

# COMMUNICATING YOUR CAUSE

A Public Relations Primer

Evelyn Alemanni

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## Preface

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### **Nothing happens without communication.**

Whatever your cause...

- you want to make your town more beautiful
- you need to recruit volunteers for a special project
- your street needs speed bumps to reduce traffic danger to your children
- you oppose a zoning change
- you want to prevent construction of a toxic waste incinerator in your neighborhood
- you want to preserve habitats for endangered species ...

... the first step to success is *communicating your cause!* How you do that, through letters, articles, television, public speaking, press conferences and much more, is the subject of this book. You don't need to be a professional writer or polished public speaker to begin putting your ideas to use.

When our rural, coastal Southern California valley was simultaneously assaulted with proposals for a trash incinerator, landfill expansion, and a sludge composting facility, we had no choice but to quickly mobilize and gird ourselves for the arduous battle to save our community and its unique environment. In preparing ourselves, we quickly discovered that we were on our own, with no guidelines to follow and no how-to books to direct us. The material contained here is the result of our experiences in dealing with these issues.

Once those massive troubles were behind us, our community was able to focus on positive, constructive things like beautification, planting trees, spreading wildflower seeds, building nature trails and holding an annual garden festival. It was through these constructive efforts that we were led to participation in America in Bloom ([www.americainbloom.org](http://www.americainbloom.org)), a national program that promotes improvements in quality of life through the use of plants and horticulture. Since then, I have become a national judge and board member of America in Bloom, and an international judge for Communities in Bloom in Canada and for LivCom, based in the U.K.

This book was originally published as a chapter in the best-selling *Non-Profit Management Handbook*, published by John Wiley & Sons in 1994, 1995, 1996, and 1997. The book has been out of print since 1998.

Since 1994-1997, a lot has changed in the way we communicate, distribute information, and do research. In 1994, we thought the fax machine was remarkable. Today, texting, Twitter, and hundreds on online tools help us get our message across faster than ever, to audiences never before imagined. The 1997 edition of this book has been updated with mentions of these technologies, but because technology changes so quickly, please keep the basic principles in mind and adapt them to the tools available to you today and in the future.

## What's in this Book

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This book provides community groups, service clubs, and non-profit organizations, regardless of

their cause or issue, an easy to follow roadmap that helps them publicize their goals and concerns.

To make your efforts more effective, to save you from making costly mistakes, and to prevent you from laboring over potentially fruitless efforts, this book is filled with practical information and examples. It will guide you through the nuts and-bolts of communicating your cause to the media, the public, and elected officials.

### **Chapter 1. Public Relations Overview**

This chapter introduces the concepts of public relations as they apply to grassroots organizations.

### **Chapter 2. Public Relations Planning**

This chapter describes the process of developing a balanced public relations plan that includes defining your goal, understanding your audience, and focusing your message.

### **Chapter 3. Choosing a Spokesperson**

A group's founder or leader may not always make the best spokesperson. This chapter describes what it takes to be a spokesperson and presents the alternative of using a public relations agency. It provides methods by which groups can determine whether going the agency route is appropriate for them.

### **Chapter 4. Developing Media Relationships**

Accessibility of the media and credibility of the person providing the information are two keys to successful media coverage. This chapter tells how to develop a media list, how to work with reporters, and how become known as a news source.

### **Chapter 5. Writing for Various Media**

In addition to the ability to originate a story concept, tools of the trade include faxes, modems, and the indispensable Internet. This section describes tools to assemble and decisions to make before writing for the media.

## Chapter 6. Packaging the Communication

The time you take to research and write a simple letter to the editor can be leveraged to develop newspaper features, articles for monthly magazines, op-ed pieces, and more. This chapter discusses the development of a concept and its use in a variety of published pieces. Guidelines for working with editors are included.

## Chapter 7. Measuring Success

Measuring the success of your PR efforts helps you to refine your public relations planning and improve on it. This chapter gives simple ideas on how to track your efforts.

## About the Author

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Evelyn Alemanni is a self-employed writer, web designer, artist, and former town council chairperson in Elfin Forest, California, one of the last remaining rural communities in coastal Southern California. Elfin Forest is home to more rare and endangered species than anywhere else in the region. As a community leader, she was faced with many difficult challenges. Developers of all types eyed the community with the same thought... “what a shame about all that open space. There must be a higher use.” In that vein, they forged ahead with proposals blast away the hilltops and scrape away the coastal sage to make room for thousands of homes, a trash incinerator to handle the waste from the entire county, sewage treatment plant to treat sewage from another city (Elfin Forest is on septic systems), and more. All these projects were successfully defeated, preserving the community’s integrity. Much of this was possible by applying the corporation communications principles that Evelyn practiced for her many high tech clients.

Today, Evelyn continues to provide communications consulting to high tech companies, assist authors with book development, and find time to write books as well. Her latest book is “Best Ideas”, written for America in Bloom and detailing more than 2000 best practices from towns across America. Learn more at [www.allea.com](http://www.allea.com).

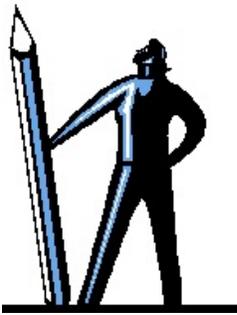
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## Chapter 1

# Public Relations Overview

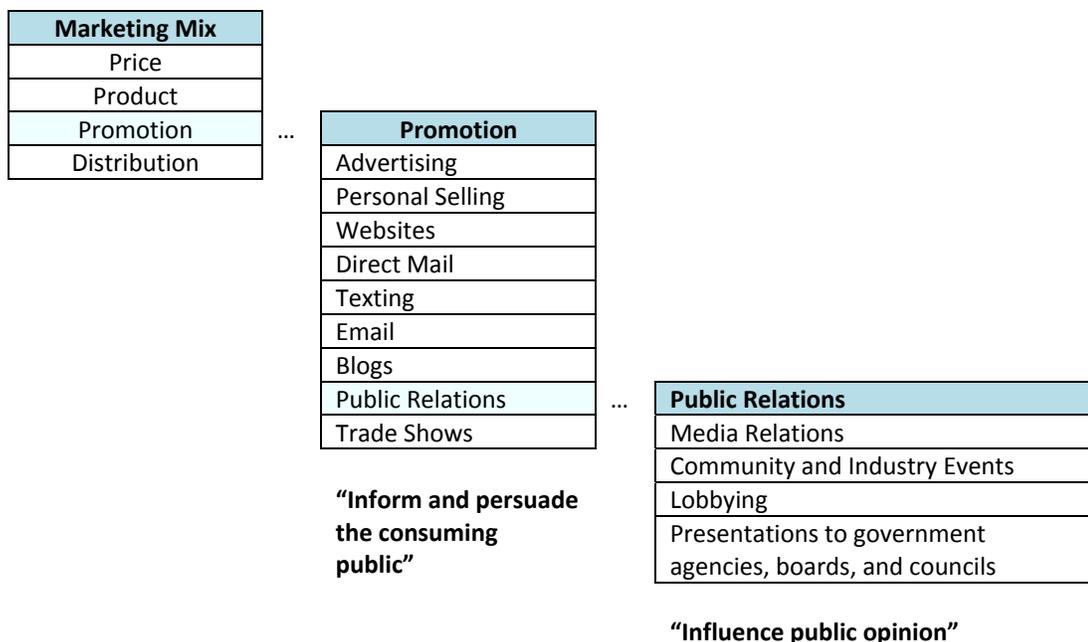
Price, product, promotion, and distribution are the four commonly cited elements of the marketing mix.

**Promotion** is the means by which the consuming public is informed, persuaded, and reminded of the organization's goals, activities, purpose, and services.

Aspects of promotion include advertising, personal selling, direct mail, and public relations. Public relations includes all communications to the organization's audience (or "customers"), including newsletters, press releases, websites, social media (i.e. Facebook, etc.) articles in newspapers and magazines, interviews on radio and television, and events such as press conferences and community events, speeches by executives, and presentations to government agencies and boards.

The goal of public relations is to influence public opinion by presenting an accurate and positive image of the organization. The relationship of marketing, promotion, and public relations is illustrated in Figure 1.

*Figure 1. Relationship of Marketing, Promotion, and Public Relations*

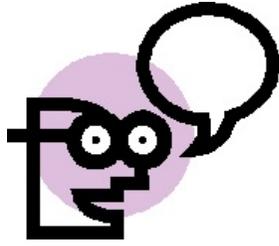


## Benefits of Public Relations

Why bother with public relations? The most important reason is that, compared with traditional

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advertising, it is an inexpensive means to broadcast an organization's message to a wide audience. An added benefit is that articles written about an organization tend to carry more credibility than paid advertising. To gain the benefits of good PR, an organization must carefully plan its PR strategy, and tactics, and professionally execute the plan.



## Chapter 2

# Public Relations Planning

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Because of the long lead time required for some types of publicity, planning and scheduling are as important to the success of a PR plan as actual tactics.

PR planning involves:

- defining the goal of the communication
- focusing on a specific message or messages
- delivering consistent and reliable messages
- using the appropriate media for the message
- timing the message.

For the purposes of this chapter, only a subset of the possible written communications are addressed. However, the same concepts can be applied to PR activities such as community events, speeches by organization executives, and presentations to government boards and agencies.



### Defining the Goal

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What do organizations typically try to achieve through their public relations? The following list enumerates several objectives.

- Increase awareness of its purpose
- Solicit support and funding
- Establish a reputation in the field
- Enhance visibility in the community
- Increase awareness of projects and programs
- Recognize achievements.

Before any public relations projects are started, the organization must agree on the goal(s) of the public relations activities and their expected outcomes.

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## Focusing Your Message

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In communicating with its various publics, one primary goal is to assure that the message is aligned with the organization's objectives and that it supports the organization's mission statement. It is helpful when messages can be focused one or two main topics.

For example, an organization that provides recycling services (AAA Recyclers\*) has as its objective to be recognized as the primary provider of the service the area it serves. So, it would focus any articles and press releases on the service it provides, plans for improving or expanding the service, and success stories.

In a second example, an organization (Recycling Experts\*) might have a goal of being known as an authority in the field of recycling and helping communities to organize recycling programs. Its message would be focused in a way that establishes the organization and its management as experts in the field. Public relations for this organization could focus on the background and experience of its employees, the specialized knowledge and talents that the organization offers, and profiles of communities which have benefited from their services.

\* organization names are fictional.

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## Audience

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Who are you trying to reach with your message? This is the main question to ask, because will help you make decisions about the media mix.

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## The Media Mix

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In planning a public relations campaign, organizations have a variety of media available to them. This is referred to as the media mix. Each type of media offers a unique way to communicate to a specific audience, and each has unique requirements for how information is presented to it.

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## Timing

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The media mix presents timing and scheduling considerations: for example, a press release to a newspaper may be published the next day, while the same release sent to a national magazine may take six months to be published.

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## Relating the Message to the Marketing Plan

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A successful public relations plan must be keyed to the organization's marketing plan. This helps assure that messages and events are targeted to the correct audience and delivered by the most appropriate media.

In the example of the recycling organizations cited in the previous paragraphs, one organization would target households and businesses, while the other might target communities and large corporations. Figure 2 illustrates the differences in planning for the two organizations.

*Figure 2. Public Relations Planning for Two Organizations*

	<b>AAA Recyclers</b>	<b>Recycling Experts</b>
Mission	To be considered the primary provider of recycling services	Recognition as an authority; help communities establish recycling programs
Audience	Households, businesses	Government agencies and boards, large corporations
Message	Description of service provided Ease of use Success stories	Description of service provided Management profiles Authority
Media	Newspapers, direct mail, community events	Newspapers, magazines, industry journals, conferences

### Relating the Message to the Business Plan

Organizations usually operate with short term and long term goals – they may refer to them as strategic plans, business plans, or maybe they just have a simple checklist of jobs that need to get done. These plans, in whatever level of sophistication or form they take, can be used as a basis for scheduling public relations events.

### Sample Plan

Figure 3 shows projects scheduled in the annual business plan for AAA Recyclers. Figure 4 shows how the public relations activities plan is linked to one of the projects, and Figure 5 shows scheduling of public relations events related to the project. Notice that this schedule only indicates when the events will occur, but does not include details on the steps of their development. This is included later in the chapter on Writing for the Print Media.

*Figure 3. Annual Business Plan - Projects*

Project	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Add mixed paper to items collected at curbside		x										
Start composting project Phase 1						x						
Expand composting city-wide											x	

*Figure 4. Public Relations Activities in Support of Phase 1 Composting Project*

Projects		Description
1	Press release #1	Describe composting program and benefits
2	Press release #2	Announce start of program, areas served, how to participate
3	Press release #3	Review success of program, % participation, benefits to community
4	Press release #4	Announce program expansion
5	Article 1 - newspaper	"Composting comes to City"
6	Article 2 - magazine	"City Saves by Composting"
7	Article 3 - magazine	"Gardens Thrive on Compost"
8	Editorial	Value of Composting
9	Radio announcement	Public service announcement of program
10	Direct mail #1	Announces program to area served
11	Direct mail #2	Describes how to participate in program, announces start date
12	Direct mail #3	Announces program to new area served

*Figure 5. Public Relations Schedule in Support of Phase 1 Composting Project*

Project	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul
Project Start						x	
Press release #1			x				
Press release #2				x			
Press release #3					x		
Article 1 - newspaper				x			
Article 2 - magazine					x		
Article 3 - magazine						x	
Editorial					x	x	
Radio announcement					x	x	
Direct mail #1/email blast				x	x		
Direct mail #2/email blast					x	x	
E-newsletter	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Notice how the timing of each public relations activity supports the other, and in turn, supports the program by informing the public of its existence and benefits. People may receive a direct mail piece announcing the program, then read about it in a daily newspaper, and hear a public service announcement on the radio; each message builds and reinforces the previous one. Other activities might include a television news piece and a community gardening day when people can get free compost for their yards.



## Chapter 3

# Choosing a Spokesperson

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While public relations planning and development of the message(s) may be accomplished by a group, the function of delivering the message and executing the plan is best handled by one person who can be the central point of contact for all media representatives. Many organizations communicate to their various audiences through a single spokesperson who may be the organization's top executive, a public relations specialist within the organization, or a contact at a public relations agency.

The benefits of channeling all communications through one person (or group) include the ability to:

- control the information
- deliver information consistently
- disseminate only the appropriate information
- assure conformance to the PR plan
- build and nurture media relationships
- assure prompt and consistent follow-up to media requests for information.

The spokesperson should be someone who is well versed in all the organization's goals, mission, challenges, and activities, and who can speak enthusiastically, convincingly, knowledgeably and authoritatively on related areas of interest. It is important that this individual's role be structured to allow sufficient time to respond quickly to media requests and to be proactive in searching out media opportunities.

If a public relations agency is tasked as the point of contact, it should be made clear to the agency that all statements to the media must be approved by a designated individual within the organization.

### Using a Public Relations Agency

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The thought of developing and executing comprehensive public relations and communications strategies and tactics can be intimidating. It is sometimes beneficial to consult with professionals who can provide guidance in developing the plan with the view to taking the work in-house at some point or sharing the tasks. The PR agency can assist with other functions as well, including planning community events, writing press releases, writing and placing articles, arranging press tours, and developing the media list.

The benefits of using an outside agency include the following:

- Experience with PR planning
- Fresh ideas
- Access to media and established editorial contacts

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- Experience writing and placing articles and press releases

The disadvantages of an outside agency include:

- Expensive
- Takes additional time to coordinate and review the agency's work
- Agency must be thoroughly educated in organization's objectives
- Some publications prefer to work directly with the "source"
- Adds an extra layer between the organization and its public.

In deciding to use an outside agency, it is important for the organization to thoroughly interview several prospective firms, interview the firms' clients, and get a specific fee proposal that enumerates the fee, retainer, and deliverables.



## Chapter 4

# Developing Media Relationships

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The media is an organization's ally. They need news items just as much as the organization needs publicity. Time spent developing rapport with media contacts pays off in many ways. When the spokesperson has proven to be a reliable news source, the step of writing a press release can sometimes be skipped in lieu of a quick phone call or e-mail outlining key points. Also, reporters will come to rely on the organization's spokesperson as a source of news and knowledge in particular areas and will often call for opinions or quotes when working on a story in a related field.

Before writing a single press release or article, it is important to know the target publications. It is helpful to develop a media list (or database) that includes names, addresses, phone and fax numbers, e-mail addresses, and contacts at all appropriate media. Depending on the size of your organization, you may also want to include additional demographics, such as areas of interest covered and geographic areas covered. There may be several contacts at a single publication: for example, at a newspaper, the contacts might include a features editor, a writer assigned to the general topic, the editor of the opinion page, photo editor, and so on. You may want to customize your communications for various industry segments. When that's the case, you'll need to generate a separate media list for each segment.

The media list should be segregated by media type, for example, local newspapers, national newspapers, trade publications, local radio and television stations. You might even add bloggers to your list. The list can be the foundation for a contacts database that tracks contacts with media, conversations with reporters, and dates when inquiries were received and information was sent. Today, there are online companies that offer searchable databases for a fee. These can be an enormous time saver and help you target your communications quickly and effectively.

A sample media list is shown in Figure 6 and a sample database entry for one publication is illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 6. Sample Media List

Newspapers						
	Phone	Fax	Email	Website	Address	Contact
Blade Citizen	555-1111	555-2222	<a href="mailto:mark@blade.com">mark@blade.com</a>	www.blade.com	111 E. Main Oceanside, CA	Mark Reporter (writer) Sam Editor (letters to the editor)
Times	444-1122	444-1234	<a href="mailto:sarner@times.net">sarner@times.net</a>	www.times.net	1023 Boca St. Hillside, CA	Susie Arner (writer) David Letters (letter to the editor)
Magazines						
Communica- tion Today	333-1111	333-1211	<a href="mailto:sterns@ct.net">sterns@ct.net</a>	www.ct.net	42 Big St. Anytown, CA	Maggie Sterns (features editor) John Wilen (news editor)
TV						
Ch. 8	222-2222	222-2223	<a href="mailto:ms@ch8.com">ms@ch8.com</a>	www.ch8.com	101 Front St. San Diego, CA	Mike Senton (news editor) Barbara Johnson (news producer)
Ch. 10	555-4444	555-2341	<a href="mailto:bob@ch30.com">bob@ch30.com</a>	www.ch30.com	1212 W. Santa Fe Del Mar, CA	Bob O'Wick (news editor)

Media list compilation, depending on its complexity, demographics, and reach, can be completed within a day or two or may take weeks. However, a PR agency may already have an acceptable list on file that need only be reviewed. The best way to start is by simply doing an internet search for target publications (or TV or radio station) and asking for the information you need. Be sure to get specific details about the information needed. For example, ask for the person who handles stories concerning your organization's issues (health care, environment, etc.).

To find out who handles letters to the editor, don't ask for the editor's name; ask for the name of the person in charge of the editorial page.

A website called *Standard Rate and Data* (see *Sources and Suggested References* at the end of the book) lists all publications by area of interest and includes the phone number, address, and editor's name, as well as advertising rates. It is available by subscription and may be available via public or college libraries. There are other similar online services.

## Communicating Your Cause

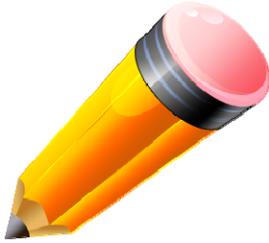
As is the case with most organizations, media personnel experience promotions, reassignments, and resignations, so it's wise to update your media lists at least twice a year or more often if necessary.

*Figure 7. Sample Database Entry*

<b>Blade Citizen</b>	<b>date</b>	<b>contact</b>	<b>discussed/comments</b>	<b>sent</b>
	3/2	Mark	composting project	press release #1 describing project
	3/5	Mark	composting project	background information on similar sites
	4/10	Mark	story ideas	
	4/12	Mark	met with Mark and his editor to brainstorm ideas for composting story	
	4/15	Mark		names of city officials who have backyard compost piles

### Establishing Interest

Before developing a press release or article, it's a good idea to contact a writer or editor at the publication for which the piece is targeted and establish that there is, indeed, interest in the piece. This is generally not as important with newspapers, which are always glad to receive interesting news items. However, it is essential with magazines because of their limited space and long range scheduling. Before developing an article for a magazine, request a copy of its editorial calendar and authors' guidelines. Contact the editor with the story proposal and determine whether there is any interest before investing the time and energy to develop the story. (The section on Query Letters later in this book provides more details on contacting editors with story ideas.)



## Chapter 5

# Writing for the Media

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It wasn't long ago that writing was targeted strictly for the print media. Today, we write for websites, blogs, tweets, text messages, social media, newspapers, magazines, television scripts, and more. There was a time when print media brought a message to a wide audience at the lowest possible cost; usually the cost is limited to only the time and effort it takes to generate and place a story. Today, online media is the number one choice for communication efficiency, in terms of timeliness and cost. With the myriad of media outlets, it's wise to consider ways to repurpose your message for each one that you use.

This chapter summarizes items to be considered before writing begins.



### Tools of the Trade

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The tools of the trade are simple and easily available: a telephone, computer, and links to online reference books such as The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual and Strunk and White's The Elements of Style. Everything submitted for publication should be carefully edited, fact-checked, and error free.



### E-mail

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Most publications prefer you communicate directly to reporters and editors via e-mail since the message can be edited directly without retyping. And a funny thing about email.... Be sure your email address reflects professionally on you. Getting an email from [hotbabe@gmail.com](mailto:hotbabe@gmail.com) doesn't exactly inspire confidence. Be sure to proof and proof again, and be sure the recipient information is correct before you hit the Send button

### Letterhead

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Strange as it sounds, some publications still like snail mail. For them, be sure all your material is submitted on letterhead. This not only looks professional, but helps establish credibility. Be sure to include your organization's full name, address, telephone and fax numbers, e-mail address, web address (URL), and the name of the person to contact for more information.



### Who Should Write a Story?

---

The responsibility of the media is to inform the public in an objective and timely manner, so why should someone in the organization write a story about its issues? After all, newspapers pay reporters and staff writers to do just that. Of course, it is possible to pick up the telephone, call a few reporters, and try to talk them into writing a story. But, chances are good that they have higher priorities and will work on the story presented to

them only if it's convenient. Who should develop the material submitted to a reporter? It can be generated in-house, by a PR agency, or freelance writer. The decision depends on budget, schedule, and available talents.

### Criteria for a Good Story

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For a story (article or letter) to be considered for publication, it must be:

- factual
- focused
- timely
- well written
- interesting to an identifiable audience.



#### Who Cares?

---

While developing your communications, ask the big question, “Who cares?” The issue may be crucially important to your organization, but when developing material for a particular publication, it must be presented in a manner that makes it significant to the thousands of others who read it.

It helps to put things into perspective if the cause is viewed as a commodity or product; the media needs the product to sell its publications. As with all products, good quality, proper care, packaging and presentation are essential to ensure success in the marketplace.

Don't worry if global conflicts are competing with space for headlines; the newspaper still needs stories to fill the local news section!

Another way to generate interest is to link the cause to another event currently in the news. If the cause is an animal rights issue for example, take advantage of zoo anniversary celebrations, associated worldwide news stories, a visiting circus or rodeo to tie in and promote the organization's concerns.



#### Before Submitting Material for Publication

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Before submitting anything to the media, even skilled and experienced writers must find someone to read and critique the material. Because writers are often too close to the material, a review by another person can quickly determine whether the readers' knowledge of the subject has been taken for granted and whether vital information has been omitted.

Check, check, and check again.

Ask someone to check for the following:

- Ask, “Who cares?” Will readers be able to relate to what's written? How might they feel about it?
- Are all the facts supported?
- If asked, are names and phone numbers of people who can provide additional information or opposing views available?
- Is spelling and grammar correct?
- Is the story told consistently and concisely?

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- Could the story be interpreted in more than one way?
- Are the length and style appropriate to the intended audience and publication?
- Is the author's (or spokesperson's) name, address, phone and fax number included?

### When to use Cover Letters

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When submitting a story or op-ed piece, include a cover letter (or an introductory paragraph in your email) that explains the purpose of the piece and its significance to the publication's readers. Be sure to include your contact information and keep a copy of the email. It may sound elementary, but sometimes, in the excitement of the moment, these details are easily overlooked. Cover letters are generally not needed for press releases.



## Chapter 6

# Packaging the Communication

As a story concept is developed, think about the various ways it can be packaged and “recycled.” For example, a letter to the editor can be rewritten as a press release, a feature article, and an op-ed piece. A single story, and even a letter to the editor, can be split into various components, each telling a different part of the story. And of course, you can adapt these to your website, blog, social media pages, etc. Each type of communication is described in more detail in the following sections.



### Letters to the Editor

A letter to the editor is an opportunity to comment on topics currently in the news. It should generally not be more than 200 to 300 words. To enhance its chances of publication, a letter to the editor should be vivid, persuasive, concise, interesting, timely, well written, and typed or submitted via email. Make one or two points and get to those points without being verbose. Stay focused, and don't ramble or stray from the point.

Be careful to avoid an overly emotional tone. A letter written in anger will read like one. Temper emotions with facts. Imagine reading the letter in one month, in six months. Is it still clear? Or would it be somewhat embarrassing?

Bear in mind that the publication will reserve the right to edit your letter and generally will not contact you for approval. What gets printed may be different from what you sent.

Many of today's major newspapers have online editions which allow readers to comment on articles. If you choose to take advantage of this feature, keep your comments civil, to the point, factual and respectful.

### Writing Letters to the Editor about Complex Topics

It's often difficult to condense a complex topic into the 200 to 300 word limit of a letter to the editor. When addressing a complex issue, it's often effective to divide its elements among several writers, not all necessarily affiliated with the organization. Or one writer can pen a couple of letters to be submitted (with permission, of course) under different signatures. Plan the strategy thoughtfully and carefully to maximize exposure.

For example, a trash incinerator proposed for the Escondido, CA area was opposed by a number of community groups and cities on the grounds of environmental damage, excessive construction cost, and irregularities in the contracting process. Each issue had volumes of supporting and damaging information, so each issue warranted a separate letter to the editor. Even if all the letters are submitted to the newspaper on the same day, it's unlikely that they would all run on the same day. The effect is one of greater public interest in the issue, and someone who may have missed the editorial page on a particular day will have a greater chance of seeing at least one of the letters.

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## Getting More Mileage from Letters

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A letter's impact can be stretched by revising it and submitting it to publications whose focus may be slightly different. For example, a letter may be appropriate for a local newspaper, and would make interesting regional topic if its focus was shifted somewhat. Another version could be submitted to a special interest magazine.

If a letter is published by one newspaper and overlooked by others, it can be clipped and sent with it an "FYI" to other papers or to specific reporters.

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## Letters that Don't get Published.

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Depending on the size of a particular publication, editors receive from 50 to thousands of letters every day. They must screen them all to compile a few letters that represent readers' opinions on *all* topics currently in the news, not just one issue. When editors sift through the mail bag and email inbox, here are the types of letters that hit the trash can (or recycle bin) first:

- letters which are overly eccentric
- unsigned letters or those without return addresses and phone numbers.
- letters with poor grammar, or those that don't make a point
- letters which don't address a specific, topical issue
- letters which are too long (although some may be accepted and used as oped pieces or guest columns)
- letters which obviously come from a "letter writing industry;" i.e., a PR agency, a lobbying organization, political action groups, or part of an organized letter writing campaign
- letters that come from out of the newspaper's circulation area.

The letter may not be selected for publication for any number of reasons. Often, there simply isn't enough space, and by the time space becomes available, the topic is no longer timely. Sometimes the editor just doesn't understand the point. If an organization has developed a good working relationship with staff writers, they can sometimes be persuaded to put a word in with the editorial page editor.

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## Opinion-Editorial (Op-Ed) Articles

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An op-ed article, as its name implies, expresses an opinion and editorializes on an issue while presenting facts. This allows much greater latitude than when simply writing an article in a strict reporting style. Some newspapers publish guidelines for unsolicited material written for the op-ed page. Follow these guidelines as closely as possible.

Op-ed articles are run on the editorial (sometimes called the opinion or issues) page of the newspaper. They usually are given the same amount of space and are on the same part of the page in every issue. They will include a byline and possibly the author's photograph and brief biography. Op-ed articles are often suited for posting on your website or blog.

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## Planning the Op-Ed Article

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When deciding to write an op-ed article, first target a specific publication. This is not the type of piece that can be sent to every newspaper on the media list. Because of its length, a newspaper will want an assurance that they will be the only one to run it. This is also true of feature stories. Publications will expect an "exclusive." Start by studying the format used by the target publication.

Look at the preferred length, and whether the author's photo and biographical material are included. Outline the topic and key points, then call the editor to discuss them. Explain the author's qualifications for writing the piece.

To save time and trouble, don't write more than an outline until an editor agrees to the idea. Keep an open mind to suggestions for rewriting and repositioning the story. If one editor flatly rejects the idea, contact others on the media list. Ask the editors for feedback on the idea and for ways to make it acceptable for publication.

### Writing the Op-Ed Piece.

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Refer back to the section on Criteria for a Good Story earlier in this section for guidelines on writing. The same rules apply. After submitting the article, the editor may want more information, minor rewrites, or approval regarding editorial changes.

Be sure that all supporting information is available, although it need not be submitted with the manuscript. Be sure that the author has time available to make revisions on short notice, and that the author will be open to changes.

### Writing a Press Release

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A press release is the best way to communicate a news story or event to the media. Basically, a press release should describe what has happened or is going to happen in addition to answering the usual "who, what, when, where and why." If it doesn't, then the story is probably not newsworthy. Be careful not to overdo the use of the press release: one per month is adequate.

Always keep the editor's job in mind when preparing a release. By doing a thorough job of writing the press release, the editor's job is made easier, and the chances of getting the story placed are improved. Well-written releases are often used as is. If the story is lengthy, make sure the editor is able to cut from the bottom. This means that the most important information is placed at the beginning of the release. Background information about the organization is usually placed at the end.

Give careful thought and attention to the format, style, and tone of press releases. Consistency among these elements is vital in helping to establish your organization's identity and promoting its cause. Remember, newsworthy stories always contain one or more of the following elements: human interest, public interest, information, conflict, timeliness, exclusivity, novelty, tragedy or humor, to name a few. Look for these elements while preparing the release and use them to their best advantage.

### The Nuts-And-Bolts of a Press Release.

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Always format press releases as 8-1/2" x 11" documents, using your organization's stationery or press releases template. Indicate that the submission is a news release by typing the words "NEWS RELEASE" at the top of the page.

Clearly indicate the contact person's name and phone number at the top of the page. Be sure this person is available to answer calls; if there's any doubt, include a second contact.

Most releases will be designated "For Immediate Release." If the release is timed correctly, the editor's job is easier. One sure-fire way to kill chances of publication is to make an editor search for a date. Sometimes it is necessary to specify "For Release After Date" or "For Release on Date." Try to avoid time constraints if at all possible. Include the date in a visible place.

A sample format for a news release is shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Sample News Release Format

**AAA Recyclers**  
**101 Second Ave. Canterbury, CA**  
**92000 619-555-1211 FAX 619-555-2222 e-mail aaa@recycle.com**

**NEWS RELEASE**

May 4, 2010

**For immediate release.**

For further information, contact:

Ms. Spokesperson  
AAA Recyclers 619-555-1215 (direct line) spokesperson@recycle.com  
or  
Mr. Wordsmith XXX Public Relations, Inc. 619-555-3333 wordsmith@xxx.com

**"HEADLINE"**

**Paragraph 1.** Who, what, when, where, why, how.

**Paragraph 2-**Supporting details. Be sure to add quotations from organization members or executives.

**Closing paragraph:** One to three sentences that describe the organization and its purpose.

If continued onto an additional page, type "--more--" and indicate page # of # (for example, page 1 of 2).

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.

At the end of the release, indicate its end by typing:

###

A catchy headline can help sell the story; a cutesy or overly clever one can earn it a berth in the round file. Give some thought to the "angle" and play with it a little while. The headline should be in capital letters, centered, and bolded.

The first paragraph of the press release should briefly tell the story and must answer the five Ws - who, what, when, where, and why. Subsequent paragraphs provide background, simplify information, expand on the details and provide an opportunity to quote members of the organization to clarify its position.

Try to keep the release to a single page, but if that is not possible, number each page and at the bottom of each, except the last, type “--more—“. The last page should end with the symbol ### or \*\*\* to indicate the end of story.

### Writing a Query Letter

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An important communication tool, the query (or pitch) letter, provides more creative latitude than a press release. The quality of the writing in the query letter is important, because its main objective is to sell a story idea and convince the editor of the author's ability to do the job.

Whether writing a query letter for a newspaper, magazine, or to organize thoughts for the phone contact, the elements are exactly the same. Answer the five Ws - who, what, when, where, and why. A strong lead paragraph should resemble the intended lead in the story and pique the editor's interest.

A good query letter must:

- introduce the story's concept
- provide a synopsis of the supporting facts
- document available material; i.e., photos, illustrations, graphics, related articles and studies
- list of experts to be interviewed
- state the author's qualifications and writing experience (if none, don't mention it)
- request to write the article.
- estimate the word count and completion time.
- tie the story to the objectives of the intended publication.
- demonstrates why the story is of interest to the publication's readers

### The Nuts-And-Bolts of a Query Letter

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Think of the query letter as a business letter and treat it as such. If you are sending it via USPS, be sure to type on letterhead. Avoid lengthy paragraphs - several short ones are more attractive and inviting. The easier the letter is to read, the better are the chances of getting a response. Do not send original photographs or artwork with a query letter.

Try and keep the letter to a single page or, one-and-a-half at most. The author's name, the date, and phone number should be readily visible. Always include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) with the correspondence, especially if it is unsolicited; the convenience will be appreciated.

### Feature Articles

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Feature articles are lengthy, timely, focused, and in-depth editorial pieces designed to highlight and examine an issue, group, or individual, present opposing viewpoints, educate the reader, and provide detailed information using text, photographs or illustrations. Whereas the job of hard news reporters is to answer the five Ws mentioned earlier, feature writers have more latitude in that they invite readers to educate themselves while forming their own opinions about the information presented.

There are countless opportunities for possible feature material. Profile a member of the organization; perhaps it includes an environmental attorney, a geologist, biologist, or city council member. It is interesting to watch individuals who may never have come together under ordinary circumstances become passionately involved in a cause which unites them and their respective talents. Or promote the cause by imparting the knowledge to educate readers.

Successfully placing a feature article will serve the organization's cause well and enhance credibility with published clips.

### Feature Newspaper Articles

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Generally, newspapers don't accept freelance feature articles for publication. Some smaller publications may, but feature articles are usually authored by staff writers. As with op-ed pieces, it is wise to contact the editor of the newspaper to discuss the concept before writing anything. Whether this contact is made over the phone or through a query letter, the method of preparation is the same. If the idea is well developed and interesting enough to an editor, it is usually assigned to a staff writer.

### Magazine Articles

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Before contacting magazines, it is essential to understand their particular requirements and focus. Even before sending a query letter, go online and research the writer's guidelines and an editorial calendar to best determine the types of stories that typically appear in that publication. The editorial calendar helps in scheduling when the manuscript must be available.

Carefully scrutinize several issues of the magazine. Pay particular attention to editorial voice, average article length, departments, design and layout, even letters to the editor. If the average length of the articles is 3,000 words, don't try and sell a 7,000-word piece to the editor. Show some knowledge and interest in the publication.

In planning the story, remember that a magazine story takes at least six months from concept to printed piece, so the story must have staying power.

### Editorial Cartoons

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Letters or articles generated by an organization may inspire an editorial cartoon! This is very gratifying and can serve to illustrate points effectively. A reader may overlook a letter about environmental degradation and health risks associated with living near a proposed trash incinerator, but the universal language of a cartoon will engage his attention long enough to get the message across.

If a particular angle or some event conjures a strong mental picture, suggest it to an editor as a potential cartoon. Describe it briefly, whether it's written or illustrated with some degree of legibility to convey the idea. Don't follow up, trust it was evaluated.

### Press Kits

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In the course of working with the media, in the past, it was helpful to have a current press kit available. This press kit would serve as a reference for reporters when they are writing about an organization and was a time saver for updating not only new writers but new employees, volunteers, or customers.

Today, these have been largely supplanted by websites. However, if there is special, extensive

information you want the media to have, provide it on a CD or flash drive, or even a special “private” section of your website.

The contents can be customized for a particular event and include some or all of the following items:

- Backgrounder
- Two or three recent press releases
- Profile of top executive
- Two or three recent press clippings
- Photos or slides related to the current topic.
- Business card of the spokesperson and agency contact
- Video interviews
- PowerPoint presentation
- Links to more information
- Event calendar
- Brochures

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### Communicating Your Cause on the Internet

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This section gives you some guidelines for when and why the Internet can help. Although explaining all about the Internet and its use is beyond the scope of this chapter, excellent references are included in the Sources and Suggested Readings section.

Today, virtually all newspaper and magazine editors have their own email addresses, so sending your press releases or article inquiries via email generally gets more attention than those sent by mail.

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#### Website

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Posting information about your organization on your own website is an important step in establishing credibility and providing information at very low cost to anyone who’s interested. You can shop around for free hosting and low cost domain names. Don’t buy more features that you need. Free software is available, as are templates that allow anyone who can use word processing software to quickly generate a website. The most important thing is to keep it current.

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#### Social Media

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Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are popular at the time this edition of the book was written. There are so many options and approaches that they are beyond the scope of this book. Also, the technology changes quickly, so do some research into whether the time required to update social media is worth your effort.

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#### Enhancing Your Communications with Video

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Video is an increasingly important component of communications. Today’s low-cost digital cameras and dedicated video recorders make it simple to create your own video and edit it on your home computer. Internet sites let you post them for viewing, and of course, you can include them on your website. Just remember to keep these communications short.



## Chapter 7

# Measuring Success

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There are many ways to measure the success of your PR efforts, depending on the goal you were trying to accomplish in the first place. Simple measurements include:

Are you receiving more phone calls and inquiries? Are more people aware of your organization and its goals?

### Keeping a Clipping File

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Well, these days it's not a clipping file anymore, but a digital repository. You can use online services such as Google News to search for your organization's name and discover where your news has been picked up.

Keeping a "clipping file" of all pieces published about the organization offers several benefits:

- Provides a historical resource
- Provides a fast reference when speaking with reporters about issues
- Demonstrates accomplishments of PR campaign
- Quickly shows which media have been most helpful.
- Can be added as links in your website.

### Reprint Services

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Many magazines offer to sell reprints of articles. Reprints are very inexpensive relative to the cost of designing, typesetting and printing a brochure.

### Conclusion

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This book introduced one aspect of public relations for non-profit organizations, the development and writing of material for the print media. The principles presented here can be applied to other PR projects, including speeches and presentations, community events, radio and television news stories and interviews, direct mail and marketing. Most important is to plan the message, keep it consistent, be proactive about telling the organization's story, stay enthusiastic and motivated.

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