

Reaching out to the media

1. Know what media is available to you.

Make a list of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television in your city or state. Include specialty publications directed at business people, parents, senior citizens, or minorities. Note radio and TV talk shows and who their audiences are. Be sure to include stations operated by schools, colleges, and cable companies.

2. Build relationships. Make it a point to know who covers library, education, and related issues for key media. Call or stop by to introduce yourself and your organization—don't ask for anything, but let them know they will be hearing from you. Find out what their particular interests are and feed them story ideas, fact sheets, articles of interest.

3. Know what's news—and what's not. Reporters are always looking for good story ideas. These must be on topics of broad interest and local impact. And they must offer "new" information that will be useful to their readers, viewers or listeners. Watch for stories in the headlines—literacy, the homeless, censorship—that you can tie into. Perhaps your library has a special program for the homeless or remedial tutoring program for college students.

4. Develop a strategy. Define your messages and audiences. Review your media list. Keep a list of reporters/editors that you have worked with and their particular interests. Target your media accordingly.

5. Write a pitch letter. Send a letter to a specific editor/reporter. Briefly explain your story idea and why it is important. Include relevant examples, names of possible spokespersons (including but not limited to yourself and your organization), and photo possibilities. Call to check on the status, offer your assistance, or find out why the idea wasn't accepted.

6. Send a letter to the editor. Write your comments on a particular topic in the news, how it relates to libraries and the public's Right to Know. Send a copy of the printed letter to "significant others" you wish to influence—the mayor, college board of trustees, or school principal.

7. Write articles for nonlibrary publications.

A state magazine might be interested in an article on the status of library preservation in your state. A Chamber of Commerce publication might be interested in new library services for the business community. Consider an "op/ed" or opinion piece for a newspaper, radio or TV station timed to coincide with Banned Books Week or National Library Week. In any case, check with the appropriate editor first as to interest in the topic, appropriate length, and deadline.

8. Hold a news conference. But *only if* the news is of such magnitude and urgency that it is best released all at once to a large group of media. This is rarely the case. Exceptions might be the immediate (and unexpected) closing of a library or a policy change with enormous impact such as the Huntington Library's decision to release the Dead Sea Scrolls. Have fact sheets and background materials to hand out—and be prepared to answer the question(s) you would least like to be asked.

9. Hold a news briefing. If there is an upcoming news event dealing with a complex issue, such as a court ruling on the homeless or censorship, you may want to invite a reporter or group of reporters to meet with you and other experts ahead of time to give background information. This could be a national ruling with implications for libraries in your state.

10. Send a press release or media advisory.

The press release should be in narrative form and contain the 5 W's (Who, What, When, Where, and Why) and H (How). Put the most important information in the first paragraph and aim to grab the reader's attention with the first statement.

11. Contact radio and television talk shows.

Be sure to include those operated by high schools and colleges as well as local cable companies. Volunteer your services as interviewee. Or, offer to put together an entire program.

Ed. note: These tips are reprinted with permission from the handouts prepared by ALA for a media training workshop.