



Working with the Media – Press Conference

Using the Media: Holding a Press Conference

Press conferences are called when important news needs to be conveyed. They are an important tool in getting your message out to the general public. However, they require a lot of work and should be taken seriously.

Giving misinformation or insignificant information is worse than getting out no message at all. For example, do not have a press conference to announce that your chapter has elected a new president. In this case, fax the media a press release and have the newly elected head of the organization call and introduce him/herself to the press as a way to begin building a relationship with the media.

You should call a press conference for big events - to release a study by your organization, to grant the press access to an important speaker they otherwise wouldn't have. But, if you overuse the press conference, the press will be less likely to show up to your events when they are important.

Timeliness of a press conference is the key to getting coverage. Every press conference needs a "hook" or reason why the press should attend. For example, hold an event highlighting the UN's efforts to combat HIV/AIDS on World Health Day.

Fourteen Steps to a Successful and Professional Press Conference:

Determine if a press conference is appropriate. If so, decide on a theme or themes, keeping your message in mind.

1. Decide on a time and place for the press conference. It is best to hold press conferences between 10 AM and 2 PM, Monday through Friday. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays are the best. Sundays can also be good, but it is often difficult to schedule speakers on that day. Call an Associated Press (AP) reporter and ask if he or she will check the AP date book for a good time to hold a press conference. The date book is simply a calendar of news events for reporters. The AP is the best place to check on a date because if they show up to your event, it is almost guaranteed that your story will receive wide coverage. Are there any other major events in the community on the day of your planned press conference? Make sure you hold the press conference in a location that is easily accessible to the media you are most interested in reaching. Finally, don't forget Mother Nature. If you are holding it outside, always have a back up location in case of rain.
2. Find a main speaker and arrange any additional speakers. You should also build a small crowd of supporters.



3. Help speakers write their speeches, being mindful of the message and theme your organization wants to convey. Speeches should last no longer than 20 minutes. Keep this in mind when writing your speeches, which generally shouldn't be more than 3 minutes to 5 minutes each. You don't want the media packing their bags before you've finished.
4. Compile a press list of all television and radio stations, newspapers and newspaper wire services (AP, UPI, Knight-Ridder, Reuters) in your area. Do not limit your list to only the stations you watch on television and listen to on the radio. Call all listed in the phone book and ask for a fax number to the news room, not the station's general fax number. Keep this media list for your records and future events. Find out who the assignment or managing editors are at each TV station (these are the people who ultimately decide what airs and what doesn't, not the reporters). Find out the beats of reporters at the major newspapers (i.e. if you are doing an event on global health issues, you want to invite the reporter who handles health issues for the paper).
5. Write a media advisory (see addendum below), a faxed release to news media outlets, that briefly tells them about your press conference. Fax it to all local press offices and organizations who may be interested in attending your event at least two days before the event. Give them enough information to interest them in attending, but not so much information that they feel able to write something up without bothering to attend. Call the newsroom (ask to speak to the news director or assignment editor) after faxing to make sure they received the fax and begin to pitch your idea for a story. Don't fax out the media advisory too soon- reporters work on short cycles and will replace it. But you should never send one too late, either, or time slots may be filled up. Give 2-4 days notice to news organizations.
6. Write a press release (see addendum below) to take to the event to pass out to the media representatives that attend. Finding out the whole story as it unfolds is their incentive to come to the event. Later, fax the release to the media outlets that didn't attend. Sometimes outlets that don't show up may still cover the event by getting the news from the release. Offer to visit news stations and newspaper outlets with your main spokesperson after the event.
7. Put together a media packet folder with all the additional information not in the press release. This media kit should include bios of speakers, research data that reporters may want to use in their story, background info about your chapter and UNA-USA including lists of ongoing activities and upcoming events and a list of organizations involved in the event along with a short description of them. This helps reporters write their story. The more information you give them, the more likely they will cover the story thoroughly and accurately.



8. The morning of the press conference, call the media to remind news organization of your event and to see which ones will attend. Again, ask for the assignment editor at TV stations, news director at radio stations, and specific reporters or an editor at most newspapers. Some radio stations may want to do a pre-interview at this time over the telephone. Be prepared. This is a good opportunity to let people know that the event is going on and to reinforce your message.
9. Arrive at least a half hour early for the press conference to set up visuals (posters, your organization's banner, etc.), a podium, maybe a sound system and a tape recorder. Remember to have a visual component (e.g. your organization's banner or a poster) for television or news photographers. A caption and a photo also can convey your message. Many press conferences encounter problems with microphones and other electronic equipment. Check and test these thoroughly in advance.
10. Don't wait too long for late-comers from the press. Start no later than 10 minutes after the time scheduled on the media advisory. Hand out your press packet and have each reporter record his or her name on a sign up sheet. Keep this for future records. If there are two or more media representatives there on time, start on time. Be sure to introduce yourself and your spokespeople to the press. Building a relationship with the press will help you in the long-run.
11. Thank the press for coming when the event has finished. Make the speaker available for individual interviews afterward. Set up a banner with your organization's logo as a backdrop for the interview.
12. That evening, record the coverage of the event on a home VCR for your records. Also be sure to clip all print coverage of the press conference for your records. Send in copies of your clips to the national organization.
13. Enhance the theme of your press conference with follow-up letters to the editor or op-ed pieces in the paper. Schedule the main speaker on a talk radio show during the week.

Pitching a Story

Media advisories are great tools for getting a reporter interested in attending your event. An even better way to ensure attendance is to back up your advisory with a strong pitch to the relevant person at a given media outlet. This is a difficult part of the process and it's not always easy to get someone to take your call, let alone listen to your pitch.

Outlined below are a few steps to help ensure that if you do have an opportunity to talk to a reporter or editor, you make the most of it. Some of these suggestions will undoubtedly seem



simple, but when it's time to make that call it's often harder than expected to be brief, on message, and to the point.

- The most important part of making a successful pitch is making sure you are pitching the best person you can. What is meant by that is, if you're calling a TV station, you want to be talking to an assignment editor or managing editor. That's not to say that having a good relationship with a reporter isn't important, but the final decision about which events are covered and airs lies with the managing editor. This is a slightly different case with daily newspapers, where having a good relationship with a reporter is often the key to getting your story covered.
- You will likely get only one shot at pitching your story. There is nothing wrong with being persistent, but you certainly don't want to bother a busy reporter with several phone calls and faxes. One way to cut down on the number of calls is to make your pitch when you call the reporter to confirm that they received your advisory. Just ask them if they got your fax, and then move quickly to your pitch, thereby killing two birds with one stone.
- When you are on the phone with the reporter or assignment editor and they are giving you an opportunity to convince them that your story is worth covering, emphasize why your story is important to the public and the fact that your broad-based coalition reflects that public interest. (i.e. a broad based coalition including UNA-USA, business leaders, and student groups, for instance, is more remarkable to a reporter than a UNA-USA only event).
- Emphasize the importance of using this story as a "local tie in" to the larger national or international story. For example, suggest the event as a way to make UN peacekeeping assessments and this is their opportunity to make it relevant to the local leadership. A local angle is always better for them than another national or international story.
- Most importantly, stay focused on your message, be brief and to the point, and don't tell them so much that they no longer feel the need to cover your event. Don't be offended if they turn you down. Establishing a long-term relationship is most important. You want the reporter in your community to call you when he or she is looking for comment or background on a story involving the UN or international affairs because they consider you a reliable, informed, and friendly local voice on these issues.

What to Expect the Day of the Event

Expect things to be hectic, but if you've carefully planned all the small details and have called the press and know who's showing up, everything will turn out fine. Remember, the press tends to run 5-10 minutes late. Don't be discouraged if no one from the media is there on time.

The press does not expect you to give a highly polished press conference. In fact, if your event is too polished, they may be suspect of your group. You may be more effective if your spokespeople are average people and not highly paid talking heads.



Despite their reputation, the press is not out to make a fool of you or your organization. If you forget lines of your speech, feel free to start over; if your visual effects get blown away, improvise. Remember, unless the event is being covered live, stations will edit the story down to around one minute.

Never lie to the press and never be afraid to tell the press you don't know a particular fact about an issue. If you don't know a fact, tell a reporter you'll get back to them with the information and follow through on your promise ASAP. You will gain more respect this way than if you try to bluff or stall your way through a tough question. Expect the unexpected, especially weather, and have a backup location if your event is scheduled for outdoors.

Tips on Speaking to the Press

If a reporter calls, take the call.

Don't be intimidated or afraid to deal with media inquiries. If you are not sure of the answer to the reporter's questions, simply jot down what the reporter wants to know and assure him/her that you will return the call as soon as possible.

Be specific.

Ascertain what the reporter needs. Does the reporter want a quote, or just background information?

Verify the reporter's deadline.

Be sure to get back to the reporter before that time.

Don't stonewall or ignore the media.

Neglected reporters have a long memory. Keep in mind - you may need the same reporter someday. Try to answer the reporter's questions as quickly and completely as possible. Don't become defensive with tough questions. Look at them as a chance to answer tough critics.

Don't become too friendly with reporters.

You will find that your relationship is strictly professional, no matter how friendly the reporter may seem. If your defenses are down, and you give inside facts to a reporter, you are simply giving him news information, and that information may appear in print whether you like it or not.

Nothing is ever off the record.

Keep that in mind, and your media relations will be friendly, yet professional.

Feel free to call reporters when you want to pitch a story.



But, don't bother reporters with unnecessary calls - be selective as to when a "follow-up" call is necessary, and use that opportunity to pitch your story. Reporters' time is precious, and if you respect their schedule, they will see you as a more reliable news source.

Addendum: Media Advisories

Media advisories simply alert the media that an event will take place. Media advisories convey very specific information, such as the time, date and location of an event. They also convey what the press conference or the event will be about. Pique the reporter's interest so he or she will want to find out more, but don't give away everything you want to say either.

The following is an example of the layout and content of a media advisory:

MEDIA ADVISORY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

[date]

CONTACT:

[name]

[phone #]

[Title/Headline]

[Paragraph explaining what will go on during the press conference]

Who: [the name of the organizations and speakers present at the event]

What: [what your group will be doing, most likely holding a press conference or special event]

Where: [where the event will be held, giving exact location, address, city and state of event]

When: [the exact time and date of the event, including the year]

(these symbols (####) are put at the end of a media advisory or press release to denote the end of the fax)

Addendum: Press Releases

Press releases are your version of the story of your event and are typed up before the event takes place. Don't keep any information back in the press release like you did with the media advisory. Press releases are usually a page in length, although can rarely be two pages. Reporters want to know your "spin" on the issue but also want to get as much information in the smallest amount of space possible.

Some papers have been known to re-print word for word an organization's press release as the actual story, so keep that in mind when you are composing it. Provide as much third party validation for your points and proposals as possible. The press assumes that you have an axe to



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grind and a bias. If you can support your claims with facts from organizations the press considers unbiased, your message's credibility will be greatly enhanced.

This sample press release has the "look" that reporters and news directors expect from a professional event.

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

CONTACT:

[date]

[name]

[phone #]

[Title/Headline-something that commands attention]

[LOCATION OF THE EVENT]- Proceed with the narrative telling your story about the event. Use important, eye-catching information, good sound bites and short quotes Less important information and statistics are a good conclusion to your press release.

- 30 -(this symbol denotes the end of a press release)

Tips on Writing a Press Release

- Start first with a headline which is in bold typeface and set apart from the rest of the press release. Make it catchy and newsworthy. As with headlines in the newspaper, this line will help the reporter or editor decide whether or not to read on. The best place to start when writing a press release is with your message and theme. The purpose of having a press conference is to convey your viewpoint on the issue.
- Press releases are like pyramids. The most important and flashy information (e.g. good quotes, the main attack) is given in the first paragraph. More general information (e.g. statistics, information about the organization) is given later in the press release.
- Begin to think like a reporter. Press releases and media advisories must always pass the skim test. Reporters are sent many more media advisories than for events they can actually attend. If you skimmed your press release and media advisory as a reporter, without knowledge of your issue, would you be interested in attending the event and making sure it received coverage?
- Use colorful quotes, buzz words and sound bites freely. Sound bites are good because they make it easy for reporters to summarize your message in their stories. You already have the quotes because the speeches are already written for the event. The quotes should include the most important sound bites. This part of the release usually gets covered.



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- Make sure you include the sources to back up the claims in your speech and media packet. Empty rhetoric won't fly with today's cynical media and citizenry.