

Extraordinary Impact on an Ordinary Budget: It's Possible with These Tactics

You don't need a big budget to spread your message far and wide.

By Jennifer R. Farmer

If you want people to support your organization, first they need to know about you and the good work you do. One of the best ways to spread that message is to break through in the media. Here are the principles that will help you do so:

Contact the Right Person, the Right Way

Before you contact members of the media – reporters, producers, TV hosts, bloggers, and others – learn as much as you can about them. This will ensure you're reaching out to the right person and avoid the embarrassment of being ill-informed.

It's important to know each person's preferred method of contact. Some will respond only to e-mails, others only to phone calls. To be certain you have up-to-date contact information, you can use resources such as HeyPress, ANewsTip, and MuckRack that keep you on top of transitions in various media outlets. You can also keep your ear to the ground by maintaining close relationships with journalists and other PR professionals. Joining PR listservs will help assure you're receiving timely information.

Before getting in touch with reporters or producers, you should have a sense of the issues they cover, the outlets they work for, and their topics of interest. Research their most recent stories so you don't miss any critical information and waste your – and their – time. There are few things as embarrassing as enthusiastically sharing what you think is a new story idea only to hear that it's already been covered.

Be the Person Whose Calls They'll Answer

You need to make friends with people in the media so that they'll want to cover your stories. To do so, you must build credibility. That means making sure your stories are meaningful, accurate, and pertinent to the media's audience.

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If you send a news release that sounds like an advertisement for your organization, media people will lose respect for you and ignore your calls in the future. On the other hand, if you consistently send out interesting, relevant stories, journalists will look to you when they want to interview someone for their own stories – and that's the best publicity you can get.

The goal is maintaining your credibility so you can promote your organization's issues in the future. You want members of the press to take you seriously.

It's not enough to be engaged in deeply meaningful work. If reporters don't find you credible (meaning they don't trust that you're an expert in your field and providing sound, newsworthy information), you'll likely have minimal success.

Look Beyond the News Release

Be creative in the ways you garner media attention. Examples:

Read the news with the intention of acting on what you read. Write a letter to the editor or a guest column in response to an article or blog.

Use graphics and videography to share your message. Develop a short video, infographic, or photo exhibit highlighting the impact of a policy.

Promote with YouTube. Record short vignettes talking about your cause and promote them via a YouTube channel.

Share important information by organizing a media conference call or webinar. For even greater impact, couple it with a Twitter Townhall or a Google Hangout. Also consider creating a Storify to capture the essence of your message.

Use social media platforms such as Facebook Live, Periscope, and LinkedIn, and share blog posts on your organization's site or through blogging sites such as Huffington Post and Medium.

Be Ready to Give an Instant Response

If you're lucky enough to have a reporter contact you, respond immediately – ideally within 10 minutes. Those in the media are on tight deadlines and need prompt answers. Besides, if they're calling you, they're likely calling other potential

“Answer everyone’s most pressing question: “Why should I care?””

sources. Getting your organization included in the story often depends on being the first to respond.

Even if you’re pressed for time, send a quick e-mail, text, or phone call acknowledging the message and providing a time frame by which you’ll reply in more detail. By stopping and acknowledging messages when they come in, you increase the likelihood that you’ll follow up – especially if you set a calendar invite reminding yourself to do so.

Go out of your way to help reporters with their needs. Doing this will solidify your relationships with the press while elevating the issues for which you’re passionate.

These rules are even more crucial if your organization is experiencing a crisis, which is bound to happen at some point, because everyone makes mistakes. Examples of a crisis include an embarrassing conflict of interest, the leak of data, allegations of wrongdoing, or an executive’s sudden departure without a succession plan. The wrong response at such times can alienate donors and supporters, tarnish your organization’s image, and derail your mission. Again, it’s important to respond promptly to media requests for information. Tell the whole truth, explain the situation, and apologize. Doing those things will greatly reduce the story’s negative impact. You may even be able to turn bad news into good.

Whenever you’re in contact with the media, for whatever reason, find an excuse to follow up. Send additional information you think will be helpful, or write a simple thank-you note showing appreciation for their time. Use the initial contact as an opportunity to build a long-term relationship.


Develop a Tight Circle of Media & Validators

Don’t wait till you need the media before asking them to champion you. You want them to know you and your organization before you make an ask. That means building a solid network.

Your network should include not just journalists, editors, producers, and media executives but also third-party validators who can attest to your claims. When thinking about your network, look for trustworthy messengers. Teachers, nurses, judges, and ministers are examples of validators respected by the public. Combining your organizational leader with a trusted public messenger will maximize your media coverage.

As with members of the press, you should know these people before you enlist their help. When you hear interesting

stories, get to know the people involved, and build trusting relationships with them. Then, when you need them, they’ll be your champions.

Cultivating relationships doesn’t require a huge expenditure. Even with a cash-strapped budget, it can yield outsized results. 

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WHAT MAKES A GOOD STORY? A SELF-TEST

People in the media are bombarded by ideas for news stories. To home in on compelling stories and increase the likelihood of coverage for your organization, answer these questions:

- **Why is this story** important now?
- **What makes your angle** unique?
- **Does the story highlight** a compelling personal narrative?
- **Would the story be more appealing** to one media outlet versus another?
- **Is the issue you’re pitching** the first of its kind? The largest? The most comprehensive? Is it surprising or counterintuitive? What sets it apart?
- **Does your story answer** everyone’s most pressing question: “Why should I care?”?

Expand Your Reach Even Further

For more ways to disseminate your stories, see articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

Boosting Visibility (Vol. 27, No. 2)

Two Surprising Ways to Broaden Your Reach Online (Vol. 32, No. 4)

How to Fit into the News (Vol. 35, No. 4)

Benefits & Risks for Nonprofit Leaders Using LinkedIn (Vol. 31, No. 2)

The Power of Story: Bring Your Brand to Life (Vol. 34, No. 4)

Four Steps to Effective Networking (Vol. 30, No. 1)

How to Publicize Your Organization on a Small Budget (Vol. 31, No. 1)

The Best Way to Tell Your Organization’s Story? Capture It on Video (Vol. 35, No. 4)

Negative Publicity: Do Nonprofits Have a Plan? (Vol. 18, No. 6)

How to Get Quoted in the Press (Vol. 25, No. 4)