Communications and Outreach Tips

Public Knowledge

>>> INTERVIEWS

Interviews are a great opportunity to get your brand position in front of the public. They're usually performed for stories (articles that appear in new media news sites, blogs, broadcast or print) or as backgrounders to catch a journalist up on the issue. They're an excellent opportunity to build a relationship with that writer and/or venue, and the stories produced will lead to much wider viewership and more credibility than any materials you publish on your own. You may also have staff participate in interviews for editorials (which present a venue's opinion) or as a service to press new on your topic/issue.

Sometimes press inquiries may come to you, but at other times you'll need to approach media outlets and reporters specifically interested in your issue. It helps if you have a **new or intriguing angle, interesting information that appeals to their readers, assets (graphics and videos) and a press strategy in place**. Whenever possible, it's a great idea to offer new information or angles that haven't been covered before so your reporter feels that s/he is contributing to the discussion (and not just doing stories that their competitors already covered). In other words, you should determine the types of audiences you're trying to reach, choose the venues that engage with your desired audience/s, craft a message that appeals to this group, decide your message delivery mechanism (stories, editorials, op-eds, broadcast, etc.,) and choose your spokespeople for your issue. It helps tremendously if you pair this information with a timeline.

- **When engaging press, be sure to be as respectful and helpful as possible**. Journalists are covering multiple stories simultaneously and struggle with tight, constantly shifting deadlines. Endeavor to remain honest when answering questions, and be upfront on any conflicts of interest or biases, as reporters are quite capable of finding out this information on their own during fact-checking. You want the media to think of you as they continue to cover your issue, so handle your relationship with integrity.

It's wise to share any resulting stories and commentary on your social channels and in your newsletters and site updates.

>>> BLOG POSTS VS. OP-EDS

It's important to note the difference between blog posts and op-eds in order to determine which communication method will be most effective (and when) in your marketing timeline.

Blogs: As an organization you have complete control of your in-house messaging delivery systems, including your website, social media and blog portal. You should be able to use these tactical mechanisms rather quickly, as it takes less time for your staff to produce a blog post or a site update than it does to pitch media.

These digital tactics offer complete message control, but lack the credibility, massive viewership and engagement (via forums/comments and social media) that an op-ed or editorial will produce.

Op-eds: Op-eds usually prove a more effective mechanism for moving the needle on your issue, but also require more relationship building and effort on your part, and may mean that you have less message control.

The best communication strategies understand when and how to use these two methods in a marketing strategy. Understand that neither is a substitute for the other, and that it's best to use both tactics in your communications strategy.

>>> FRAMING AND REFRAMING

In working in public interest advocacy, you'll find that the framing of an issue can largely shape how the media depicts your issue, as well as how the public and policymakers feel about your issue. Framing is a way of presenting or posing an issue or problem in a context that will garner support from your constituents, allies, and targets. In order to properly frame your pitch, you must know the history and stories of the people you're trying to convince and weave your issue into whatever works for that group of people.

Any issue can be framed in a multitude of ways that will attract support or opposition from various players, and the framing of an issue will create a certain mindset for those who may be unfamiliar with your issue. You probably see this all the time in how issues are posed during elections versus once a person is elected to office. Framing is important when determining the timing for your campaign because if your issue is being framed in a way that hurts your campaign, you will need to include additional time for reframing the message to the public, policymakers, and others.

> *Judges and lawyers in one particular field have a host of experiences that demonstrate their opinions and ideology relevant to the issue. Be sure to understand each person's history, and evaluate what approach to take when dealing with each of these individual actors.*

>>> TIMING

Timing for press stories, media, and other outreach is key to reaching the largest audience possible. While you may regularly update your social media accounts and blog posts, you may also find that when your particular issue is no longer in the media spotlight, you may need timing hooks, such as holidays and elections, to push press stories.

Let's say for example, you're submitting comments to the FCC in response to a notice on inquiry (a topic that may get little press interest). When your issue becomes "sleepy," that's the best time to do *targeted* outreach to select reporters who have a proven track record of interest in your field. Their reports could help generate interest early on for the FCC notice of inquiry issue.

>>> SOME GENERAL MEDIA AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS TIPS:

Reiterate your message: Remember every stage of the advocacy and/or lobbying process is a chance to refresh media coverage of your issue.

- **Be judicious about the use of blogs and the press**: While it is helpful for an advocate to build their profile, it is important to speak out the most when doing so will directly or indirectly help you reach your advocacy goals.
    - Think about what impact a strong critique could have on your relationships with industry or government officials you work closely with. Some relationships, such as with chairpersons of congressional committees, may not be able to bounce back from such criticism, so be sure to consider the pros and cons. In addition, if there's a risk of a blog post or op-ed being depicted as self-serving, find a third party, such as a coalition member or policymaker to co-author the piece (aka third party validation)

- **Co*smetic* vs. *strategic* press coverage**: Have a strategic reason for speaking publicly on an issue. Don't just grab opportunities just to get your name in the media. When working in coalitions, divide expertise and share press opportunities for public outreach and to enhance strategic cooperation.

- When possible, deliver **simple messages** that take advantage of key facts that effectively convinces media, individuals, and policymakers on the merits of the public interest viewpoint.

- **Be creative** with gimmicks and descriptive imagery that helps people visualize your issue.

> *An example of a creative gimmick is the use of "Comcast Octopus" analogy by public interest communities who opposed the Comcast-Time Warner merger in 2014 because of its negative implications on consumer choice and affordable pricing. The "Comcast Octopus" image and slogan clearly captures the image of the problems with expanding Comcast's reach in*