

# Public Relations Toolkit: For Voluntary Organizations

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Public relations is a powerful tool for any voluntary organization. Public Relations can:

- Increase awareness of your organization
- Promote a positive image of your organization
- Influence donor attitudes and decisions
- Build attendance at special events
- Increase volunteer recruitment
- Help establish your organization as a good citizen within your community
- Supplement your paid advertising budget in a very cost effective way

In particular, using public relations effectively is a key factor in planning a successful event. Getting positive free publicity should be one of your main goals for any volunteer event. In this toolkit, you will find valuable tips, templates and information to help you create effective media materials, and interact professionally with the news media.

## 1. Selecting media materials

There are many different kinds of materials you may choose to distribute to the media. It pays to understand what each of these materials is for, and how it is used. Here are some tips:

### ✓ **Calendar announcement:**

Also known as an event listing, a calendar announcement gives your local media the date, time, location, purpose, and name of your event.

### ✓ **Media advisory:**

A media advisory offers reporters 'bare bones' information about a particular event. A standard advisory includes one or two sentences on who, what, when, where and why your event is taking place. This should be crafted and sent to a reporter in your area who covers metro news, community events or philanthropic activities.

### ✓ **News release:**

A news release is essentially an in-depth media advisory, organized in a different way. Rather than one or two sentences each to describe the who, what, where, when, why, press releases provide one or two pages of new information to reporters who are interested in your event. The release should be organized like a brief summary, including key facts and a quote from your executive director, board chair, president, local dignitary or influential member of the community involved with your organization.

**Reader tip:** When writing a news release, pretend that you are actually writing a story that will appear in your local newspaper. Include a headline for the release, an attention-grabbing introduction, a quote and possibly even graphs or charts to illustrate important information.

### ✓ **Backgrounder:**

A backgrounder is a one or two page description of your organization, outlining:

- What your organization does
- The history of your organization
- The services or programs you provide

A backgrounder usually accompanies a news release and is often included in a media kit, to give the media more information about your organization.

✓ **Letter to the editor:**

This Can often be an effective publicity tool. You may wish to draft a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, discussing the importance of volunteers to your community and how your event intends to recognize and thank them. If possible, the letter should be signed by an influential or well-known member of your community so that the chances of your letter being published will be increased.

✓ **Op-ed:**

Op-eds or opinion editorials are articles written by guest writers that usually run opposite the editorial page. You may wish to draft an op-ed piece, usually about 750 to 1000 words, to discuss the importance of volunteers and the difference they make to your community.

✓ **Fact Sheets:**

Fact sheets are usually bulletin points that give information. An example would be how many people in your community volunteer how many hours, how many people in your community are helped by volunteers, what percentage of social service, sports, culture and other organizations in your area use and value volunteers.

## 2. Contacting Your Local Media

If you don't already have one, create a list of your local media contacts at newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations. Don't forget to include any company or corporate newsletters in your area, as well as university or college newspapers.

Two good sources for media lists are the Bowden's or Matthews Media Directories, which you should be able to find at your local library. If you are unable to find that source or another comparable source of media contact information, then obtain contact information from your telephone book and call the media outlets to obtain names, addresses, fax numbers and e-mail addresses of the appropriate person to send your information to.

Before distributing a media advisory and news release to your local media, appoint someone who will be the official spokesperson to the media for your organization. This might be the executive director, board chair, president or a member of your board of directors. This is the person who will speak to the media about your event if the media requests an interview.

✓ **Who to contact**

When distributing a media advisory and news release to your local electronic media, contact the 'assignment editor' at radio and television stations. This is the person who assigns a reporter to cover the event and do a story. If the assignment editor requests that you send the material and follow up with another contact, follow his/her advice and do so.

When distributing a media advisory and news release to your local print media, contact the 'metro/city editor' first. It is possible that he or she may pass on the information to the lifestyle or features editor or even someone else at the newspaper. Your city/metro editor and lifestyle editor are the contacts that will most likely be interested in covering your event.

When distributing your media advisory and news release to local magazines, contact the 'editor' of the publication.

Send your calendar announcement to the attention of the 'calendar' or 'event listings' editor at your local newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations.

Be sure you have the correct name and spelling of all media contacts!

**Reader tip:** You will notice in the sample press releases to follow that there is a suggested quote by a board member, executive director or president of your

organization. Be sure to contact this person before preparing and distributing the news releases to obtain their permission to use the quote. They may also want to change the quote as they wish.

### **3. Still Photographs and the Media**

Because most newspapers and television stations welcome strong and interesting visuals, a photograph will help generate pre-publicity for your event. We advise taking a black and white photograph of a member of your volunteer staff assisting a client of your organization with your board chair, executive director or president to send with your news release. Give some thought to how a photo could capture what you want to say about your event or your organization.

In addition to distributing your own photos with captions and a brief news release, invite each media contact to send a photographer/camera person to shoot either the set-up and/or the actual event. Make sure your organization's logo is prominently displayed at the event, in such a way that it will be captured in photos and video. Be accessible to photo opportunities and interview requests at all times to increase coverage of your event.

### **4. Hosting a news conference**

To give your event increased status, you might consider hosting a small news conference to announce your event. The news conference can be held in a meeting room, in your offices, or in a public place such as City Hall.

To announce your news conference to the media, send out a media advisory announcing the who, what, when, where and why of your news conference. You will want to portray your news conference as the announcement of an important community event.

At the news conference you should have a news release announcing your upcoming event for the media present. Keep in mind that you will also be preparing a release for your event, to be distributed about one week before.

Those participating in your news conference should include your organization's executive director, board chair or president, and dignitaries such as your local MPP or mayor. In addition to inviting the media to the news conference, you might also consider inviting local business people, some of your volunteers and clients.

The purpose of your news conference is to announce your event. If you have a dignitary such as your local MPP or Mayor, he or she could announce your event and express how pleased they are to support it. Your executive director, board chair or president would then explain when your event will happen, what it will be, who you expect to attend and thank your sponsors.

Your news conference should last about an hour, and should give local media a chance to hear your remarks and those of your sponsors, and to interview your representatives.

A news conference need not be expensive. There is no need to serve refreshments other than coffee, bottled water and soft drinks.

### **5. Creating a media kit**

In addition to preparing a news release, you may also wish to create a more complete 'press kit'. The press kit would consist of a folder with pockets on both the left and right sides, which can be purchased from any office supplies store. It might contain:

- A black and white photo with caption as mentioned already.
- A backgrounder about your organization.
- A biography of your organization's executive director, board chair or president.
- A news release about the event.

## 6. Getting local media co-sponsorship

### ✓ Radio stations co-sponsorship:

Co-sponsoring your event with a local radio station is an excellent way to get free advertising. You can approach the station manager of your local radio station and ask him or her to co-sponsor your event.

In a letter outlining your event, offer to mention the radio station's sponsorship and use its logo on all printed materials you distribute for your event. Offer to display the radio station's signage at your event in exchange for their agreeing to promote your event on air. You can then ask for a meeting to discuss your proposal in more depth. You can also agree to display their signage at your event press conference, if you have one.

The best time period for these types of promotions are the morning and afternoon drive time slots where the greatest number of listeners tune in. Each time the radio station runs an announcement of your event they should mention the day, date, time and location.

If you are co-sponsoring your event with a local radio station, work with its promotions department to arrange live coverage either at your event or on a radio station talk show or other program.

### ✓ Local Newspaper Co-Sponsorship:

Co-sponsoring your event with a local newspaper is also an excellent way to obtain free advertising. You should approach the managing editor of your local newspaper and ask him or her to co-sponsor your event. A local newspaper in your area should be willing to cooperate with you for your event. Based on space availability, you should be able to negotiate at least two promotion insertions or free advertisements.

### ✓ Local Television Co-Sponsorship:

Local television can be a powerful partner in your public relations campaign. As with radio, TV stations are anxious to increase their local coverage so it can be counted as Canadian content. You should approach the station manager of your local television station in the same way you would approach your local radio or newspaper.

Based on space availability you should be able to negotiate at least two or three interviews on local programming.

## 7. Maintaining media contact

It is important that someone in your organization is available for interviews with the media at all times, to increase coverage of your event. In answering the reporters' questions, be clear and concise.

You may also wish to follow up your news releases with a phone call to the appropriate media contacts after you have sent the information or press kit. For example, one or two weeks before your event, telephone the media contacts at newspapers, radio and television stations. Ask for the person you sent the information to, by name.

Preparing some talking points in advance can help you effectively encourage coverage of the event:

- Your event is hosted by your organization, as well as other local sponsors
- Your event is a way to recognize and celebrate local volunteers
- Volunteers make a difference to your community and help many people

- Describe the event: fun-filled, open to all ages, an awards dinner or reception, cost if applicable and what the costs would be used for
- First event of this kind in your area or for your organization
- Great photos of volunteers and people who are helped by volunteers
- Number of people expected to attend.

The purpose for calling the media is to find out if they plan to attend your event, or at least to do a story on it, and if not, to encourage them to do so.

When speaking to the media, be friendly, enthusiastic, assertive, and concise. Do not be overly aggressive. If they are interested in your event, they may surprise you and actually telephone you after receiving the material you have sent. Return any phone calls made by the media as soon as possible.

There is always the possibility that you might speak with media contacts who, for whatever reason, cannot attend your event and may not even want to write about it. In that case, remain cordial and professional and thank them for their time. Be able to take “no” for an answer.

**Reader tip:** Remember that you are building relationships with your local media over the long-term. While they may not be interested in your event today, they may well be interested in the future.

Keep a written record of each media contact you speak with, whether you call them or they call you. Also, keep careful notes on any requests they have made, such as requests for photos or other information.

If any of your media contacts require further information after receiving your written materials or have any questions, do your best to provide what they need as soon as possible, keeping in mind that the media work under tight deadlines.

#### ✓ Telephone tips:

- Clearly introduce yourself and the purpose of your call:

*“Hello, this is (your name) of (your organization’s name) calling about our event (name of event). We are hosting this event on (date, time and location) to (explain why your organization is hosting this event)”*

- Make your event sound as newsworthy and timely as possible
- Invite the reporter to attend and cover the event, bringing a photographer

*“I hope you can attend all or part of the event, and please feel free to bring along a photographer.”*

- If the reporter wants to meet you and see your organization prior to the event, accommodate him or her by arranging it
- Treat reporters well when they arrive, perhaps offering them a coffee or tea, and asking them how you can be of help.
- Be accessible to the media, offering to assist the individual covering the story in any way possible. Keep your schedule flexible for interviews and photo opportunities.

## 8. Scheduling your media contacts

Although each event is different, here are some general guidelines:

#### ✓ Calendar/Listings Announcement:

Distribute to your local media during the sixth week prior to your event.

✓ **Media Advisory:**

Distribute during the second week prior to your event.

✓ **Introductory News Release:**

Distribute one week prior to your event.

✓ **Press Kit News Release:**

Hand distribute to media who attend your event, and mail to those media contacts who could not attend but are interested in getting the information.

Also include a backgrounder sheet on your organization, a photo, a biography of your board chair, executive director or president, and a sheet describing your co-sponsors and/or cross-promotional partners.

✓ **Follow-up News Release:**

Distribute as soon as possible after the day of the event, preferably the next day. Also enclose one or two black and white photographs of the event, which might include key speakers, or award recipients.

✓ **Calendar/Listings Announcement:**

Distribute to your local media during the sixth week prior to your event.

✓ **Backgrounder:**

Distribute by hand to media who attend your event, and mail to those contacts who are interested in getting the information but cannot attend.

## 9. Writing tips and templates

✓ **Headlines:**

The headline of your calendar listing, media advisory or news releases should speak directly about your event. If you have a celebrity, dignitary or some other well-known person receiving an award from your organization, or attending your event, you will want to mention this in your headline as well. Here are some examples:

(Your organization name) to Host Conference on Importance of Volunteers to Caring and Safe Communities.

(Your organization name) Hosts Volunteer Recruitment Fair.

(Your organization name) Brings Together Community Leaders to Discuss the Future of Volunteerism.

✓ **Paragraphs:**

Here are two sample paragraphs that you might like to use in your news releases, to provide general background about the importance of volunteerism:

Ontarians have a long history of volunteering. Almost 3 million Ontarians or 1 in 3 volunteer almost 422 million hours a year in this province. Volunteers are the backbone of much of this province's community health and social service, sports and recreation, arts and cultural organizations.

But Ontarians also volunteer in ways that are not included in these statistics. They shovel their elderly neighbour's walkway, play piano for the church choir, coach children's sports or visit a lonely or bedridden neighbour. All of these volunteers deserve to be recognized and honoured for their contribution to making our community a safe and caring place to live.

**Reader tip:** When sending out your calendar announcement and media advisory don't forget to send them to the Public Service Announcement (PSA) departments of radio and television stations. Since your organization is not-for-profit, they may well mention your event as a public service.

✓ **Thanking the Local Press Who Attend and/or Cover your IYV Event:**

It is an extra nice touch if you personally thank any press contacts who attend and/or cover your event. You may either thank them verbally, or better yet, write a brief personal note to each contact thanking him/her for the coverage.