

Spread the Word About Events

Successful events require more than simply posting a date, time and location. You need to attract the attention of media outlets and influential leaders, as well as the community at large. This guide contains information and tips for generating media coverage and positive word of mouth about your events.

What's the Difference Between Public Relations and Advertising?

In advertising, you're paying to control the message that you want delivered. Using public relations (PR) means getting stories written about your agency in the local press, business media, trade publications and other media outlets. PR is the process of getting out an informative message about your organization—but you don't ultimately control the content.

When people read media articles, they're going to take them more seriously than ads—especially if you can get a third party like a community leader or outside expert to make a comment for your cause. That lends you enormous credibility, it's positive content that's not coming from you and you don't have to pay for it.

Tips for Generating Media Coverage

Build relationships. Reporters are usually not experts on the subjects they cover, so they depend on people like you and your research for the information they need. Establish yourself as an expert in the field of underage drinking and provide good, reliable information. If you see a news piece that you wish you had been interviewed for, contact the reporter and let him/her know that if they need a contact about underage drinking in the future, he/she can call you.

Localize your story. Keep in mind how your story or event relates to the local community. If you have a press release you are sending out across the entire state, try to include quotes from local people or statistics from different regions that can help make the story relevant to local communities.

Know your audience. Decide the age of the people you are trying to reach as well as their gender and avoid using too many big words—try to write at around an 8th grade reading level.

Tie to current events. Pay attention to what's being covered in the media around your local community, across Vermont and around the nation. If you notice something related to underage drinking, send out information about your organization and how it is related to the recent issue or contact your local media outlets and offer to be a resource on the issue.

Avoid jargon and acronyms. Nonprofits and government organizations deal with a lot of jargon and acronyms, but the general public won't know what you're talking about. Make your message easy to understand by using terms that everybody should know or, if that's not possible, include a brief description of a term's meaning.

Build on success. If you had success on a story or got coverage on an event, you may be able to follow up with the same media outlet(s) about future developments.

Use media wisely. It's good to generate media coverage on a regular basis, but don't flood the media with an overwhelming amount of information. Regular releases are good, but sending too many of them can cause them to be ignored.

Distributing press releases. Some media outlets still like to receive press releases by fax or by mail, but many prefer to receive them via email. If you are sending a press release by email, be sure to use a memorable subject line based on the title of your event or the angle of your story idea. Paste the content of your release into your email, NOT as an attachment. You want the reporter to be able to quickly open your email and read your release—not bogged down by an attachment they may ignore.

Public Relations and Press Releases

Getting Started

Start with your small, local press and pitch an article about underage drinking prevention, why it is important, what you do and why you do it. As you approach reporters and editors, emphasize the things that differentiate your organization and campaign from previous efforts.

Reporters

You can find specific individuals by looking at the websites of local media outlets and figuring out who covers issues that may be related to underage drinking. If you can't get an e-mail address from a website, call the news desk and ask.

Choose Publications

It all comes down to knowing your audience. Local media outlets are great for talking to the general public, but don't forget about smaller organizations that also talk to parents and educators who may communicate through community newsletters, magazines and websites.

Media Pitches

Before you write anything, stop to think about whether you—as a typical member of the community—would want to read this. Is it interesting? Is it attention catching? Start your pitch with the newsworthy points right at the front. Don't drone on with a lot of background information at the top of an email. Keep it brief and make sure, before you send it, that you're targeting the right reporter or editor. Look at what else they write about. It's easy to Google their name and read some of their previous articles online. Ask yourself, “Is my story really right for their audience?”

You Need to Think Like a Reporter

Thinking like a reporter means:

- Separating real news from promotional fluff.
- Delivering a sharp story angle that will be of real interest to the public.
- Delivering this angle in a professional, courteous way.

Some Basic Truths

- Reporters don't care about helping you.
- Reporters are hassled all day by PR people and they're pretty much sick of it.
- Reporters don't care about your website, your research or your organization unless you are providing something that helps make their job easier.

In that case:

- Reporters love you.
- Reporters are happy to take your call.
- Reporters are fascinated by your website, research and organization.

Have Something Newsworthy

That means:

- Developing story angles from a reporter's perspective, not your organization's.
- Conducting yourself in a manner free of hype, clichés and fluff.
- Using proper etiquette when contacting a reporter or editor.

Ask yourself, "What can I do at this step that will make this information more useful to a journalist?"

Etiquette

- Don't call just to "see if they got your release." Journalists hate this. Folks send out mass mailings and then call to see if the release made it there. If you really want to get a story in, call first to pitch your idea and then follow up with your release, photos, etc.
- Plan your call around their deadlines. Most papers are morning editions, so deadlines are often around 2 o'clock in the afternoon—don't call during this time! The best time to reach a newspaper journalist is 10 a.m. to noon.
- Don't start pitching right away. If you get Joan Smith on the phone, don't just dive into your pitch. This is rude, as Joan may be on the other line, working on a story, entertaining guests or who knows what else. Start by saying something like, "Hi Ms. Smith, my name's Bill Jones and I have a story suggestion you might find interesting. Is this a good time for you?" Joan will reply, "Yes"—which is a green light to start your pitch, or, "No"—to which you reply, "When would be a good time to call you back?" Your courtesy will be greatly appreciated by the journalist (which can only help your chances).
- Pitch to the voice mail. It's fine to pitch your story to the reporter's voice mail. Keep it very short and end the message with your phone number. If you don't hear back, try again until you get the actual reporter or editor on the phone.
- Don't read from a script! Journalists have to put up with an annoying number of people reading off a sheet of paper. If a telemarketer has called you reading from a script, you know how annoying it can be. Practice your pitch so that it seems natural and spontaneous.
- Give them a story, not an advertisement. Newspapers do not exist to give you publicity. They exist to provide readers with interesting stories. Your job is to give the journalist what he or she wants while getting the free exposure. Make your pitch newsy, exciting and relevant.
- Follow up immediately. If the reporter is interested, he/she will ask for more information. Be sure you have a press kit (including a news release and photo, if appropriate) ready to send. Send it via email. Send your release in the body of an email to your contact, rather than as an attachment. Photos can be sent as attachments, but be sure they have been reduced in size so they don't jam up the reporter's email.

- Call again. Now it's appropriate to call to see if the reporter received your stuff—after all, unlike a mass-mailed release, the reporter requested it. Ask if he/she had a chance to look through it and what he/she thinks.

How to Write a Great Press Release

What is a Press Release?

A press release is a pseudo-news story written in third person that seeks to demonstrate to an editor or reporter the newsworthiness of a particular person, event, service or product.

How is a Press Release Used?

Press releases are often sent alone by email, fax or standard mail. They can also be part of a larger press kit or may be accompanied by a pitch letter.

Establishing Your Message

Creating a press release is about presenting your message in a way that will make a difference about how people feel about underage drinking. Use your answers to the following questions to clearly define your story:

- Who are you? Who do you represent and what does your group do?
- What is the news you want reported? Think about the story you are trying to create—are you inviting people to an event, communicating an important fact or both?
- When will your event occur?
- Where will the event take place?
- Why is this story important? Why should people care about what you're doing?

The Proper Press Release Format

Here's a sample press release template you can use to format your press release correctly.

Headline Announces News in Title Case, Ideally Under 80 Characters

City, State, Date -- The lead sentence contains the most important information in 25 words or less. Grab your reader's attention here by simply stating the news you have to announce. Do not assume that your reader has read your headline or summary paragraph—the lead should stand on its own.

A news release, like a news story, keeps sentences and paragraphs short, about three or four lines per paragraph. The first couple of paragraphs should answer the who, what, when, where, why and how questions. The news media may take information from a news release to craft a news or feature article, or may use information in the release word-for-word, but a news release is not, itself, an article or a reprint.

The standard press release is 300 to 800 words and is checked for spelling and grammar before submission.

The rest of the news release expands on the information provided in the lead paragraph. It includes quotes from key staff or subject matter experts. It contains more details about the news you have to tell or the event you're trying to publicize.

The tone is neutral and objective, not full of hype or text that is typically found in an advertisement. The use of "I," "we" and "you" outside of a direct quotation is a flag that your copy is an advertisement rather than a news release.

The final paragraph of a traditional news release contains the least newsworthy material. But for an online release, it's typical to restate and summarize the key points with a key sentence:

"For additional information on the news that is the subject of this release (or for a sample, copy or demo), contact Mary Smith or visit www.prweb.com."

About XYZ Company:

Include a short backgrounder or "boilerplate" copy about your organization, event or person that is newsworthy before you list the contact person's name and phone number.

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Contact:

Mary Smith
XYZ Organization
555-555-5555
<http://www.XYZ.com>

Press releases end with ### centered below the last line followed by contact information.

How to Format a Media Advisory

A media advisory is an FYI to let journalists know of your upcoming event. It gives basic information on who, what, when and where.

	XYZ Organization
For Immediate Release: DATE Smith, Title	Mary (802) XXX-XXXX office (802) XXX-XXXX cell (802) XXX-XXXX fax mary.smith@email.com
MEDIA ADVISORY	
Who:	Your organization name here.
What:	This area is much like your press release headline. Clearly state the news item and/or event name and provide a description of what will happen and how it relates to underage drinking. List the speakers, leaders or experts that will be at the event and explain the topic they will discuss.
When:	The date(s) and start/end times for the event.
Where:	Include the location name and address, as well as any directions if the location could be difficult to find.
<hr/>	
About XYZ Company	
Include a short backgrounder or "boilerplate" copy about your organization, event or person that is newsworthy.	
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Mention “Photo Opportunity” if there will be one and be sure to send the advisory out to local photo editors as well as reporters.

A media advisory should never be longer than a page and should arrive three working days before the event.

Make follow-up calls the day before your event and have the advisory ready to be emailed or faxed.

How to Write and Submit a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor are some of the most popular items of any newspaper and are usually written in response to an article or editorial published in the same paper. Here are some tips for writing your own Letter to the Editor:

- If you see an article or opinion piece that states a position opposite of you or your organization, write a letter disagreeing with the article and state your stance. If you don’t disagree but have a different perspective, you can also write a letter.
- If the contact info for the “letters-to-the-editor” department is not listed in the newspaper, call the newspaper and ask to speak with them. Ask how long your letter should be and get the name, fax number, mailing address and/or email address of the person you should send it to.
- In the first paragraph of your letter, refer to the article or position that you are writing about. Name the reporter who wrote the article and its title and date of publication. Clearly state why you disagree and state your group’s position on the issue, or offer a different perspective. Short and strong is better than long and rambling.
- Send a cover letter addressed to the appropriate editor. Sign the letter with your name, title and organization name, as well as your contact information.

How to Write and Submit an Op-Ed

The name “Op-Ed” is an abbreviation of the phrase, “opposite the editorial page—in reference to where it is found in a newspaper. It is an opinion pieces written and submitted by a reader of a publication that is relevant to the whole audience. Here are some hints for writing and submitting your own op-ed piece:

- Learn the name of the newspaper’s op-ed page editor, his/her address and fax number as well as the length limits. Most are 700-800 words, so you’ll need to be direct and to the point.

- Read your paper’s op-ed page to see what kind of letters it publishes. If the paper recently ran a letter that your organization disagrees with, you may have a better chance of having yours published.
- There should be a compelling angle to your letter to generate interest and demonstrate the value of your opinion to the readers and the community. Give it a strong local angle so the readers can quickly relate to you and your story.
- Decide the overall message you wish to convey and write it in a brief sentence. List the key arguments that support your message and develop each one.
- Have a definite opinion, state it strongly and make your case throughout the entire letter. Begin with the basics of your opinion and then back it up with facts—not the other way around.
- Print your op-ed on your organization’s letterhead and sign your name and title.
- Send your op-ed with a cover letter to the editor as well as some background information about your organization. Include your business card with both home and work numbers, and make a follow-up call a day or two after the editor has received your op-ed. Ask if the paper intends to print it, and if so, when.

When writing an op-ed, ask yourself the following questions to remind yourself of the important points you are trying to make:

- What is the problem you and your organization are trying to solve?
- How do you and your organization help solve this problem?
- Describe your organization. How does it work?
- Why hasn’t the problem been solved before?
- Is there a villain to the story? What are the major barriers?
- What is the cost of the solution you are writing about?
- How can you “paint a picture” in the readers’ minds through your words?
- Which community leaders, groups or people in the community agree with you and why?
- Which community leaders, groups or people in the community disagree with you and why?
- What is the urgency?
- Who does this affect?
- What is the history of this story? What has been done before? What was the process to get to this point?

How to Respond to Questions from the Media

If you submit a compelling story, reporters will be interested in learning more and will have some questions for you. Here are some points to keep in mind to effectively answer those questions:

- When a reporter contacts you, reply back immediately. Be ready to ask these questions:
 - What is your deadline?
 - Who else have you contacted?
 - What questions do you have?
- Know your message.
 - Everyone in your group should clearly understand the message you are trying to convey. Have your message points written out and practice saying them before you are interviewed.
- Your responses to questions should tie back to your message.
- If an issue or event comes up that you expect to be questioned about by the media, prepare yourself by writing down likely questions you expect to be asked and practice your answers in a way that ties back to your message.
- If you have an interview scheduled, provide the reporter with a fact sheet that includes the information you would like to share and offer suggestions of questions the interviewer can ask. The reporter may not stick to this material, but giving out this information from the start will increase your chances of covering all the information you want to get out there. This type of preparation is generally appreciated by reporters.
- Before a scheduled interview, try to prepare yourself by role-playing.
 - Make up questions you expect the reporter to ask.
 - Practice answering those questions out loud. Don't forget to tie in your message.
 - Ask a partner to ask you questions over and over so you can practice and prepare yourself for the actual interview.
- Don't be afraid to admit that you do not know.
 - If you don't know the answer to a question, refer the reporter to someone who does or research the question and get back to him/her. If you research the question, be sure to follow up quickly.
 - If you realize you misspoke or misstated your thoughts, tell the reporter immediately.

- Provide any information you have that could be used for an upcoming story or event that concerns underage drinking.
 - Many reporters appreciate this gesture and it helps to maintain connections with media outlets.
 - Building relationships with reporters will hopefully lead to better opportunities to get your message out to the public.