

Somebody Ought To Do Something

"Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has"

Margaret Mead, Social Anthropologist

Chapter Four Dealing with the Media



CASE is an education group that campaigns for only the best for all children and relies entirely on membership fees and donations.

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Chapter Four - Dealing with the Media

Publicity for your campaign

Local media coverage of your campaign can set off a public debate about your campaign. It can build up pressure on decision makers such as politicians. It is an important way of getting your message across and finding more supporters.

The media will want something specific to report, not just that you are unhappy. Make sure you give them some information to report based on a specific event, grievance or circumstance, such as the launch of your campaign, a school losing teachers to save money, scrapping the school meals service, £3 million cut from the local education budget.

Identify the real problem, but try to give it a 'human' interest dimension (how it will affect individual children or parents). Ideally have someone who will be quoted e.g. a parent whose child has no secondary school place.

Although journalists find that conflict makes for more interesting reading, it is important not to expose a school you are trying to support to harmful publicity. If you name a school, check that the head is agreeable to the school being named in publicity. Also check if s/he will welcome contacted from the press or filming in or outside the school.

Media contacts

The press will usually get in touch personally if they are interested in using a press release. It is best to have more than one person whom the media can contact, with work, home and mobile numbers if possible.

A spokesperson must be available during the day and has to be ready to speak on behalf of your campaign - make sure he or she has a thick skin, doesn't mind being misquoted and has all the facts at his or her fingertips.

Try to sum up the aim of the campaign in a few seconds - a 'soundbite'. Have answers ready to questions such as, 'What do you want to achieve?' and 'What are you going to do now?'

Do not assume that if the press ask challenging questions that they are out to get you, it is a means of getting a clear story. It's a good idea to prepare a checklist of points to keep by the phone so the media contact doesn't have always to check back to someone else when asked questions by journalists.

Sometimes the press might ask for a story to be exclusive. It is probably best to go along with that if you feel it might not get coverage otherwise. If it is an interesting story the rest of the media will take it up later.

A fax/answerphone would be useful, but you need to get back to the press quickly or they may go elsewhere for a story.

Local v national interest

Local newspapers are always keen on local stories involving children - make sure you provide a photo opportunity and invite them to send a photographer to any event you are arranging.

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Try to get a local paper to take up your campaign. Don't be too proud to let them think it's all their idea! Target local free-sheets that may have column inches to fill and haven't the money to employ many reporters!

National newspapers need to have it made clear that a local issue has a national dimension. This is harder to do but if the issue is sufficiently controversial you could make an impact. The nationals, particularly the tabloids like to expose 'troublemakers' so make sure you aren't doing or saying anything which might be used by any possible opponents to discredit you or your campaign. This is particularly important when children are involved.

A press release

1. You need something to report if you are sending a press release. Launching your campaign might be newsworthy in itself, or you might want to wait until your first meeting to issue a press release.

2. Check through your release to ensure it answers the five questions: - Who? What? Where? When? and Why?

Writing the release

Write a snappy press release!

- Give the release a short catchy headline if you can. Use campaign headed notepaper and a large print headline. You need to catch a journalist's eye and make them want to read on; they may have received a lot of other press releases and you want them to use yours.
- Keep it very short, preferably one side of A4 double spaced. You might want to include a separate page of back-ground information as notes for the editor if it is a complex issue, but keep it short.
- Put the most important information in the first paragraph and then work down through the most important points. If newspapers are short of space they will probably cut the last paragraphs.
- Keep to short clear sentences and paragraphs. Ideally make a key point in each paragraph
- Try to give your press release some human interest by including lively short quotes from named people, a parent or a child for example
- You must include contact names and telephone/mobile numbers, preferably two, where press can get more information.

Keep the release short and clear. It is more likely to catch a journalist's eye and they are more likely to use it if they don't have to make changes. Journalists will always ring you if the story interests them and they want more information.

Sending the release

Maintain good links with the local media and if possible with the Education Correspondents for the national newspapers. Find out the names of the correspondents who deal with education on local TV, radio and newspapers and keep in touch with them regularly. This also gives them a more personal contact and they are likely to follow this up

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if they are looking for a story or a quote and you may get extra unexpected publicity this way.

Send press releases to them by name and follow up with telephone calls, particularly if those who have shown interest in your campaign. It is sometimes the phone calls which attract journalists' attention.

If you do not have a named contact, address the press release to the News Editor for local papers. For national newspapers address it to the Education Correspondent or ring up and ask their name.

Make your press release for immediate release. You can "embargo" press releases for a few days ahead if you think you have an important story which the press may need time to research to give it more impact. An embargo means the press can only publish the article on the day given under your embargo

Post your press release, or email and fax it out if you can. If you post it send it preferably to a named person with a hand written envelope. You should send it out in plenty of time.

Check the publication and "copy" date of local weekly papers. (The copy date is deadline for stories to get published that week's paper) The day after publication day is the ideal time for your press release to arrive. The nearer to the paper's deadline it arrives, the less space is left in the paper and the more stories it will have to compete with. However check the copy dates in case you have an urgent release.

If you have an event planned try to deliver the press release two weeks before an event for a weekly newspaper. Follow up with a phone call.

You could send three press releases for an event – one several weeks beforehand, one a few days before and one after to say what happened. You might catch the interest of different journalists.

Local newspapers often have a 'What's On' feature which identifies coming events. Find the name of the feature in your local newspaper and write the details of your event to match the style the paper uses. Send it under separate cover, addressing it to the name of the feature e.g. 'Coming Events'. What's On etc.

A press conference

It might be worth organising a press conference to launch a particular event. A line-up of speakers will be needed, preferably high profile people. They should make very short speeches and answer questions from the press. Make sure it is in the morning for the national press, in an accessible place and with coffee, if possible.

However, organising a press conference is a lot of work and if it clashes with stories of more immediate interest ("breaking news"), then attendance might be very low. You might find you get just as much coverage with a good press release with quotes and phone numbers. You can also get good coverage by inviting the press to a particular event or demonstration.

TV and radio

TV has the most impact - people remember when something has been on television and politicians are most

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wary of adverse TV exposure. Getting your campaign some TV coverage (however small) is a major breakthrough. There has got to be a visual element in TV coverage e.g. a demonstration at the school gates, a march. TV journalists are unlikely to cover conferences.

Make a spokesperson available for live interviews. Radio isn't nearly as difficult as TV. You will only get two or three minutes to make your point so make sure you can sum up your campaign in a couple of sentences. Do not attempt to give large numbers of statistics. Keep it simple and stick to your main points. Most interviewers will tell you what is going to happen; if not check what questions they will be asking and how your slot will be organised. Think through what you are going to say.

Remember not to speak too close to the microphone as every intake of breath is clearly heard; try to speak slowly and clearly (it will also give you more time to think!). Be clear, concise and friendly. Remember how the politicians answer when faced with a question you cannot answer – “what I can say is” or “I can’t comment on that, but what I can say is”

Try to learn from the experience for next time and don’t be too critical of yourself! If the interview is pre-recorded rather than live it may well be cut down anyway.

Listen out for access shows, local news programmes, phone-ins etc. Use the phone-ins to make your point.

Letters to the Editor

Don't underestimate the impact of letters to the editor. It is difficult to get them into national papers, but much easier in local ones. In national papers you should write in response to an article which has just been published, which has a connection to your campaign. Read through the letters pages of the national papers to get an idea of what letters get published, how they are written etc.

Letters to local papers about a local issue can help to alert the newspaper to your campaign, providing a two pronged attack. If an editor gets 20 letters on a particular issue he or she is likely to print one, so a couple of well-written letters and many short ones making the same points will probably ensure that one is printed.

When writing letters to papers make your points in separate paragraphs so that if they decide to cut five lines at least the rest is reasonably coherent.

Magazines and newsletters

Most magazines work to a schedule which makes it difficult to get an immediate response. You could work on a longer-term background story for them or write letters to the editor about your particular campaign.

Many membership organisations, such as teacher unions, have regular members' newsletters and might be interested in having a brief item about your campaign.

Generally it is better to view all publicity as good publicity, but if you feel your campaign has been seriously misrepresented, complain to the relevant editor or programme producer.