reporters and editors, across the country. If it's not in your library, you'll probably find other reference books, like Bacon's guides, that are essentially the same.

Media & Communications Consultants

Rocky Mountain Media Watch
Box 18858

Denver, CO 80218

303-832-7558

(Offers media "how-to" workshops and media strategy advice for nonprofits.)

Communications Consortium
1333 H Street, N.W., No. 700

Washington, DC 20005

(Public interest media consulting.)

Center For Strategic Communications

505 Eighth Ave., No. 2000

New York, NY 10018

(Provides an array of publications and services.)

Center for Media Literacy

1962 Shenandoah

Los Angeles, CA 90034

(Resources covering many media issues.)

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting

130 West 25th Street

New York, NY 10001

(Publishes *EXTRA*, a magazine for media watchdogs.)

Public Media Center

466 Green Street

San Francisco, CA 94133

(A good source for creative advertising help.)

that are sure to be newsworthy—especially on a slow news day.

1. Show the Actual Problem

Display a piece of the actual problem—by offering politicians water from a contaminated site, publicly exposing elements of poverty, and the like. Disabled activists in Denver demonstrated the need for access to the Capitol by abandoning their wheelchairs and crawling up the Capitol steps. Such graphic demonstrations are hard to forget.

2. Create a Replica of the Problem

After viewing political artist Barbara Donachy's 34,000 miniature clay bombs and submarines representing the U.S. nuclear arsenal, a teacher told the *International Herald Tribune*: "Wow, I thought we only had 100 bombs. It's good to have something like this so people know."

Activists in Arizona illustrated the cozy relationship between the state's environmental regulators and an incinerator company by pulling off this stunt: They hauled a bed to the Capitol steps and put effigies of the government officials and polluters in bed together. They said they would remain "until the government gets out of bed with the polluters." TV stations gave live updates from the bed.

3. Make the Most of a Petition

Instead of quietly delivering petitions to politicians, a pro-choice group in Kansas City drew media coverage by draping taped petitions over the railings of the Capitol rotunda. Similarly, the AFL-CIO delivered a "petition carpet" of signatures on a 36-inch-wide roll of paper, which was unfurled on the Capitol steps.

4. Remember: Cameras Love Costumes

Activists in Boulder, Colorado, dressed in pig costumes to make the point that the Rocky Flats nuclear bomb plant was a "pork-barrel waste of money." Other activists have dressed as clowns ("Stop clowning around in the legislature"), Santa Claus ("Stop giving corporations all the gifts"), trees ("Stop clear-cutting our forests"), sacred cows ("Cut expensive pet projects of politicians"), and almost anything else you can think of.

5. Find a Newsmaker to Endorse Your Cause

After struggling to publicize the fight against a waste dump, activists in Minnesota enlisted Bonnie Raitt to perform a benefit concert. The concert generated intense media coverage. Use the same strategy by finding a celebrity or politician to endorse your cause, and announce it to the media.

6. You Give the Grades: the Worst or the Best

Each year for over 20 years, Environmental Action in Washington, D.C., inducts 12 members of Congress into an elite club: the "Dirty Dozen." These lawmakers are, in Environmental Action's opinion, the most offensive, outrageous enemies of the environment who (dis)grace the halls of Congress. Environmental Action's annual press conference to announce the awards is well attended.

Other nonprofits have publicized their supporters and foes by giving out report cards (with Fs or As), flowers, tickets, and Valentine's Day gifts. Even awards for volunteers, if staged creatively, can be newsworthy.

Six More Ways to Publicize Your Cause

Creating a media event is one way to draw attention to your cause. But, there are many other ways to use the media for publicity. Here are a few:

1. Lobby Editorial Writers

A newspaper gives its official positions in its unsigned editorials. You can lobby a newspaper to adopt your view as its official position. Here's how to do so:

- Call the paper and ask to speak with the editorial writer who specializes in your cause.
- Briefly explain your position.
- Ask what they need from you. Answer questions directly.
- Find out if they would like to meet in person with your group.
- Send a follow-up note with written information (no more than 10 pages).

2. Write a Guest Opinion

EXAMPLES OF TV & RADIO SOUNDBITES

"We are here today to stop police brutality before it stops us."

○

"My yard is contaminated. Where are my kids going to play?"

○

"If the Norwegian government is unwilling to stop the whale hunt, we'll make them stop."

○

You will rarely hear a soundbite of more than 10–15 seconds.

Call the editorial page at the newspaper and ask for the editor of the op-ed page. This is the person who decides, sometimes with other editors' input, which opinion columns by guests—like you—will appear in the paper.

Once you get through, which may take repeated calls, describe the gist of your piece and ask if they would like to take a look at it. If the answer is yes, mail or fax your submission, a short biography of yourself, and a cover letter reminding the editor of your conversation. Call after two weeks to find out if a decision has been made.

3. Submit Letters-to-the-Editor

Send letters to newspapers and magazines. Often, a letter-to-the-editor reaches more people than a longer guest opinion. Here are some tips:

- Stick to the 100-word limit that most publications set. It's better for you than a faceless editor to control what gets cut.
- Read the letters page. You'll know if your brilliant idea occurred to someone else first, and you'll get a sense of style.
- Write in the summer when there's less competition.
- Don't write too frequently. Once every three months is often enough.

4. Convince a Columnist to Write about Your Issue

Read as many pieces by local columnists as you can endure. Identify the ones who, based on their work, might have an interest in your cause. Then offer them ideas for columns suited to “their issues” and style of writing.

But save your time and theirs by contacting the appropriate columnists in the appropriate manner:

- On the phone, be brief. Practice in advance. You’ll know within a few minutes whether the columnist is interested in your ideas. Assemble concise written information to send, if necessary.
- You can choose to write a one-page letter with your idea. Address the envelope by hand to insure that it gets opened amid the sea of junk mail columnists receive. Follow up with a phone call in a week.
- Consider contacting a columnist who disagrees with you about your cause. An angry column opposing your position may kick up a debate that you’ll eventually win.

5. Tune Your Cause to Talk Radio

If you’ve got the right subject and an articulate spokesperson, use talk shows to get your message out. Before calling, learn which programs might air an issue like yours. Listen to as much talk radio as you can without going crazy. Different shows focus on different themes—sports, health, current affairs, astrology, cars, and so on.

“Do some research,” advises David Lauer, producer of a popular talk show on Denver’s KOA radio. “I get many offers for guests that just don’t have a chance.”

Once you’ve identified an appropriate show, call the radio station and ask for the name of the producer of that show. Send the producer a one-page description of your topic and guest. Then follow up with a phone call.

If the producer is not interested, do take “no” for an answer and say goodbye without dragging out the conversation or becoming confrontational. “Losing gracefully is appreciated,” says Lauer. “I’ll be

- Pitch your idea over the phone. Ask if a reporter has a minute to talk. If so, lay out your idea in less than a minute, referring to visual elements if you are talking to a television journalist.
- You can pitch a story to more than one journalist at a time. If you decide to speak to only one reporter, however, be sure to explain that this is an “exclusive.” Your chances of being covered are better.

Landing on Oprah Is Not a Strategy

Criticism of nonprofit groups whose only goal is to catch the attention of Oprah or the 10:00 news is justified. Some nonprofits are so enamored of media coverage that they think it is an end in itself.

It isn’t. Efforts to land in the news should be connected to a larger strategy about how to make progress on an issue. It should be clear how media work fits into this strategy.

Overall, however, media attention tends to make good things happen. News coverage of a small nonprofit can vastly increase the likelihood that the organization will survive financially and be effective at its mission. For nonprofits of any size, news coverage attracts donors, builds credibility, draws in volunteers, and energizes existing staff.

Gaining media attention can be one of the cheapest tools a nonprofit has available. You can generate hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of air time by organizing a media event costing under \$10. Dollar for dollar, manipulating the media is a powerful tactic to change the world. ■

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more receptive next time they call.”

6. Pitch Story Ideas about Your Cause

Day after day, reporters are expected not only to write stories but to uncover them. They need your help. They want you to “pitch” them new ideas.

Your job is to know your issue well enough to give reporters what they need. If you do, they can play a significant role in shaping debate about your cause. Here are the steps to take:

- Think constantly about story ideas and scour your own sources for new information. Realize that journalists don’t have the time you do to think about the progression of an issue. Your goal should be to stay ahead of the media with story ideas.
- Ask yourself if your idea is of significant interest. Don’t mistake insignificant changes for newsworthy developments. Remember reporters have the big picture—and your average citizen—on their minds.

A MEDIA HANDBOOK FOR NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

This article is excerpted from *Let the World Know: Make Your Cause News*, a media handbook for nonprofit organizations and community activists. The book explains how to book a guest on talk radio, deliver soundbites, stage media events, write effective press releases, compile media lists, contact reporters, create newsworthy visual imagery, become a resource for journalists, develop a media strategy, maintain “credibility,” lobby editorial writers, and much more.

Let the World Know is based on interviews with media-savvy activists and professional journalists, whose quotes appear throughout the text. It was published by Denver-based Rocky Mountain Media Watch. (To order, see the *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue.)